# The Fatal Rose

**Summary**

It's Killua Zoldyck's 18th birthday: the day he will take over from his father, the current Lord Zoldyck, to rule their family and their fiefdom. However, his brother, Illumi, a powerful magician, challenges him for his inheritance. When Killua refuses to give it up, Illumi curses him to live for hundreds of years with no human companionship, while dying slowly and painfully of a disfiguring disease. True love's kiss will break the curse, but Killua doesn't hold out much hope that anyone will even find him, let alone fall in love with him, before the disease consumes him.

Of course, he has yet to meet Gon Freecss.

**Notes**
I owe an awful lot of people an awful lot of thanks for helping this fic come to life. But, if I credit them here there will be big spoilers, so I'm going to do that at the very end! Right up front though I want to thank a few people to whom I owe my own blood debt as literary midwives. My brilliant and beautiful daughter, who not only introduced me to HxH but faithfully reads my original work, and suggested that this half-finished rejected novel would make a great conduit for Gon & Killua. Fireolin, fandom friend and travel partner-in-crime for being the best of betas. Losing_Sanity_Fast for her friendship and for faithfully reading and commenting on everything I hand her. And mornintide for being a generally lovely soul, always willing to talk AU's and to draw the sweetest killugon around. Those sketches scattered throughout the story are theirs. Love to you all! <3

One more note as to the rating. After a lot of thought, I've rated this M, because in the 95K words of this fic there is very little sex and the violence/horror is nothing you won't have seen in childhood fairytales. Which is to say that the vast majority of this is T rated, and a very tiny percentage is E rated. Since I'd hate to lose either audience to that fact, I compromised with M and I promise to give you fair warning if there's a chapter that might contain some E-worthy material. All of it can be skipped without losing continuity, although it's also there for carefully-thought-out reasons.

An addition: Looks like I've piqued some interest with the info that this fairy tale originated in 18th c France, and was written by a woman. Here is the abridged version that every version of this story is based on: http://humanitiesresource.com/ancient/articles/Beauty_and_Beast-Final.pdf

So, having caveated you to death? Enjoy!
It was a celebration to rival any the Zoldycks had hosted in the past, and as such, most of the Padokean court had come to Dentora to partake in its excesses. Killua Zoldyck, heir to the richest landowner in the region, was turning eighteen, and would, once the sun had risen on the following day, become ruler of his family’s vast holdings. There were sycophants aplenty in attendance, and an abundance of their daughters, hoping to catch the young Lord’s eye.

Killua’s parents were more than supportive of their son’s eye being caught: after all, he would need sons of his own to secure the family’s future. Killua himself was equivocal. He dutifully danced with all of the eligible girls, but he forgot their names immediately and their faces not long after. They were all alike: pretty and well-versed in the right words to say to a young man of his status, their true selves carefully hidden from him. None of them interested him; how could they, when they were so tightly leashed? Truth be told, he had no interest in any of this: running an estate, being a Lord, going to Court and playing in its ridiculous intrigues. In short, living a life of tradition and tedium.

The current dance ended, and Killua bowed to his partner and then excused himself, pleading weariness that wasn’t entirely fictional. He saw her face fall, the false cheer she had worn throughout the dance eclipsed by sadness and something else. Fear? He looked at her more closely. She was slightly built and very young, probably no older than fourteen. She had soft green eyes and a cloud of mahogany-colored hair. She was pretty, but she was a child, with no business here. Killua was filled with sudden anger at her parents.

Leading her to the side of the dance floor, he fished for her name, found it. “You’ve done nothing to be upset about, Calla,” Killua said to her. She wouldn’t look at him. “Did your parents make you dance with me?” She nodded her head, still avoiding his eyes. He sighed. “Will they be angry with you if we do not dance again?”

“They will beat me,” she answered at last, barely above a whisper.

*And may the gods take those miserable excuses for humans straight to hell,* Killua thought, a headache blossoming between his eyes. How many more of these girls had been threatened similarly? He made himself smile at her. “Tell your parents that I find you entirely charming, but there are too many daughters of my father’s friends here tonight for me to spare more than one dance with each. Tell them too that I would be very upset to hear that any ill had befallen you. Thank you for the dance, and be well.”
Killua lifted her hand and kissed it—more than he had done for any other girl that night, and it sent the requisite ripple of commentary through the room. Then, before anybody could close in and enquire as to the meaning of the gesture, he called on his godspeed and was gone in a blink.

He didn’t go far, only to a shadowy corner of the ballroom’s adjoining terrace just outside the last of the long, open doors, but at last he could breathe freely, alone in the cooler night air. He was just beginning to relax when he felt a presence at his elbow, and his fragile peace dissolved. He didn’t even have to look to know that it was his oldest brother, Illumi. There was a chill that hung around the other man that seemed to emanate from his pale skin and pitch-black hair and eyes. There always had been, but since he’d returned three days previous from a year of clandestine travels, it had been stronger than ever.

Killua had cold coloring too: skin so pale it was nearly translucent, eyes the color of an alpine lake, and the famous silver-white hair that marked him as the heir. The Zoldyck line produced a single, silver-haired child each generation, and the silver-haired child always inherited, regardless of birth order. It was no more or less than the way things had always been, but he couldn’t escape the feeling that Illumi resented it, and always had, though never with quite depth and bitterness he sensed now.

“Weary of playing the willing bull calf, Little Brother?” Illumi asked in a low, pleasant voice that was entirely at odds with his frigid appearance.

Killua sighed, glanced at him. He was dressed in elegant black silk that hugged his slender frame, his long dark hair intricately braided with the estate’s famous red tea-roses. He wore black gloves to the elbow, his kid-covered fingers ensconced in rings. He was beautiful and repellant as some kind of insect, and Killua wanted nothing more than to be away from him. An irony, as Illumi would become his chief advisor when he took his father’s place as Lord Zoldyck.

“Who said that I was willing?” Killua grumbled.

Illumi smiled, folded his arms and looked at his brother. His opaque pupils seemed to fracture, fiery lines showing in them like the seams of light in smoldering coals. Killua grew cold: this was a sign that his brother was tapping into his magic, and that never boded well.

“You’d better be willing,” Illumi said. “You really have no choice but to pick one of them, and willingness will make it so much easier. You seemed to like that last one better than the others. Say the word, and I’ll make it painless.”
Killua took a step away from him. “Don’t you dare toy with that child,” Killua warned, “and do not even think about toying with me!”

“You would not have to marry her,” Illumi wheedled. “Just take her to your bed for a night, and prove to everyone—”

“Prove what?” Killua growled.

“That you’re capable,” Illumi said, his voice still conversational. “After all, it’s your eighteenth birthday, and yet you’ve never been with a woman.”

Killua reddened, wondering if his brother had read his mind. Rather than deny it, which is what he meant to do, he felt the touch of Illumi’s burning cold aura and found his lips spilling the words, “How do you know that?”

Illumi gave a low laugh. “It’s written all over your face; and besides, I’ve seen how you look at the prettier boys.”

Killua spluttered, flailing for something to say.

“Don’t,” Illumi said. “You’ve already as good as admitted it. You are an abomination, you aren’t fit to lead this family, and the only real question now is how to be rid of you.”

His face burning, Killua looked toward the edge of the terrace, longing to escape; but something bound him in place, something scorching and freezing by turns. Killua felt his own aura crackle to life in response. A few guests took notice, began to point and whisper.

“Be careful, Little Brother. I truly don’t think you want to fight me.”

Illumi put a hand on his shoulder, and a hundred images seemed to flow through Killua’s mind at once: a flat stone on a rocky outcropping, covered in blood. A white cloth caught and fluttering like a netted butterfly in a black tree branch. Thick smoke rising from a fire smoldering on a pile of what looked like animal guts. More and more and more, each more terrible than the last. Finally, Killua’s shocked mind began to make sense of them: all of these things were his brother’s handiwork. Wherever he had been, he had sold his soul there to darker forces than Killua had known to exist, and had become far more powerful than he could have imagined.
“Now, go to Father and tell him that you rescind the title. That you gift it to me.”

“It won’t be that easy,” Killua grated out, though the force of Illumi’s aura was wearing at him. “It isn’t as if he decided this arbitrarily. This is tradition, and that won’t change just because you say so.”

“It will when I threaten to take the title by force if he doesn’t give it to me willingly.”

Another rush of images flooded Killua: all of the party guests clutching their stomachs, their throats, as blood poured from their mouths. Blood running in a wide delta across the ballroom floor, through the doors, across the terrace, between the pillars of the balustrade in a brutal cascade. A bright morning, unnaturally silent aside from the buzzing of fat black flies around a roomful of corpses. Those corpses decades on, tangled with weeds and vines, woven into a green and pitiless net. Killua uttered a strangled cry.

“No one will die,” Illumi said, his voice velvety, “unless you refuse me.”

“Enough!” someone roared, before Killua could answer. Their father, Silva, was standing in the doorway. He had cloaked his aura in order to listen to them—but how much had he heard? By the look on his face it was, as he had said, enough.

“Illumi Zoldyck,” Silva said in a voice like a thunderstorm rolling across the now-silent room, “your words are both blasphemy and treason! By virtue of them, you have lost the right to the Zoldyck name, and any part of our fortune. You are exiled immediately!”

“But Father—” Illumi began.

Silva drew an ice-blue sword from the sheath at his hip, and held it to his oldest son’s throat. “You have broken our law. Now go, before I decide that exile is too lenient!”

Illumi pushed the blade aside with remarkable poise—there was no magic stronger than that contained in Silva Zoldyck’s sword. And yet there was a crack of doubt in Killua’s certainty. He had felt a brush of Illumi’s power; was their father truly still stronger?

His anxiety only redoubled when Illumi said, his voice calm and even, “I will go, since you do not
count my worth. But first, I have a birthday gift for my brother.” He raised his hands and plucked one of the roses from his hair. He examined it for a moment, and then offered Killua a wide, cold smile. “I gift you, Little Brother, a long, long life of solitude, confined to this castle and its grounds. Unfortunately, I can’t make you live it for an eternity; but you will have many hundreds of years to consider the folly of your decisions, after which you will die choking on your own loneliness. Oh,” he sighed, frowning slightly. “Well, because a curse does not take hold unless there are means to break it…”

A ripple of exclamations followed these words. Killua’s head swam. Illumi’s words had only been words, hadn’t they? Threats made in bitterness, because he had been defeated. Curses were for fairy tales. For all his new power, Illumi couldn’t have become powerful enough to bring those tales to life…

“You can’t—” Killua began.

“Oh, I can,” Illumi said, smiling as he tucked the rose he was holding into the buttonhole over Killua’s heart. “But I will grant you this one mercy: true love’s kiss—true, pure, mutual love—will break the curse…should you ever manage to compel such a thing.”

“You think that I can’t love?” Killua asked, his voice shakier than he would have liked. “That no one can love me?”

“You cannot love naturally,” Illumi said with a gentle smile that could have frozen an ocean. “As for someone loving you, you can’t hide your deviant desires, so how would any woman bear you?”

“Go!” Silva roared.

Illumi bowed to his father and brother, turned, and went. As he crossed the threshold of their home, he turned back once and said to the silent guests, “Remember, the blame for this falls solely on my brother.” Then he was gone.

Pain tore through Killua’s chest like nothing he’d ever felt before. He collapsed on the parquet floor as the guests around him began to scream. Just before he lost consciousness, he realized that they were not screaming for him.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

We meet Belle...ahem, Gon...and learn just how shitty life can get for a pretty boy in a seedy slum. But is that a heart of gold I see beating under the grime?

Idrisi, Old Port

Northwestern Padokea

A Winter Afternoon

1

“Order up!”

Gon looked gratefully at the bar, away from the two middle-aged women in too much makeup and too little clothing for the weather, which was cold even for midwinter. They had kept him at their table for the last five minutes on the pretense of needing this, that or the other minor embellishments without which their cappuccinos would be positively undrinkable.

Bisky looked back at him, one finely-plucked eyebrow raised in her childlike face (the product of many surgeries), tapping a candy-pink fingernail on the greasy countertop. There was a plate of fried whitebait beside the elbow she leaned on the counter, lying in turn beside a well-thumbed manga volume, its cover showing two improbably beautiful scantily-clad men, even less probably entwined. The book was Bisky’s: the only thing she ever read was the stylized cartoonish erotica from her home country. The food was meant for the grizzled fisherman sitting in a corner table: the bar’s only customer who looked likely to eat anything that wasn’t green and raw.

“Excuse me, ladies,” Gon said politely to the fluttering women, two of three locals among an unlikely crowd of nine who currently populated the cafe in this off-season and odd hour, too late for lunch but too early for liquor. “But I have to—” He forced a smile, and ignored their protests as he practically ran to the bar.

“Popular with the ladies as ever, Bishie,” Bisky smirked, pushing the plate toward him with a delicate finger. Up close, it was clear that she was older than she was trying to look, though her manner and energy were closer to fifteen than her probable forty. “Hmm, and not just the ladies,” she
added, eyeing a table that two male shipping clerks had been propping up for the past couple of hours, ordering coffee after coffee. “Those two are here almost every day.”

“Are they?” Gon asked, well aware that this was true but not particularly inclined to talk about it.

“Really, Bishie? I’m surprised you haven’t felt them burning holes in your backside every time you turn around.”

“My name is Gon, Bisky,” Gon said, blushing furiously. “Not Bishie.”

Bisky smiled, flicked her long, blond ponytail over her shoulder. “Well, if the shoe fits—”

“Bisky,” Gon growled as the customers looked on with interest, “I am not one of those boys from your gross books! I don’t even look anything like them!”

“Hmm, debatable.”

“Besides, aren’t stories about pretty boys for little girls?” Gon couldn’t help the jab—he took enough of them from her.

Bisky smirked. “Little girls, big girls, not girls at all—what does it matter? All of us like a pretty boy. Which is why I keep you here.”

Gon picked up the plate. “Kaito’s fish is getting cold,” he said, turning away from her.

She chuckled, eyes sparkling with humor. Whatever she might say, Gon was certain that the main reason she kept him on was to tease and bicker with him. Well, that and her cut of his admittedly substantial tips. He began to maneuver his way through the tight spaces between the packed-in café tables, toward the man waiting in the corner. After what Bisky had said, he couldn’t help feeling all of the eyes in the place following him, like so many surveillance cameras. He sighed. She was right, he was used to it, but it didn’t make him any less self-conscious.

Gon wasn’t much given to thinking about his looks, but he still knew that they drew attention. He hadn’t met his parents—his mother had abandoned him at birth, his father not long after, to the care
of the aunt and great-grandmother who had raised him. Gon knew from pictures, though, that he looked like his father, and Ging was a striking man. Or had been, before embarking on the sea journey that had killed him and lost the family all of their money. In the few pictures of him that Mito had kept, Gon saw the same dark complexion, gold-brown eyes and unruly black hair.

He didn’t like being called a pretty boy in Bisky’s native Japponese or any other language, but he was also glad that Bisky didn’t pull punches. It was the reason why he’d accepted the job, out of so many similar offers. He didn’t want to be flattered by his boss. He didn’t want to earn more than was due pay for hard work. But he knew, uncomfortably, that somehow, he had still ended up a commodity.

Gon reached the older man’s table and set the plate down in front of him. “Sorry for the wait, Kaito,” he said. “Do you need anything else?”

“Gon,” Kaito said, leveling Gon with deep-set dark eyes, “you have worked here for two years now, and I’m here pretty much every day, when I’m not on a fishing boat. Have you ever seen me eat anything besides whitebait in tempura batter with far too much soy sauce?” He dumped a pool of it onto his plate from the clay pitcher on the table, as if to punctuate his point.

Gon shrugged. “I wouldn’t be much of a waiter if I didn’t ask. After all, someday you might wake up wanting steak? ”

Kaito barked a laugh. “Never! I was born to the sea, and it’s far too late to change me now.” He inspected the plate of fish and selected one with a set of worn teakwood chopsticks that he always carried with him, and used with unexpected delicacy. “But,” he said, dunking the fish in the puddle of sauce and then pointing at Gon with it, as it dripped dark liquid onto the pile of its unfortunate brethren, “you should not let Bisky mock you like that.”

Gon smiled ruefully and said, “She’s only teasing. Plus, there are worse jobs out there.”

“I can hear you,” Bisky told them in a loud, trilling voice. All customers currently occupied, she was slumped now in an old beach chair behind the bar, reading the manga and fanning herself with a palm-leaf fan despite the cool atmosphere of the café and the drafts creeping through the flimsy windows. “And Bishie’s right. Where would an eighteen-year-old boy with an ass like that find a better job in this town that wouldn’t demand…well…the selling of assets he might prefer not to sell?”

Gon blushed fiercely, but Kaito only shook his head, crunching fried fish. “You’re meant for better than this, Gon. Your father—”
Few things riled Gon since he’d gotten used to this job, its concomitant flattery and verbal abuse, but invoking his father’s name against him invariably did. “My father left me with a thirteen year old girl and an old woman,” he interrupted sharply, “to go off on a pleasure cruise that killed him! He doesn’t come into my decisions!”

Kaito held up a long, thin hand, white ponytail raking his shoulders as he shook his head. “And may he plead with whatever god he answered to for that. I only meant to say that he wasn’t a man to accept a bad bargain. You’re as smart as he was, but you got your Aunt Mito’s heart. You’re the best of both of them.”

Gon’s tray hung forgotten by his side. He looked out of the dirty window at the street congested with cars and scooters, the narrow harbor, equally crowded with boats of all descriptions tied up at the quais, to the slate-blue sea beyond. Bands of sunlight stuttered across the far-off water through breaks in the wind-driven cloud, painting it in soft greens. All of it was somewhere between the color of Mito’s and Komugi’s eyes.

“My family deserves better than what we have,” he sighed.

“You do,” Kaito said, his eyes and his words soft. “Why not apply to a university? You could learn a profession, leave all of this behind.”
“I would never abandon my family.”

“I didn’t mean that you should! With an education, you could get a decent job, and with a good job, you could keep them comfortably.”

Gon considered the far-off horizon, empty except for a shipping vessel or two inching across it. For a moment he could smell the open sea, the cold, clean atmosphere of his island childhood, and he longed for it with a visceral twist of his gut that made him reach for the table to steady himself.

“Gon?” Kaito asked, brows drawn together with worry.

Gon drew a deep breath, and the nearer atmosphere of fish and grease and exhaust fumes that hung perennially over the docks eclipsed the sea-wind scent. The smell permeated the café, even in midwinter with the doors shut. He shook his head, smiling sadly at the man as he turned back to answer him.

“Kaito, I left school two years ago. I’d need those and two more even to qualify for university. And if I did find one to take me, then I’d have to pay for it, which I can’t.”

“There are scholarships.”

Gon laughed bitterly. “Yeah, and a one-in-a-million chance of winning one—if you’re a good student.”

“You’re too young to be such a defeatist.”

“Okay, so suppose I did manage all of that—I wouldn’t know where to go. Everything I know is here.”

Kaito sighed wearily and pushed his plate away, still half-full. “Who can tell any man where he should go? I only know that it’s in your eyes…some other place. Some better place.”

That hit where it hurt, because of course, Kaito was right. Gon did want to see other places, he always had. He longed for newness and adventure and wind that didn’t smell used up. But those
dreams were as far out of reach as university, and so there was no use in dreaming them.

Gon was saved from having to answer Kaito (or consider undreamable dreams) by a call from a table of four women, tourists from Yorknew. “Sir,” one of them called shrilly, “more coffee, please!”

“Sorry, Kaito, I have to go,” he said, and made his way to the table of Yorknew women—the wives, he’d found out by listening to their earlier conversation, of shipping magnates like his father had been. As he refilled their cups at the bar they discussed him (unaware, as most people were, of his oddly sharp hearing) in such frank terms that he stayed there far longer than necessary, back to them, so that they wouldn’t see his flush of embarrassment. When he realized that one of them had thrown down a wager regarding which of them could lure him to her hotel room, he knew that he had to get out, wages be damned.

“Bisky, I’m leaving,” he said, clattering his tray onto the bar and hurriedly unwrapping his apron.

“What?” she demanded, furious. “Happy hour will begin in twenty minutes, and it’s Saturday, so you know that we’ll be busy!” She waved her book in emphasis, awarding Gon a view of two characters doing something two each other that he hadn’t even known was possible.

“I’m getting sick,” he hissed, turning his head slightly toward the Yorknew women.

“You know how to turn them down nicely, when it comes to it,” Bisky said sternly, ignoring his words, her voice for once without affect. “Until then, you have to play your part. We all do, or we’ll starve.”

I’d rather starve than... He shook his head, unable even to think the words. He knew that Bisky was right, and this certainly wouldn’t be the first time he’d fended off unwanted advances. But on the heels of Kaito’s words he truly did feel sick, and sapped, and so very tired of it all. How long, he wondered, could he keep dodging this bullet? He knew that other boys in his situation would jump at the opportunity those women offered for a short window of luxury, if only for a night. But he only felt revulsion at the thought. Right now, that didn’t need to be his reality; but as Abe’s senility worsened, and if Komugi’s weak chest didn’t improve, the two of them would need more care than Mito and Gon could give, working full time...

“I’m sorry, Bisky,” he said. “I’m going to throw up…”

She leaned her forearms on the bar, looked at him with slitted eyes. “Be careful, Bishie. You may be
pretty, but you aren’t irreplaceable.”

“I understand,” Gon said, bowing his head to her.

“Hm,” she said with a cynical smile. “I wonder if you do.”

“I’ll come in early tomorrow,” he said, to placate her.

“Will you? After vomiting all night?” She shrugged, and stuffed a handful of jenny in his shirt pocket. “Buy yourself some tighter pants and be here first thing, and hope some prettier boy hasn’t shown up in the meantime.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A little look at what This Provincial Life is really like for Gon & family, and a sudden uptick in their fortunes that may be too good to be true. (Of course it is! This is a fairy tale kids!)

Chapter Notes

So I've been thinking hard about how and when to post these chapters. This fic is finished and it's almost 96K words long. 26 chapters would take me 6 months to post at one a week. But I don't want to overwhelm you with 10K words at a pop, so here's my compromise: I'll be posting one chapter each on Sundays and Wednesdays. Apologies if that feels like a landslide, but, well, the other option is to still be posting this when I start the next Big Bang! XD

2

Gon stood for a moment on the quai after he’d left the café, breathing the cold air, truly fighting down nausea and wondering how his life had come to this. It was rhetorical, of course. He knew how he’d come to live in this city, the primary and distinctly seedy home port of one of the many new trading conglomerates that had grown up after the war and the collapse of East Gorteau. And he knew how fragile the balance was between good fortune and bad, life and death. He had lived it, after all: the privileged life they had once led in a large, airy beach house on an island off the coast, before his father and their money were lost at sea.

He had watched, helpless, as his father’s creditors hauled away everything of value from the house, and finally forced the remaining family—Gon and his aunt and great-grandmother—out onto the streets. They’d made their way to Idrisi because there was nowhere else to go. One of the few possessions left to them—probably because no one in their right mind would want it—was the tenement building in the worst quarter of the city.

Once the respectable neighborhood of a small religious sect, the Belsonso Quarter had long since morphed to a melting pot of refugees that the global political chaos of the last half-century had churned up. Now, native Padokean bakeries and Laundromats rubbed shoulders with Gorteauan spice shops, Japponese noodle houses, multi-lingual used book shops and hundreds of other small businesses with proprietors of every race and creed. Interspersed were the crumbling tenements
overflowing with the city’s most destitute, washing-lines strung between them in an impenetrable web, drying clothes fluttering like prayer flags on mountain crags.

Gon sighed as he turned onto their street: nameless, like most of the streets spidering out through the Belsonso. It was steep and it was cobbled, its few stunted trees clattering their branches and a few clinging leaves in the bitter wind that whistled down from the crest of the hill. Gon dipped his nose into the wide, soft, forest-green scarf that Mito had given him for his last birthday. Though it had been spring then, they’d both known that it would get cold soon enough, and the off-season price had been too good to turn down. Now he was glad of it.

He passed a couple of faded tenements, the noodle house that was barely more than a doorway billowing scented steam, and the acupuncturist’s office, but he stopped short at the bakery a block down from his building. Abe stood outside it on a rickety ladder, scrubbing the window.

“Abe!” he cried. “What are you doing?”

His great-grandmother looked down at him, her lined face lighting. “Gon! Madame Durand said that she’d give us all of the leftovers from yesterday if I washed the windows. There are even two chocolate muffins.”

Gon sighed. The old woman was in no shape to be scrubbing windows. She shouldn’t even be outside on her own. “Abe, please come down.”

Abe looked back at the window and took up her scrubbing again: the same spot, over and over, clearly ignoring Gon. “I want a chocolate muffin.”

Gon tamped down his exasperations, saying gently, “Please come down? Just to talk to me for a minute?”

Reluctantly, she tottered down the ladder while Gon waited underneath to catch her if she fell. Once on the ground, she stood in front of Gon, not quite meeting his eyes. Her thin jacket, long outworn, was splashed with water, as was her skirt. She had no hat or gloves. She frowned as she examined her soaked clothing, as if wondering how it had happened. Gon promised himself for the thousandth time that he would find a way to save his family from this misery.

“You go home,” he said, hugging her. She was so frail, she felt as if she’d crumple like a leaf in his embrace. “I’ll finish it.”
“But you have a job.”

“I’m finished with that for the day.”

Abe sighed, but she dropped the washrag into the bucket of dingy water. Gon frowned to see her fragile fingers blue with cold. He warmed them between his own for a few moments, and then waved her on her way home. Then he unslung his messenger bag and picked up the washrag.

* *

Though it was falling to ruin like the rest, Gon’s family’s building held onto an air of old-world grandeur. It was painted a fading yellow, with a crumbling terracotta-tiled roof and a scrollwork of precarious wrought-iron balconies laddering up the front with long glass doors behind them. Most of the doors had several panes missing, which had been patched with fabric and cardboard and, in one case, what looked like a rusted hub-cap banged into roughly the right shape.

The Freecss’ doors, at the very top of the tenement, were miraculously intact. It was the only good thing about the place. The apartment was tiny, far too small for four people. Its single bedroom belonged to Gon, mainly because it was unheated and Komugi and Abe couldn’t stand the winter cold. His aunt and great-grandmother and little sister unrolled thin pallets by the stove on the sitting room floor at night. The flat’s few pieces of furniture were those that had been there when they moved in, mismatched and rickety.

The last of their money had gone on the trip to this place, a meandering sea journey that took far longer than it ought to have, had they been able to afford better tickets. Abe’s mental state began to decline not long afterward. Gon had always wondered if she simply wanted to forget; to escape their grim present in favor of a life that existed now only in memory. She had loved the island, and in this new place she was diminished. Like the buildings of their neighborhood, their once-vibrant colors leached to pastels by harsh sun and harsher winter storms, she was a faded image of her former self.

Aunt Mito wasn’t much better. Life in the city had wrung her out, as had raising two children more or less on her own. At thirteen, she’d been in no position to be a mother, but motherhood had been thrust on her anyway in the form of an infant Ging couldn’t be bothered to look after himself, along with the care of an old woman. In their big house on the island it had worked, more or less. Mito had had plenty of help there, and there had been other opportunities for her to escape for a few hours a day when they’d had the money Ging sent them dutifully every quarter.
Once that was gone, it meant relentless work for both herself and Gon. Never having had the chance to train for a profession, Mito accepted the only job she was offered in Idrisi, working the line in a fish canning factory. It barely paid their bills.

By age seven, Gon was scrounging any odd jobs he could. He hung around the bars in the Old Port after school and on weekends with a handful of other urchins he quickly befriended, sweeping doorways or collecting trash, anything for which someone would give him a few coins he could bring home. At eight, he showed up one cold spring afternoon with a two-year-old girl instead of a pocketful of jenny. She was blind and feverish, her breath laboring with pneumonia, but Mito took her in anyway.

She spoke a language that none of them knew, but she made it clear that he name was Komugi. Mito called a doctor that they couldn’t afford, and he told them that there was no use treating her, she likely wouldn’t last the week. But Mito bought the medicine anyway, and Komugi did last the week, and eventually got better, though she would never quite be healthy. Gon fell in love with his new little sister, and worked even harder to keep her as comfortable as possible.

He was glad of her company as he grew older, and watched his friends sink one-by-one into the mire of this place. A few found jobs bartending or waiting tables, like he did, but there were only so many legitimate jobs to be had in the slums of a heaving international port, and he knew that he had been more than lucky to land one of them. The rest drifted into inevitable prostitution, some with more luck than others. Gon tried not to listen on the rare evenings when a few of them weren’t working and they dragged him out to dockside bars, gloating to each other over their latest conquests.

“You should listen to this, Bishie,” one of them would invariably say, jabbing Gon in the side with an overly-jovial elbow (they’d long since adopted Bisky’s nickname for him.) “Take notes. You’d make a killing with that pretty face.”

Gon would clench his drink and long to cry, to rage, to run—but where? Even if there were somewhere for him to go, he could never abandon his family, because he knew that there would be a day, likely soon, when he would be the last flimsy barrier between them and starvation.

These ruminations had Gon in a black mood by the time he finally got home, his bag full of the promised leftovers from the bakery. He found Abe and Komugi huddled by the small paraffin heater in the center of the main room, Komugi telling Abe one of the fairy-tales she’d memorized from the books Gon read to her. Mito, meanwhile, stood at the counter of the tiny kitchen area, a board of half-sliced onions in front of her. Her eyes were fixed on the window over the sink, where a tiny shard of sea was visible among the jumbled rooftops. She had always been a dreamer, easily distracted, but it had a different quality now than it had in Gon’s half-remembered days on the island. Then, she had been vibrant as the flowers in their large garden, chestnut hair falling in thick waves to her waist, her blue eyes always laughing as she allowed Gon to drag her from her from her house or yard work into one of his elaborate games.
Now her hair was shorter and pulled into a messy knot at the back of her head, reddish-brown streaked with grey. Her face was gaunt, her eyes flat and faraway. She turned distractedly as her nephew entered, saying, “Gon, you’re back early,” with a watery smile that never fully formed.

“Yeah…um…Bisky didn’t need me anymore.”

Mito frowned. “At this time, on a Saturday? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, fine,” Gon said, unable to meet her eyes, the money Bisky had given him for new pants burning a hole in his pocket. “Look, I got bakery leftovers,” he said quickly, before she could pry further. He took one of the chocolate muffins and gave it to Abe, who bit into it with delight, and then he offered the other to Komugi.

She sniffed it with clear longing, and then offered it back to Gon. “Give it to Mito,” she said. “She deserves it.”

“Take it, Sweetheart,” Mito said. “You’re far too thin.”

“But—” Komugi began.

“Please,” Mito said softly, and Komugi nodded, bit into the cake.

Gon set the bakery bag on the kitchen counter and then retreated to the bedroom, shedding his now-damp jacket and scarf onto the back of a chair on the way. He shut the door in order to change. The tiny room was dim in the fading winter light, and so cold that ice had formed on the inside of the window panes, the frozen condensation of his past night’s sleeping breath. He carefully took off his work clothes and hung them up. He only had the single set, washing them on his day off, and he couldn’t afford for them to get dirty in the meantime. Of course, if he obeyed Bisky’s orders, soon he’d have another pair of pants. He sighed.

He stood for a moment in his boxers, goose-pimples rising on his skin, contemplating bathing. In the end, he couldn’t face the trip down to the dank communal bathroom on the ground floor, which only left cold water in a basin as an alternative, and that was unthinkable. So he pulled on one of his two other sets of clothes: a dingy-green long-sleeve t-shirt and equally uninspiring olive cargo pants.
Gon was tired, sapped to his bones by the weight of worry. He wanted nothing more than to crawl under his covers and sleep, preferably dreamlessly. As he stood contemplating it, though, he heard a loud rapping at the door, and one of the downstairs neighbors calling, “Phone!”

The building’s phone, too, was communal, and situated, like the bath, on the ground floor. Sighing, he went back out into the main room just as Mito opened the door. “I’ll take the call,” he said, before she could step out, but the young man in the doorway—one of the sons of a large Mimboan family who had lived in the building for a couple of months—shook his head.

“They say they talk to Miss Mito,” he said, his accent so thick he was hard to understand. “Only Miss Mito.”

“Alright,” Mito said, though she raised her eyebrows. The few phone calls they received were almost always for Gon. She disappeared out the door and down the stairs. Gon went to the kitchen.

“What was she making?” he asked.

“Onion soup,” Abe answered dismally.

“Didn’t they give her any fish scraps today?”

Abe just shook her head and stared drowsily into the stove. Gon looked through the cupboards. They were pitifully empty, and he reminded himself to stop by the market when Bisky paid him tomorrow. For the moment, there were only the onions, a bit of a bottle of brandy, some oil and a lump of cheese of unidentifiable variety, bluish with mold around the edges. Still, that was better than nothing, and the bread he’d brought would fill it out.

He fried the onions until they turned golden-brown, then he lined a baking dish with sliced bread, added the onions, grated the cheese over it and finally topped off the dish with watered-down brandy and put it in the oven. He turned, wiping his hands, to see that Komugi had crept over to lean against the counter.

“How do you know how to do that?” she asked.

“Make dinner?” he asked.
“Make dinner out of nothing.” Her pale green eyes were fixed on his face, giving him the uncanny feeling that she could see him. Of course she couldn’t, and never would. Her blindness was congenital, her world forever dark.

He smiled. “Necessity,” he answered, and Komugi made a face.

“I mean it!” she said. “I can’t cook anything! It always burns, or tastes funny, or the onions are still crunchy.” At that, she shuddered; she hated raw onions.

“You’re only twelve,” Gon said, running a hand over her rough, white-blond hair. “Plenty of time to learn.”

“Will you teach me?” she asked, taking his hands and twining their fingers inside and out, like a game of Cat’s Cradle.

He smiled. “Of course. But don’t get too excited. It’ll mostly be frying onions.”

“When is breakfast?” Abe demanded.

It wasn’t really worth correcting her. “Half an hour? Maybe a little more?”

“So long?” she asked dejectedly.

Gon smiled at her. “Do you want me to read to you? To pass the time?”

Abe considered him, and then said, “No. I want to watch you draw.”

Gon was tired and dispirited, but he couldn’t say no to the small, hopeful spark in her eyes. “Okay,” he said, grabbing his bag and pulling out the sketchbook and pencil he always carried with him. He sat down on the floor beside Abe, and Komugi sat leaning against him, her eyes turned to the fire. He flipped past his last few sketches—Kaito ruminating over an empty plate; storm clouds over the sea; a couple of studies of gulls in flight.
Finding a blank page, he looked back at Abe. “What should I draw?” he asked her.

She considered this, and then she said, “Draw something from the island.”

This was a common request from her: to draw pictures of the life they’d lost. He could understand why she would ask, but the pictures always left her with an expression of longing that made him wonder if it wouldn’t be kinder to deny these requests. That, and the fact that he barely remembered the island at all, and his drawings were mainly fabrications, though Abe didn’t seem to notice.

“Gon?”

“Sorry. I was trying to think of something.”

“Draw the garden,” she suggested.

“The garden! That would take longer than a half hour.”

“A flower from it, then. A rose. I do miss the roses…” Her eyes were rheumy, dreamy.

Gon nodded and set his pencil to the paper. Flowers weren’t something he had much practice drawing, few and far between as they were in the Idrisi slums. But he could remember the roses Mito had tended on the island, some of them tiny as coins, others big enough to overflow her cupped hands.

“Hold your hands together, like this,” he said, demonstrating for Abe. “Now sit still so I can get them right.”

“I don’t want a picture of my hands,” Abe grumbled. “I want a picture of a rose!”

“Be patient,” he said, and began to sketch the outline of Abe’s fingers, curled and knotted until it wasn’t clear whether they were hands or branches. Then he pulled out his precious box of pastels, choosing the crimson one and a few paler red shades. He’d decided to draw the bloom wide open, almost overblown; he recalled that that was when they had smelled the sweetest. Abe bent close to watch as, petal by petal, the rose emerged from beneath Gon’s hand. When he was happy with it, he
turned the sketchbook so that she could see it.

“It’s perfect,” Abe said, touching one of the petals reverently. “Almost like real…but without the scent.”

“I wish,” Komugi said softly, “that I could smell a rose.”

Gon sighed, because really, a chalk-and-pencil drawing of a rose was very far from the real thing, and for Komugi, it meant nothing at all. It hurt to think that she had never smelled a rose. It hurt more that his great-grandmother might never see a real one again. He tore the page from the book, and handed it to her.

“Well,” he said, trying not to let the melancholy leak into his smile, “at least this one will never fade and die.”

“Thank you, Ging,” Abe said, holding it reverently and studying it.

Gon flinched at the name, hoped she hadn’t noticed. “You’re welcome. And now, I better check on dinner—”

He didn’t get the chance. Mito came back in the door as he stood, with the strangest look Gon had ever seen on her face. It was a mixture of consternation and panic and—hope? Could that actually be hope?

“Who called?” Gon asked anxiously.

“It was Bisky,” Mito said, dropping into a chair, her eyes somewhere off in the distance.

Oh gods… Gon thought. Had she fired him because of this afternoon? But if she had, why call Mito about it? “What did she want?” he forced himself to ask.

“A ship has just come into port. A ghost ship, found abandoned, beached on an atoll off the north coast of the Begerosse Union. They’ve brought it to port here, because—” Mito looked at Gon and then swallowed hard. “Because it was one of Ging’s.”
For a moment Gon was frozen, staring at his aunt as if she’d sprouted wings. Then he sat down beside her in one of their wobbling chairs. “He’s come back?” His voice wavered, barely more than a whisper. He had thought that the father he had barely known didn’t matter to him. He had been wrong.

Taking his hand, Mito said, “No, Gon, I’m sorry. It is one of his ships, but it isn’t the one he was travelling on. And the crew is gone, anyway. No one knows what happened to them.”

He nodded. He should have known that. Even if Ging was still alive somewhere, he was never coming back.

“But,” Mito added, “the ship’s cargo is intact, and that means that by rights, it’s yours, since you’re Ging’s sole heir.”

“And what does that mean?” Gon asked.

“Well, the ship is carrying a full load of tech cargo. It’s worth a fortune. So what it means is that once you pay off Ging’s last creditor—well, let’s just say you’ll probably be able to afford to quit your day job.”

Gon shook his head in disbelief, trying to wrap his head around this sudden about-turn of their prospects. “So what are we waiting for? Let’s pay them off and get out of here!”

“Not so fast,” Mito said, her tone like a boulder in his gut. “We can’t claim it. Apparently, Ging’s will leaves his assets to you, Gon, but in the form of a trust fund, which you can’t touch until you’re twenty-one. Since I’m your legal guardian, I have to claim the money, and pay off the creditor.”

“Where?” Gon demanded. “And when?”

Mito turned her eyes back to the now-dark window, looking out on the sprawl of dingy lights from other buildings. “Kart Hudesht,” she answered.

Gon was beginning to sense that something was badly wrong with all of this. “That’s hours away! Why there, when Idrisi is the main port, and the boat is here?”
“Because that’s where the creditor lives. Morow—I believe that’s his surname.”

“I’ll go with you,” Gon said resolutely.

“No, you won’t,” Mito said, her voice soft but firm. “For one thing, you can’t risk Bisky firing you—not until the money for the ship is a sure thing. And second, we can’t leave Abe and Komugi alone for so long.”

But that wasn’t all of it. Gon knew Mito well enough to know that. “What aren’t you telling me?” he asked.

“This is…” Mito began, and then stopped, shaking her head. “I don’t know. It’s all very sudden, and very strange. I would rather you weren’t involved.”

“But I am involved, just by being Ging’s son!”

“Gon, please, just let me handle this.”

“Something’s wrong. I think we should look into it more before you go anywhere.”

Mito sighed, and her eyes were tired when they met his. Tired and worried. “Morow is insisting that I come tonight. He’s worried that others might try to claim the cargo before we settle accounts. He’s sending a driver, who will be here in…well, actually, he’s probably already waiting.” She stood up. “I have to change, and pack an overnight bag.”

Mito disappeared into Gon’s bedroom, and emerged ten minutes later transformed. She was wearing an elegant blue dress, one of the few things she’d kept from their days with money. There were accessories, too, and a pair of heels. She was even wearing makeup.

“Aunt Mito, you look beautiful!” he exclaimed.

“I was hoping for professional,” she answered with a slight smile, and despite everything, Gon was happy to see that something in her eyes had come awake, which had been sleeping for a long, long time. “Now, assuming all goes well, once I sign those papers, we’ll have money again. So what
would you all like?”

“Like?” Gon asked, confused, and still starstruck by the change in Mito.

“Yes. Gods know we’ve all denied ourselves many things in the years since Ging died. I want to bring you all back something to make up for that.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Gon said quickly. “Come back safely, that will be enough.”

Mito smiled at him, ran a hand down his cheek. “You’re a sweet boy, Gon. But please, let me do something for you? You’ve worked so hard for our family.”

“Cake!” Abe cried.

Mito laughed. “That should be simple enough.” She turned to Komugi. “Well? What would you like, sweetheart?”

“I want you not to go, Mimi,” Komugi said, slipping back into her baby name for Mito, as she did when she was frightened or upset. “Please, stay here!” She flung her arms around Mito’s waist.

“Komugi,” Mito said, “what is this? Are you crying? It’s only a short trip, just overnight. You won’t even notice that I’m gone.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Komugi repeated, her eyes swimming. “I have a bad feeling.”

“Komugi,” Mito said gently, “I have to go. We can’t keep living like this.”

“I don’t mind it. I don’t mind at all!”

Sighing, she answered, “But I do. I’ve minded every day since we left the island. You all deserve better than this.”
“I still don’t want anything,” Komugi insisted.

Mito smoothed Komugi’s hair. “Well then, Gon? What about you?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Don’t waste time shopping for me—just come back as soon as you can.”

Mito frowned. “The two of you are making me nervous! Stop talking as if this is something terrible!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to worry you,” Gon said softly.

“Well then, let me bring you something.”

Gon shut his eyes for a moment, trying to stem the simmering panic. When he opened them, it was to Komugi’s gaze, wide and green and wet with tears. So he said, “A rose. Bring Komugi a rose, the sweetest-smelling one you can find.”

Mito gave him a quizzical look. “That ought to be easy enough. Are you sure that that’s all you want? Not pens, or paint?” He shook his head. She looked to Komugi. “Fairy tale books?”

“No,” Komugi said.

Mito sighed. “All right then, a rose it is. And now, I have to go,” she said, running a hand again over the little girl’s hair. Reluctantly, Komugi let go of her.

“I’ll come down with you,” Gon said, standing. Mito nodded, kissed her grandmother and Komugi good-bye, and then left the flat, with Gon following.

They went down the stairs and then out onto the street, where it had begun to snow. A sleek, black car was waiting at the curb, its exhaust like dragon’s breath in the freezing night. As soon as he saw them, the driver, a tall man with auburn hair and golden eyes and a sinister half-smile, stepped out of the car and opened a back door. A blast of heat emerged from within.

“I don’t trust that driver,” Gon whispered to Mito as she hugged him. As if he’d heard Gon—though
he couldn’t possibly have heard him—the driver’s smile widened into a leer. “Don’t do this.”

Mito said, “I have to do this. You know as well as I do that Abe is going to need more care than either of us can give before the year is out, and Komugi—every time she coughs my heart stops. I’m the closest thing either of you have to a mother, and this is what mothers do for their children.” She smiled a little, then whispered, “Besides, I have pepper spray in my bag.”

She let go of Gon and then, with a wave and a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes, she folded herself into the back seat, and the driver shut the door. Gon watched as the car pulled away and drove up the hill, and then was gone.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which Mito returns home with an unbelievable story and a terrible burden, and Gon shows off the brains behind that pretty face.

Over dinner, an unusually lucid Abe chattered excitedly about all of the things that would be different when Mito returned. She recounted memories of their life on the island, wondering whether the money from the ship would be enough for them to move back there. Gon tried to listen, but he only half-heard her as he picked at his food. Komugi didn’t even make a pretense of eating. He was more than glad when the old woman finally conceded that it was time for bed.

He helped Abe and Komugi unroll their pallets and settle for the night, and after cleaning up the kitchen, he turned toward the bedroom. Once there, he shucked his clothes quickly and then pulled on the t-shirt and track pants that he slept in, diving under the covers of his pallet before the cold had a chance to properly sink in. Gon was beyond exhausted, but at the same time he couldn’t fall asleep, his mind too full of everything that had happened to let him relax. He lay awake for hours, and when he finally dozed off, it was anything but restful, fraught with disjointed dreams that were ominous without making any sense.

He walked through the garden of their old house, looking for a rose to cut for Komugi, but all of them had turned to ice and shattered when he touched them. He stood in a library whose shelves reached up into a cloudridden sky, full of books whose titles were written in characters he couldn’t read. He reached out a hand and found it enclosed by another one, long-fingered, fair-skinned, with a tracery of dark lines on it like rivers on a map, and the touch sent a wave of grief crashing through him. He ran through a thick forest, snow so deep that it kept tripping him, and he kept falling, and he couldn’t fall because something terrible was chasing him…and then something small and cold was gripping his shoulder, and he started awake.

After a panicked moment, he realized that it was Komugi’s hand. The room was still dark, and icy cold. “What is it, Mugi?” he whispered.

“I can’t sleep,” she answered in a voice that wavered with tears. “Every time I try, I dream that Mito is…that she’s…” She let out a choked sob. Gon lifted the covers and she climbed under them, burrowing into his arms.
“It’s not real, Mugi,” he said softly. “It’s only because you’ve never been away from her before.”

“But it feels real,” Komugi said. “Ever since Bisky called about the ghost ship, everything has just felt wrong.”

Gon didn’t know what to say, because he felt exactly the same way, but it wouldn’t help Komugi to know that. Instead, he said, “What kind of rose do you think Mito will bring you?”

“I don’t care about that! Why did you ask for one, anyway?”

Gon sighed. “Because I had to ask for something. She was trying to be brave, and I could tell that us worrying was making her worry, and so it was better to go along with it.”

She paused for a moment, and then said in a small, frightened voice, “In the dream I could see her. She was running through snow, and it was deep, and she kept falling, and she was afraid…”

“Afraid of what?” he asked, trying not to think of his own, nearly identical dream. He could just see her eyes in the faint residual light from the street. They were wide and too bright.

“Something was following her,” she whispered, “something bad.” The words sent a finger of cold down Gon’s spine. He shuddered despite himself. “You see?” Komugi whispered. “You’re scared, too. You’re pretending you’re not, but you are.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but I know that it’s all in my head. There’s no reason to be afraid. She’ll be back tomorrow, and then we can move out of this place, to a good neighborhood, or maybe even the country. You can have a whole garden full of roses.”

“I’m not a baby, Gon. You don’t have to lie to me.”

Komugi’s words were harsh and brave, but he could tell that their shared warmth was making her sleepy, which was for the best. And so he said, as confidently as he could, “I would never lie to you. You’ll have a rose garden one day, if that’s what you want.”
“A rose garden…” she repeated drowsily, her eyelids drooping.

“With roses in every scent you can imagine.”

“Promise me…”

“Promise you what?”

“That you’ll never leave me.”

“I’ll never leave you, Komugi.”

He managed to make the words sound definitive, but the truth was, as he spoke them, another icy shudder ran up his spine. There was no reply: she had fallen asleep, still clutching one of his hands. Gon didn’t sleep for a long, long time.

* *

He awakened to wind whistling around the eaves and a room so cold he could see his breath. Komugi was still fast asleep. By virtue of the dim, watery light coming through the window, he guessed that it was very early. When he slid out of bed and went to look out, he could see nothing for the driving snow. He couldn’t remember the last time Idrisi had had a full-blown blizzard, but they were in the midst of one now. He checked his alarm clock. It was half past nine.

Gon dressed and then pocketed the jenny Bisky had given him. He went into the main room, where Abe was still fast asleep. He pulled on his boots and jacket and scarf. Then he let himself out quietly.

First he called Bisky to confirm what he already knew: she wasn’t going to bother opening the café today. Then he went out to find breakfast. Most of the shops he passed were shut tightly, with wind-driven snow banking their doorways higher than Gon’s knees. He had to go three streets over before he found a convenience store that was open, and even then, all of their baked goods were a day old. Still, he and his family were used to that, and it also meant the meager banknotes stretched farther. He bought milk and coffee and jam along with three small loaves of bread, and then started the long slog home.
When he reached it at last Abe and Komugi were up, huddled by the stove. Komugi’s eyes were fixed on it pensively, while Abe was grumbling about the lack of food. She brightened when Gon came in with his shopping bags.

“Coffee and toast, Abe?”

“You are a good boy, Gon,” she said. He smiled at her, and then went to the stove and filled the coffee pot, put it on to boil. Komugi trailed after him. She looked pinched and tired. He made toast, spread it with butter and jam, and handed her a piece.

“Eat something, Mugi,” he said.

“I’m not hungry,” she answered. “Do you think Mito will make it home today?”

Gon sighed, looking down at her. “I honestly don’t know. If the snow stops soon, maybe…?”

“Where is Mito?” Abe demanded loudly.

_I’d like to know that myself_, Gon thought, piling breakfast things onto a tray. “She went out for a bit.”

Abe frowned. “I want her now!” she insisted, like a petulant toddler. Sighing, Gon resigned himself to hours cooped up with a cranky Abe and disconsolate Komugi.

The day dragged by just as slowly as he’d imagined it would, the only respite when he went out to buy more food. All he could afford were a few eggs and some vegetables that had seen better days, but he managed a passable omelet, big enough to stretch to lunch and dinner, assuming Mito didn’t make it back.

Dusk was falling before the blizzard finally began to subside. Abe had stopped asking for Mito, and Komugi had stopped speaking at all, but she brooded as she dried the dinner dishes. Gon watched her, wishing there was something that he could say to reassure her, but anything he said was likely to make everything worse.
Night had fallen when Komugi cocked her head and asked, “What’s that?”

Her hearing, honed by her lack of eyesight, was even keener than Gon’s. A moment later he heard it too, though: the low rumble of an approaching vehicle. The streets had been silent all day, too clogged with snow for any cars to pass, and so the noise of the motor was amplified by the silence. He and Abe peered out the glass door, trying to see what was coming.

“Is that an army truck?” Abe asked when the vehicle finally came into view.

“No,” Gon said, peering over the top of her head, “but it’s not far off. It’s an all-terrain vehicle.”

“Who needs one of those here?” Komugi asked, and then, before Gon could answer her, Abe said, “Look, it’s stopping outside!”

The blocky vehicle pulled up in front of their building. It was black, with tinted windows and huge, studded tires which made short work of the snowy streets. As they watched, the driver’s door opened, and a man stepped out: tall and lanky and dark-haired, most definitely not the man who had driven Mito away the night before. He opened one of the truck’s back doors and a small figure emerged, draped in a cloak that fell to the frozen ground. This one moved toward the building, disappearing inside without a backward glance. The truck sped off in a slurry of slush, quickly disappearing into the night.

Gon threw open the door when he heard footsteps climbing the stairs. “Mito?” he called down.

The hooded figure pushed past Gon into the flat, closing the door again before she turned and pulled her hood back. “Mito!” Her face looked drawn, her eyes haunted, and her hands trembled as she pulled off her gloves.

“Mito, what happened?”

She looked at him for a long moment, and then she shook her head slightly, as if to clear confusion. “Is there anything warming to drink? Brandy?”

“There’s a little bit left, I think,” Gon said. “I’ll get it.”
“Thank you,” she said, and then collapsed into a chair by the stove.

Gon poured some of the dark liquid into a glass and offered it to his aunt, as Abe and Komugi crowded close. “What happened?” he asked softly.

“I’ll explain everything,” she said, “but first…” She drank deeply from the glass, her eyes closed. When she lowered the vessel, though, and looked at Gon again, she didn’t seem at all restored. If anything, Gon thought she looked more skittish than she had before.

“Did something go wrong at the meeting?” he asked anxiously.

Mito laughed slightly, without humor. “There was no meeting. I never even made it to Kart Hudesht.”

“Why not?”

Mito stood up slowly, as if she were stiff and sore, and unhooked the cloak and let it fall. Gon fell silent, staring at her in horror. Beneath the heavy garment, she was wearing the clothes that she had put on the night before. But the neat, elegant silhouette was gone. The dress was snagged and torn, the tights laddered, the jewelry and shoes missing, and her feet raw.

“Mito!” Abe gasped, her eyes filling.

“What?” Komugi demanded. “What is it?”

Mito touched the little girl’s head, looked down at her with a sad smile and then said to them, “It was a ruse. Morow never meant to give us anything. He invited me to Kart Hudesht in order to kill me.”

“What?” Gon demanded, peering around for nonexistent combatants.

Mito sighed. “Relax, Gon. That danger is long since past, and I was a fool not to have seen through it all at the beginning. Any idiot should have been suspicious of the terms of the meeting—asking to see me alone, sending a car to fetch me—”
“But to want to try to hurt you…” Gon stumbled. “Why?”

“It’s as I told you last night. You are Ging’s sole beneficiary, but right now I control your estate, such as it is. With me out of the picture, Morow could claim the whole of the cargo for himself.”

“But it’s worth much more than he invested!”

“Probably,” she answered wearily. “But with interest on the loan, and the unusual circumstances… well, it doesn’t matter, really. It only matters that he believed he’d be able to claim it all. I began to understand when we turned off the coastal highway. We were into the mountains by the time I jumped out of the car. That was no driver—it was Morow himself.”

“Mito!” Komugi cried. “Are you hurt?”

Mito sank back into the chair, shaking her head, and Gon poured her another cup of brandy, which she accepted gratefully. “No, love. Not really. He had a gun. He tried to follow me. But it was snowing hard by then, and I had a head start, thank the gods. He lost me in the forest. And then he left me there, no doubt assuming that the storm would finish me off.”

“Then where did this come from?” Gon asked, carefully examining the cloak. It was made of heavy green velvet, lined in grey fur that looked real. “Something like this would cost a fortune. And who was that man who brought you back?”

Mito remained silent for a few long moments, gazing into the flames licking red against the stove door. Then she drew a deep breath, reached into one of the wide pockets of the cloak, and brought out a large, perfect, blush-pink rosebud, just beginning to unfurl its petals. By its delicacy and intense fragrance it was clear that it wasn’t a common hothouse flower, but one that had grown to its own design, in a garden, under a natural sun. The scent brought Gon close to tears for the lost life it conjured.

Mito offered it to Komugi, who reached out reluctantly to accept it. She breathed in its scent, her lower lip trembling. “Thank you, Mito,” she said softly.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t manage a cake,” Mito said to Abe. “This was the only gift I brought back, and I paid dearly for it.”
“You’re scaring me,” Gon said.

Mito uttered another humorless laugh. “That’s probably a good thing. But I’ll let you judge for yourself. All I ask is that you hear all of my story before you start asking questions.”

Gon nodded.

“Well, I’ve told you that I ran into the woods, away from Morow and his gun. I was only thinking about getting out of his way, but of course, when I finally stopped running, I realized that I was hopelessly lost. I couldn’t even remember the name of the last town we’d passed, or when we’d passed it. Since it was snowing, there was no hope of judging direction by the stars or moon. There was no hope even of re-tracing my own path, with the snow up to my knees and the wind covering my tracks as soon as I made them.

“I was so cold, and exhausted, but I knew that if I stopped moving that would be the end. So I kept walking purely to avoid freezing to death. I don’t know how long I wandered like that—it could have been hours, or less, or more. Everything looked the same; I might as well have been walking in circles.

“I’d just about given up by the time I spotted a light through the trees. At first I thought I was hallucinating. But as I walked toward it, it grew brighter. At last I found the source: it was a lamp on top of a huge gatepost, one of two on either side of a wide double gate. It wasn’t an ordinary gate. The doors were made of a thick, tangled briar, the gateposts weathered tree-trunks. Their branches stretched out into a fence as far as I could see from side to side. Even the lamps were some kind of pitch lanterns—not electric. If it hadn’t been for the lamps, the whole thing would probably have just looked like part of the forest.”

Mito paused, breathed. Then she resumed her tale. “I tried pulling at the gate, trying to open it or at least break through, but the briars began to scream and writhe like humans, and…and…”

Gon’s brow furrowed. Mito was eminently practical, and what she was saying made no sense. “Mito,” Gon asked, “are you sure you’re alright?”

“Are you asking if I’ve gone mad?” she answered, with a quirk of a smile.

“No…I mean, I wouldn’t—”
“Good. Because I’m not mad, and you promised to hear me out.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

But then Mito looked up at him with lucid eyes and a definitive line to her lips. “I should have seen that it was a line never meant to be crossed. But I was desperate. So I reached for the branches again, begged them to open, and this time they pulled apart, just like an ordinary gate.”

She stopped again, drew a breath. Nobody moved. “There was a pebbled path beyond them,” she said at last. “As soon as I stepped onto it, the storm was gone. Or…well…not gone. I could still see the woods and hear the blowing snow behind me, but it was warm where I stood, and peaceful, and flowers bloomed all around me, as if it were the height of summer.” But there was a deeply troubled look on her face as she spoke the words that Gon didn’t like at all.

“So it was…what? A biodome?” Gon asked.

“No,” Mito answered with conviction. “Nothing like that. There were no walls, the trees were a normal height, and I could see the sky. I followed the path through the garden until I could see that there was a large house—no, really, more of a castle—up ahead, the windows all lit up. I hoped that whoever lived there would be willing to help me.

“The front doors opened as I approached…by themselves, like the gate. I went inside, into a reception hall all lit with candles. There was a fireplace big enough that I could have stood in it, with a roaring fire. But there was no one there, either, and no one came when I called, so finally I gave up, and went to warm myself on a couch by the fire.

“I sat there for a while, wondering how I was ever going to get home, and then I heard a rustling noise. I turned to look and saw that there was a small table now near the couch. It was set with the loveliest dining-ware and covered with dishes of food. I called for whoever had brought it to me, and I thought that I saw someone disappearing into a corridor, but no one answered. There was a notecard sitting against a carafe of wine on the table. Someone had written on it: ‘Eat whatever you like. I wish you a peaceful night.’

“Well, I had no idea who might have written it or sent the food, but I was hungry enough not to care.” Here, Mito’s voice and look grew speculative, and slightly wondering. “And then, when I looked carefully, I saw that my mysterious host had served all of the foods we used to have on the island. I don’t know how he could have known.” She shook her head again, as incredulous as Gon was.
“So,” she began again after a moment, “I ate, and then, since no one came to take the dishes or tell me where I was meant to spend the night, I lay down on the couch. Even though it was all so strange, I fell asleep right away. I dreamed in the night that people were whispering over me. Odd things, a girl asking whether I was ‘her,’ and then a woman saying that I couldn’t be, I was too old.” She laughed ruefully, shook her head. “Old, at 31! And maybe that part was just my mind playing tricks on me, after all of the things that had happened.

“I woke in the morning to find myself covered with that cloak,” she nodded to the garment that Gon was still clutching, “and the dinner table now laid with breakfast things. There was another note telling me to help myself to whatever I liked. So I ate the breakfast and then put on the cloak, since I assumed it would be winter again once I left the garden, and it would be a long walk back to the main road, assuming I could find it at all. I made my way out of the house and back onto the pebbled path. I was looking around, trying to figure out how it could be so warm in the garden when it was winter just a few meters away—and then I saw the roses. There were hundreds of bushes, stretching out as far as I could see.”

It sounded like a sweet dream to Gon, but Mito blanched as she spoke the words.

“I was still sick with what had happened with Morow,” she continued. “That I’d be coming home worse than empty handed.”

“Mito—” Gon began, but his aunt held up a silencing hand.

“Komugi’s rose, though—at least I could manage that. So I looked for a perfect one, one that she could watch blossom, and then I broke the stem from the bush.” Mito looked now as if she might be sick. Komugi held the rose gingerly, as if it might bite her. “After all that I had been given in that strange place, you would have thought that a rose from a garden filled with them would be nothing. It’s what I thought. I was so very wrong.”


For a moment, Mito just stared at her clenched hands. Then, shaking herself, she said with a bitter laugh, “All hell broke loose. The sky clouded over; all of the colors of the garden seemed to fade. And he came striding out of the house, like an avenging angel. He was tall, and broad enough in the shoulders that he had to be a man, but that was all that I could tell about his appearance, because he was covered from head to toe in black. Black boots, black gloves, and a black cloak like the one I was given, its hood pulled down low so that it covered his face.”
“Who was he?” Gon asked. “The owner of the castle?”

Mito sighed. “Yes, he was the owner. It was clear even before he reached me, by the way that he carried himself, and his anger—all of the plants in the garden seemed to shrink away from him. I know that I did. When he reached me, he raised his hand as if to strike me. ‘What is the meaning of this?’ he asked me, pointing at the rose I’d picked. His voice was deep, rough, like someone who hasn’t spoken in a long while. Like it hurt to speak. I tried, but I couldn’t see his face—only a little bit of white hair.

“I apologized to him, and then I found the whole story pouring out of me, as if he were somehow compelling me to tell it. Last of all, I told him that I had taken the rose because my daughter had wanted one, and it didn’t seem as if it would matter when he had so many. He laughed a horrible, humorless laugh, and said, ‘You have no idea what you’ve done. You might as well have torn off one of my limbs when you broke that stem.’”

“That seems…kind of dramatic,” Gon said.

Mito shrugged. “Maybe it was. I truly don’t know. I only know that he was as angry as he might have been if I had attacked him.”

“But he let you go,” Gon said, his voice uncertain, “and I’m guessing that that was his car that brought you back?” Mito nodded. “So, he was just a rich crazy. But it’s okay, you’re back safely now. I mean, he even let you keep the rose.”

At this, Mito’s eyes filled with tears, and Gon looked on helplessly, wondering what he had said wrong.

“Oh yes,” Mito said, mastering herself after a moment, “he let me keep the rose, but as I’ve said, there was a price.” Gon said nothing, silenced by creeping unease. “For a while he just ranted at me, pacing back and forth like some kind of wild beast. He’d been kind to me, he said, given me his hospitality, and I’d shown my gratitude by trying to leave without any thanks, and stealing from him in the bargain. It went on and on, and then he said, ‘Your desecration won’t go unpunished.’”

“I tried again to apologize, to give the rose back, but he only laughed at me. ‘It’s far too late for that, now,’ he said. ‘A limb for a limb, isn’t that what they say? Well, which one will it be? I’ll be generous, and let you choose.’”
“He—he wanted one of your limbs?” Gon cried.

Mito sighed. “That’s what he said, and I had no reason not to believe him. I begged him, pleaded with him to spare me. Finally he agreed. I thanked him, and turned to go, but he grabbed my arm. ‘Where do you think you are going?’ he asked. ‘Home,’ I told him. ‘My family will be wondering where I am.’ He laughed at me, that terrible, grating, hopeless laugh. ‘You cannot leave. No human can, who passes my gates—not unless another is sent in their place.’

“So I begged him again, this time to let me go. I told him that I had a family, and we’re poor, and you need me, especially with that creditor after us. He watched me the whole time. Well, I think he did. I couldn’t see his eyes, but it seemed I could feel them, burning through his black hood. When I ran out of things to say, he said, ‘Your creditor has already been taken care of. I saw to that last night. But I’m curious: you say that it was your daughter who asked for the rose?’ And I told him it was. ‘Well then,’ he said, ‘I’ll let you go—if you send her in exchange.’”

“I asked him what he could possibly want with Komugi. He would only say, ‘If you won’t stay, then you must send someone else, and I want the one who caused this injury!’”

Komugi whimpered, and Gon moved to put an arm around her.

Mito looked pinched and sick. “Of course I refused. It wasn’t even a question. I don’t think it was ever even a serious request—what mother would send her child to take her punishment for her?”

“Then how did you get away?”

She sighed. “I didn’t; not really. He held his ground, I held mine, but of course, I never had anything real to bargain with. It was clear that he could overpower me easily, overtake me if I ran, and even if I could get away from him, I doubted that I would get those gates to open for me again. By that point, I was fairly certain that I hadn’t got them to open in the first place: it must have been him, all along.

“So, finally, I gave in. I told him that I would stay with him, but I begged him to let me come home one last time, to explain to you why I have to go away. I couldn’t bear to leave you wondering. He agreed that I could come home for one night and one day—sundown to sundown. At sunset of that day he would return to fetch me again—or Komugi, if I changed my mind.”

“You should have kicked him in the balls,” Gon muttered.
Mito flashed him a look. “I will pretend that I did not just hear those words come out of your mouth!” Then she sighed. “I can’t say that the thought didn’t cross my mind. But it must have crossed his too, because he grabbed my wrists in one hand, and…” She faltered again, furrows in her brow. “It didn’t feel like a hand. It felt like a vice; like he could snap my wrists with one squeeze. ‘Don’t even think about breaking your word,’ he said. ‘If you try to run, or to trick me, you and everyone you love will die.’”

“Who the hell is this guy?” Gon snapped.

“I don’t know,” Mito answered. “At this point, I don’t think it matters. What’s done is done, and he’s made it more than clear that he has the power to make me do what I promised. And so,” she drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, then met Gon’s eyes. “I’ve come to say goodbye to you.”

“Where are you going?” Abe asked, her eyes vacant.

With a sigh and a forced softness to her voice, Mito said, “Nowhere right now, Abe.”

“Nowhere, ever!” Gon said, the fury that had been mounting as Mito told her story finally snapping loose. He let go of Komugi’s shoulders and stood, hands clenched, facing his aunt. “This is crazy! He can’t be above the law! Where was this place? We’ll call the police—”

“No, we won’t,” Mito interrupted. “I believe that he does have the power to hurt us all if I don’t go back. But more than that, I wouldn’t have any place to tell the police to go, even if I dared risk it.”

This only stoked Gon’s fury. “Why not? He drove you back here, didn’t he? Did he blindfold you? Drug you?”

“No, nothing like that. And no, he didn’t drive me himself. He had a driver, someone who came to the gates and picked me up…but that doesn’t matter. I remember the drive, that we were in the mountains for a long time, but when I try to remember the route we took, it all just blurs and scatters.”

“We need to get out of here. Hide out somewhere until it all blows over.”
Once again, Mito uttered a rueful laugh. “Gon, this man never asked me where I lived, never even asked my name. I had no identification on me by the time I reached his castle. I gave his driver an address on the other side of the city as a deflection, and he brought me back to our front door. I don’t know who that man is, what he is, but I know that it’s pointless to try to fight him. So I’m going when that car comes back for me, and that’s the end of it.”

There was a taut pause. An idea began to form in Gon’s mind, in that measure of silence. He drew a breath, a sick anticipation twisting his guts, but Komugi pre-empted his speech. “No. It’s my rose, I’ll go.”

All of them erupted at once into protests and arguments, pleading and blaming and talking over each other until finally, Komugi cried, “Stop it!” She so seldom raised her voice that everyone fell silent in surprise. She shook off Gon’s protective arm, and stepped forward to face them all. She drew a deep breath, her unseeing eyes huge and her face pale, and Gon knew immediately what she was going to say; but his heart still froze at the words: “It’s my fault, so I’ll go.”

“No,” Mito said with steel in her voice, “you absolutely will not.”

“I have to, Mimi,” Komugi said with weary patience far beyond her years. “The rose was for me. I should be the one to fix it.”

“No!” Gon cried, furious. “This is not your fault, or Mito’s, or anyone’s but that madman in his castle. Who would make such crazy demands for a stupid flower? I’ll go, and I’ll show him what he can do with his threats.”

“Gon—” she began.

“He made a mistake when he challenged you,” he pushed on, before she could derail this fragile train of logic. “So did you, but that’s okay, because it means you can send me, without breaking your promise. And if you haven’t broken your promise, then he can’t hurt any of us.”

“Gon—” This time, her tone was exasperated.

“No, listen!” Gon said, forcing himself to sound calmer than he felt. Komugi came and wrapped her arms around his waist, and he put a hand on her head, but continued. “You told him Komugi asked for the rose. But she didn’t. I did.”
“You asked on her behalf.”

Gon set his jaw. “It doesn’t matter. It was still my ask, my words that brought all of this on. And that’s what he said, right? ‘I want the one who caused this injury.’ Well, that would be me.”

There was another prolonged silence, and then Mito shook her head. “Gon, you can’t.”

“Mito,” Gon said gently, glancing down at his sister, and then over at the old woman, who had fallen asleep in her chair, “Abe did nothing but ask for you all day long. She needs you, not me. Komugi is a girl, and growing up fast. She’ll need you, not me, to do that right. And whatever you say about this beast guy’s strength, well, I have a better chance if it comes to a fight than any of you do.” He shrugged, trying to seem confident in the assessment: “But I bet it won’t even come to that. He’ll probably forget all about this by tomorrow.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then I go and sort it out with him. If he really wanted to kill someone over a stupid rose, he’d have killed you.”

“You aren’t encouraging me, Gon.”

Gon forced a smile. “Come on, Mito. If it comes to it, I’ll go and talk to him. I’m sure we’ll be able to work something out. What’s he going to do to me, anyway? Lock me in a tower?”

Mito didn’t answer. By her sigh, though, Gon knew that he had won.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Gon faces the music, and we get a first look at our Beast.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so Sunday evenings were a dumb choice for posting. I skate almost every Sunday evening. But they’re also supposed to be the BEST for posting, so, dilemma. Double dilemma this week bc this is the first time you get a Killua section, and those are kind of a counterpoint to the main story, not chapters, not parts of chapters, and hence the chapters on either side are kind of short. What all of this means is, I’m going to post Chapter 4 and a Killua section rn, and Chapter 5 when I get home from skating. Hope that works!

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At dinner, Abe ate ravenously, apparently having forgotten that Mito had ever been gone, or the ensuing conversation. Gon and Mito both picked at their food, Mito stealing pained glances at Gon. It exhausted him, tired as he already was from the past restless night and the day caring for Abe. He made his excuses early and retreated to the bedroom, where he pulled on his sleep clothes quickly and then huddled under the covers.

But he couldn’t get warm, and his mind wouldn’t stop racing. He had no doubt that he’d done the only thing that he could do, but it didn’t make the prospect of tomorrow any easier to accept. Despite his brave words, he felt in his bones that that black truck would return, and then he’d have a fight on his hands that he wasn’t anywhere near as confident of winning as he’d tried to make his family believe.

Mito and Abe were still talking quietly when Gon heard the door creak open and soft steps come into the room. Komugi knelt by Gon’s pallet, and he opened the covers to her. She crawled into his arms as she had the night before, but it was nothing like the night before: beginning with the fact that she was still crying, voiceless sobs shaking her frail ribcage and tears flowing down her cheeks.

“Mugi—” he began, clutching her little body against his.
“No!” she interrupted emphatically. “Don’t you dare say that it will be okay! The car will come back. We both know that. What if you get to the house and that man kills you when he sees how we’ve tricked him?”

Gon was silent for a long time, as Komugi quietly soaked his sleeve. At last, he said, “Mugi, nothing is assured in this life. Our family knows that better than anybody. But when it comes right down to it…” He sighed, took a deep breath, stared at the dimly lit ceiling until the weight of her anticipation became unbearable. “Well, I’m the obvious choice. I’m the one who can fight him, if I have to.”

Komugi let out a strangled cry, clutching at Gon, but he continued calmly, “It’s true, sweet one. And you still need a mother.”

“I need you too!” Komugi cried, clutching him so tightly that tears sprang to Gon’s eyes. “Without you, I wouldn’t even have a mother! I’d be dead!”

Gon dropped his head onto hers, sighing. After a long moment, he said, “Mugi, you’re reason I go to work every day. I love you, we all love you…”

“But I’m blind, and sick, and useless.”

“No!” He sat up, brushed the unruly hair back from her forehead. “You’re beautiful and graceful and smart and sweet! You have the world at your feet, if you’ll only grab it!”

“But how, Gon?” she wept softly. “How will I learn those things if you’re gone?”

How indeed? he thought. And then why and why and why? At last, he said, “The same way I did. By the sheer force of wanting to.”

There was a long silence, while Komugi’s tears ran away into the darkness and Gon tried not to promise her what he couldn’t. He held her tight-curled body like a rosebud in the cup of his own. They lay like that for a long time, and then, abruptly, Komugi sat up, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Okay,” she said.

“Okay—what?” Gon asked, dubiously.
“Okay, I’ll believe what you’re telling me. For the moment. But Gon—” she pointed a finger at him, in much the way Mito had when he was small and misbehaving. “You have to promise me that you’ll come back. Even if it’s only once: come back, and tell me that you’re okay. Because otherwise I’ll come looking for you in that stupid forest and stupid rich man’s castle, and I won’t be nice!”

Gon smiled in spite of himself at Komugi’s fire. “Pinky promise?” he asked, as he hadn’t in years. A relic of her early childhood.

“Mmm,” she said, and and teached for his hand, linking their little fingers.

“Pinky swear made—” Gon began.

“Whoever breaks the promise—” Komugi said.

“Has to swallow a thousand needles—” Gon added.

“Sealed with a kiss!” Komugi concluded, pressing their thumbs together.

“Okay? Happy now?”

Komugi paused for another long, appraising, not entirely unsuspicious moment. “No,” she said, “but I trust you.” And then she burrowed her face into his chest and fell asleep.

The next day, Gon did everything that he could to keep his family’s spirits high, while quietly preparing to leave them. The roads had been cleared of snow and traffic was flowing again, so Gon rose early and went to visit a second-hand clothing dealer to pawn the cloak. He knew Neon and her shop well, and he knew that she’d never seen anything of the cloak’s quality cross her counter, but he still had to bargain for half an hour and threaten to leave twice to get anything close to a fair price for it. If there even was a fair price for such a thing.

After that, he went to the café. He explained to a distinctly unimpressed Bisky that he was probably going to have to leave.
“Leave? To go where?”

“I have…business with my father’s estate,” Gon lied, badly.

She raised her eyebrows and said, “How long will you be away?”

“Yes. Hopefully not too long.” He cast a glance behind him for Kaito. Backup right now would be nice, and though he hadn’t been there when Gon entered the café, he was hoping that the man had shown up in the meantime. He hadn’t.

Bisky’s smile was beatific in the way a dragon’s might be, observing a fresh knight. “The pants?”

“Here’s your money back.” He carefully counted out the bills from the wad in his pocket.

Bisky’s eyes widened as she clearly calculated the amount. “So you finally took up one of those offers?”

Gon snorted. “I’d throw myself in that rat-infested harbor first. No. Lucky windfall. So yes, I would be glad if my job was still here when I get back.”

“Hmm. Send me a pretty stand-in, and we’ll see.”

Gon sighed, and left quickly.

After that he went shopping for dinner. He intended to create an island-style feast for his family, either as a parting gesture or proof that the beast and his castle were no more than a delusion. But just as he’d begun cooking a shellfish stew, the sun’s rays spreading like fingers across the flat, they all heard the rumble of a large engine outside. The family left their various distractions, and went to look out of the glass doors.

“It’s back,” Gon said in a low voice.
“We can still…” Mito began, and then trailed off when she saw Gon’s look.

Gon drew a deep breath, looking at the hulking black truck, and then said, “No, we can’t. I’m going. But Mito—” He turned to his aunt, took her trembling hand in his. “I will come back to you. I promise.”

Gon slung on his messenger bag, and then picked up the duffle bag he’d stashed in a corner. It contained all of his art supplies and clothing, aside from his cafe uniform. He closed his eyes, gathered himself, and then opened them again. Mito was openly crying.

“I meant for you to have so much more than this, Gon.” She hugged him, her tears soaking his shoulder through his shirt. He pulled away, looked at Komugi.

“Komugi.” She turned away from him. “Mugi,” he said, stroking a hand down her hair, and at last she turned to him. “This isn’t forever.”

At that, Komugi let out a strangled sob, clutching Gon around his waist as she wept. He let her cry for a time, and then he pushed her to arms’ length. “Don’t cry, Mugi,” he said. “I’ll come back. I know I will.” She didn’t contradict him, but he could see the doubt in her expression, along with the unspent tears. “But for now, I guess this is—”

“Don’t say it, Gon.” Komugi’s voice was almost too low to hear. “I can’t hear you say it.” And with that, she turned and fled into his bedroom. Mito, looking mortified, and Abe, blissfully unaware of what was happening, hugged him in turn. It felt like a scene in a play, not quite real.

He took Mito by the hands. “Be strong for Abe and Komugi.” She didn’t contradict him, but he could see the doubt in her eyes, along with the unspent tears. “Okay…well…” he said, equally tremulous. “Wish me luck?”

Mito nodded, and he left, closing the door quietly behind him.

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Now that it had come, Gon only wanted this moment to be over with as quickly as it could be. He hurried down the stairs and out the street door, trudging through the snow to the black truck. He was reaching for the handle of the back door when a hand in a woolen glove closed firmly over his.
“Just what do you think you’re doing?” its owner asked in a rough, foreign accent. Hispanian, maybe?

Gon took a deep breath and turned to face him. He was a young man, probably mid-twenties, tall, with short, spiky dark hair and small round glasses and a day’s worth of stubble dusking his strong jaw. While he didn’t look particularly angry or violent, he was clearly guarded.

“I’m here at the request of your employer,” Gon said firmly.

The man narrowed his eyes. “The Master said to expect a woman, or very possibly, a girl. He didn’t say anything about a young man.”

“Well I’m what he’s getting, so take it or leave it.”

The man was glaring at him now. “You don’t cross the Master.”

“I’m not crossing the ‘Master.’ I’m doing exactly what he asked.”

“Listen, kid. Chivalry is grand and all, but if I go back there without that woman or a girl, I’ll have hell to pay, and more people than you realize will suffer for it.”

Gon pressed his lips together and folded his arms over his chest. “And there is no way that my aunt or my little sister are going anywhere with you, but you’re welcome to go back without any of us.”

The man’s jaw worked as he started Gon down. Gon stared back, expecting the man to take out a cell phone and call this “master;” preparing himself for a fight. But the man didn’t reach for anything, and after a moment his look turned to one of speculation. At last he sighed, and opened the door of the truck. “Fine, get in. You can sort it with the Master yourself. But I’ll warn you, he won’t be happy!”

Gon got in the truck before the man could change his mind, and then the driver got back in as well, and pulled away from the curb. It took Gon several moments to switch gears from the fight he’d expected, to begin to take in his surroundings. It was a shock to find himself a passenger in such an absurdly well-appointed vehicle. The air had a soft, cocooning warmth like the earliest days of
summer, before the heat became oppressive. It smelted of oiled leather and spices and something that Gon could only think of as wealth. The plush seat he settled into was softer than anything he’d felt in a long time, and as the adrenaline left him, he was overcome by sleepiness.

He tried his hardest to stay awake, to memorize the route they took, but it was impossible. The drowsiness quickly took him under, and when he started awake abruptly, it was to find that the car had drawn up at an open gate. It was clearly the gate Mito had described, with the gardens full of flowers and fruit trees, and a large building beyond it. A castle indeed, straight out of a children’s book, with turrets and spires and battlements jumbled in vast, dizzying swoops. Every window was lit, but with a softer light than Gon was used to. Candles. That was what Mito had said. The wide front doors were thrown open, that buttery light spilling out.

The driver climbed out of the car and opened Gon’s door, nodding to gesture him out. Gon stepped down, lifted his duffle to his shoulder, and then simply stood in the snow, staring at the impossible scene beyond, uncertain what to do next. He couldn’t make himself walk forward.

“Go on,” the driver told him, gruffly but not unkindly. “My job is done. Yours?” He laughed humorlessly. “Well, good luck!”

Killua

I step out of the bath as I hear the car approach the gates. My throat is tight and it has nothing to do with my affliction; or, I suppose, it has everything to do with it. There is no possible way that this can work. There is no countenancing the possibility that it won’t.

I pick up a towel, drying my hair first, and then the rest of me, carefully, because snags happen easily and snags are painful. I try not to think of what touching me would do to soft, ordinary human skin. But then, no one has to touch my body to undo all of this. A brush of lips, as long as it doesn’t take too long to achieve, ought to be painless, and then the rest will be moot.

On the other hand, I have no idea how long it will take, if it even happens at all. Nor do I have any idea how much the affliction has progressed. I can’t remember the last time that I looked at myself and, on the heels of that thought, I know that I can’t go into this without knowing.

I drop the towel and leave my clothes piled on the floor by the bath. I walk naked into the bedroom, pick up the key, stand before the locked door. It’s even harder to breathe, now; my hands are
shaking such that I can’t make the key fit the lock.

When at last it slides home, I pause for a long moment before I turn it and open the door. The hinges ought to whine with disuse, there should be dust, cobwebs—but of course, none of those things exist in this perfect place. My brother must have ensured the order and beauty of my surroundings as a further torture. How long, I wonder for the thousandth time, did it take him to plan this?

I draw a deep breath, feel the sting of my restricted lungs and barely suppress a coughing fit. But suppress it I do, and I take up a taper in a silver stand, step into the dressing room. All of my old clothes are still here, pristine as the day they were put away, though it is centuries since I’ve worn them. They hang like pinned butterflies, bright but lifeless, on either side of the black-satin-draped mirror.

I finger the heavy fabric shroud for a moment, and then, like ripping off a bandage that has stuck to a wound, I pull it off.

For a moment I can only stare in horror at the apparition before me. A slim white body, well enough formed, but bound in what look like clusters of serpents. For a moment they actually seem to writhe around my limbs, twining up and down in a terrible dance.

But that’s only the candle flickering in my trembling hand and the leaping shadows it casts. Willing my hand still, I see them for what they are: not serpents but vines, thick as a man’s fingers on my torso, thinning as they spread outward, down my limbs. My hands and feet are marked, but still soft, and there are no marks yet on my face, aside from one splay of fine lines on the right side of my jaw. From there, they wrap around my neck—the skin there also unbroken, although the jagged shapes are showing beneath. But the thorns breach my skin all over my arms and legs and torso, thick and hooked and menacing as a mountain cat’s claws.

I want to curl up and weep. How could that poor woman ever love this?

Except that that isn’t really why I want to weep. Because it is just conceivable that a woman like Mito, so obviously brimming with compassion, might look beyond this horrific body and see something to love.

But I very much doubt that the man I am could ever love her back.
Gon and the Beast meet. It goes about as well as you would expect.

Gon stepped through the gate into the soft, enveloping warmth of a perfect summer evening. He heard the man driving the car away, and resisted the urge to run after it, to plead with him to take him back to his family. Instead he trudged up the path and climbed the steps, into an entry hall that was almost familiar from Mito’s telling. Wall sconces clustered with candles provided the lighting. There was the massive fire in its grate; there were the couches, one of which Mito had slept on, and the side table laden with dishes of food. There, also, was the figure Mito had described: a man a hand’s width taller than Gon, narrower, though still powerfully built. He was dressed in heavy black clothing, including a hood, boots and gloves.

He stood with his back to Gon, facing the fire, a large, shaggy dog with a wolfish face and a brindled gray coat lying at his feet. At the sound of Gon’s footsteps, the dog stood and the man turned. The hood hid his face, as Mito had said. Clearly, though, he could see through it, because he stopped when his hidden gaze came to rest on Gon, freezing in place, though his hands slowly curled into fists by his sides. A tremor went through Gon, but he didn’t flinch from the man’s obvious anger.

“What,” the man asked in a low, rasping, furious voice, “is the meaning of this?”

“I’m here in place of my Aunt Mito,” Gon said, willing his voice not to shake. “In return for the rose she took.”

“I told your aunt that her daughter would be an acceptable substitute, if she did not return herself,” the man growled.

“Well, my aunt didn’t offer her daughter.”

He stepped forward, his movements fluid, catlike, and very, very dangerous. “I am absolutely certain that she did,” he said.
Gon shrugged, refusing to be intimidated. “And I’m certain you’re wrong. You asked specifically for the one who caused the injury—the one who requested the rose. I asked for the rose, on behalf of my little sister. I’m the one directly responsible for the injury. That satisfies the requirements, doesn’t it?”

“No!” the hooded man roared, stopping just in front of Gon. It felt as though he were pushing at Gon with a force that sparked and fizzed, though there were still inches of air between them. “It satisfies nothing! You will return to Idrisi immediately, and send back your aunt or her daughter!”

“My aunt,” Gon said in a steely voice, “is an overworked, exhausted woman who was almost murdered two nights ago, all for trying to save her family from the miserable life we’ve lived since my father died. My sister is a sickly young girl who only wanted a little bit of beauty in her life. Now they get to figure out how to survive on one less crappy salary per week, courtesy of you! I’m exactly what you asked for, and if you don’t like that, I’m happy to go home, but I am not sending anyone back here!”

Despite his words, Gon was under no illusion that winning this fight would be that simple, and given the other man’s clenched fists and looming anger, he dropped his bag and braced for impact. He tried to avoid street fights when he could, but in a place like Idrisi Port they were hard to avoid. He didn’t remember the last time he’d lost a fight, but he also wasn’t afraid to take a beating, as long as he gave one in return.

But the man didn’t move, only stood regarding Gon for a long moment from the depths of his hood. Gon had the sense of eyes burning into him, though he could not see them. All at once, the man inclined his head a fraction, with a rasping laugh, though when he spoke, he sounded anything but pleased: “Very well; I concede.”

Gon blinked at him for a moment in astonishment. “You concede? Are you saying that I can go? You’ll leave my family alone?”

“I’m saying that I concede you have outwitted me—for now. And that’s all I am willing to concede. I’ll have to consider the situation…” He trailed off, shook his head, and then sighed, waving a hand toward the couches. “Dinner is there, and once you’ve eaten, one of the servants will show you to your room. Though I suspect that it won’t be decorated to your taste.” With that, the black-clad figure turned away and started toward one of the corridors, the dog following him, though it looked back once at Gon with sad, golden-brown eyes, as if in apology.

“Wait!” Gon cried after him. “Come back! Explain all of this.”
“Tomorrow,” the man answered curtly over his shoulder, “dinner.” And then he began to cough: a deep, rattling, terrible sound, though it went some way to explaining the rasp of his speaking voice. Gon wondered whether he was ill, but then both the man and the choking cough disappeared.

Slowly, feeling battered by the events of the last two days, Gon approached the red brocade couch. Then, equally circumspect, he unwound his scarf, and shed it along with his jacket. At last, he sat down. He looked around at the comfortable space, oddly devoid of any people, studying it carefully for any sign of life. The man—the Master?—had mentioned servants, but Gon saw no sign of any.

“Hello?” he called experimentally into the opulent silence. “Is there anybody here?”

After a moment, Gon thought he detected a young girl’s giggle. He couldn’t tell what direction it came from. It seemed to be everywhere and nowhere. He shivered, and wished he hadn’t taken off his jacket and scarf, but he’d be damned if he was going to put them on again: to appear defensive.

Gon waited several minutes, but when there was no response, he said, “Fine. I’ll eat, because I don’t have a burning desire to starve myself. I guess I’ll just have to hope it’s not poisoned.”

Once again, Gon thought he heard a fleeting echo of feminine laughter, as well as the faint words, “Canary, he’s funny!” and an answering, “Shhh.” But when no more followed, he brushed the voices off as one more peculiarity of this peculiar place he’d been sent to. Figuring that even if the dinner were poisoned, at least he’d die with a full stomach (something he couldn’t remember having any time recently) he pulled the side table closer, and began to lift the lids covering the various dishes.

Very quickly, he learned that his captor was not only rich enough, but studied enough in the place where Gon had come from to guess what he might like to eat. There was fried calamari and grilled asparagus and artichokes, and numerous other side dishes surrounding a massive tureen of fish stew. It was enough to feed his family for days, and he sighed, suddenly missing them badly. It was hard to eat, knowing that they were going without.

When he’d eaten as much as he could make himself, he turned away from the table. He jumped when it slid silently into the shadows, and he looked around uneasily in the crackling half-silence of the fire. He was beginning to feel sleepy again, and wondered if he should spend the night on the couch as Mito had, despite what the Master had said about rooms, when he heard a rustling from one of the corridors that led off of the entry hall. A figure emerged tentatively from the shadows, but Gon’s eyes refused to make sense of it. It was almost a woman’s figure, but something was off about its shape and movement.
“Sir,” the woman said in a low, sweet voice, “allow me to welcome you to our home.”

Gon looked up at the woman, who had bowed to him. When he set eyes on her, he leapt to his feet with a cry, scrambling backward as quickly as he could. Because, although she sounded like a woman when she spoke, the figure in front of him had very little of the female, or the human, about her. She had a woman’s form, sort of, but it all seemed to be made of grey-brown bark. Bunches of wide, five-pointed leaves festooned from her shoulders to her feet, like a gown—maple leaves, Gon half-registered through his shock, in the brilliant yellows-oranges-reds of autumn foliage. There were more on her head, where hair might be. The suggestion of facial features were like flaws in the wood framed by the fire-colored leaves.

One of them opened—a mouth? —and she spoke again, straightening up. She was a good six inches taller than Gon. “I am Canary, the housekeeper. I am sorry to have shocked you with my appearance, but there seemed no use in prevaricating, as you’d learn the truth about us soon enough.”

“Us?” Gon choked out. “There are more of you?” He knew that he was being rude, but he was too stunned to be anything but blunt.

Canary’s leaves rustled as she moved with what sounded like rueful laughter. “We halflings are all there are here, Sir, as far as living beings go; well, except for the Master’s dog and a horde of cats who find their way in. And then, of course, there is the Master, and he is…” She trailed off, shook her head. “Well, he is something else. But for now, I have come to show you to your room.”

Gon stood staring at her dumbly, her words barely penetrating his mind. Canary’s leaves ruffled in what Gon took to be a sigh. “Come, child. You have nothing to fear from any being in this house.”

At that, Gon found his tongue, and it was sharp when he answered, “Really? When your master threatened to tear off my aunt’s limbs as punishment for picking a rose?”

Canary sighed again. “The Master has been away from the company of his own kind for a very long time. And then, also…” She seemed like she wanted to say something to finish the sentence, but then thought better of it. “His plants are precious to him. And he has suffered more than you can imagine,” she added, sounding as if she were choosing words carefully. “It makes him seem cruel, when that is far from the case.”

Gon quirked an eyebrow. “He tried to kidnap my aunt, and as long as I’m here, he’s taking my income from my family, who have little enough as it is.”
“Oh, don’t worry about that, sir,” she said. “They have been well compensated.”

“Compensated?” Gon repeated. “He’s going to pay them for me?”

Canary’s features took on a look of puzzlement. “Did you think that he would leave a family to starve? He is not unaware of what the loss of your aunt would have cost your family. He made certain that the inheritance she sought two nights ago would go to your family, as it ought rightfully to have done. That cannot be undone easily, even if he were of a mind to try. I do not think he would rescind it, despite the change in circumstances.”

Gon shook his head, sighing, overcome by a wave of exhaustion. He drew a hand across his eyes, and then looked back at her. “Morow will go after them, when he learns they’ve got it.”

“Morow is gone, sir,” Canary said.

“For good?”

“For good.”

Gon sighed. “Fine, well, as long as there’s no chance of him showing up on their doorstep, I don’t think I want to know the details.”

“I’ll take them to my grave, sir,” Canary said, and Gon couldn’t help but hear a glint of humor in her voice.

“Right. Oh, and please don’t call me ‘sir.’ Gon is my name, and that’s all I’ll answer to.”

“Very well, si— Gon. Now, shall I take you to your quarters?”

Gon could only nod wearily. Canary turned and strode toward a flight of stairs half-lost in the shadows. He slung on his bag and picked up his jacket and scarf, wishing that all of them weren’t so shabby. Feeling only half-conscious, and aware that he should and yet couldn’t pay better attention
to the route they took, he followed the peculiar housekeeper along a maze of corridors. Gon quickly lost his way in their windings, and by the time Canary stopped by a door and opened it to him, he had no idea where he was in the vast castle.

“These will be your rooms, si—Gon,” Canary quickly corrected. “I am sorry that they are not suitable.”

Gon blinked, and then took in the room before him. It was a pleasant enough sitting room, with a desk and comfortable chairs and window seats and even a small iron grate with a fire glowing in it. Unlike the rest of the house, it wasn’t lit by candles, but by soft, recessed modern lighting. But the decoration was an explosion of floral frills, like an apple tree in May. He couldn’t stop himself from laughing, and soon the laughter overtook him so that he was gasping for air. If Mito had come here and seen this, she would no doubt have done the same.

“Really, sir—” Canary began perplexedly, and all at once, Gon’s laughter dried up. Then she straightened, fixed him with her weird, cleft-bark stare and said with weary patience, “You have no idea how long it’s been since we’ve had a guest here, and we were told to expect a young woman —”

“No,” Gon interrupted, dropping his bag abruptly at his feet. “No. I’m the one who’s being unfair here. I can’t say that I like it, but I do know that the…your master expected Mito. He wasn’t specific enough, and so you have me instead, but I don’t blame you for it.” He sighed. “And I’m sorry for your sake that I’m not what your master wanted. But I’m here, and that isn’t going to change unless he releases us all from this supposed blood debt, so—can we make a truce?” He offered one hand to the tree-woman.

“Truce?” Canary said, cocking her head to the side in a rustle of leaves.

“Truce,” Gon repeated. “I’m here. My aunt and my sister will never come here as long as I’m alive. I’m hoping your master will accept that and cancel this whole crazy thing, but in the meantime, can we just try to make the best of it?”

Canary looked at him for a long time, one twiggy hand raised to her face, fingers tapping lightly. “Truce,” she said at last, lifting her chin and offering the hand. Gon took it gingerly, expecting it to feel as fragile as the dry twigs it looked like. He almost dropped it again when he realized that it was warm, like living flesh. He stopped himself just in time. “Truce among all of us who serve the Master. But he is a force of his own. I cannot speak for him.” She looked away from Gon’s eyes.

“I see,” he said, releasing Canary and tilting his head. “So you’re afraid of him.”
“Never say that!” she said, in what was close to a cry.

“Okay. I wouldn’t ever want to say what isn’t true.” He followed her eyes carefully as they dropped from his.

“Let me show you the bedroom.” Before Gon could answer, she’d turned and opened a door in the far wall of the sitting room. Beyond it was a bedroom that was equally and ostentatiously swagged in floral fabric, but he kept his mouth shut this time. “The bathroom is through that door.” She indicated another door, on the wall adjacent to the one the wide, canopied bed rested against. “I will leave you now, Gon. In the morning, we will have everything changed—”

Gon laughed a little, looking at Canary, silhouetted against the dim doorway to which she’d retreated. “In the morning, we’ll see whether your master accepts me, or has me killed.”

If a tree could blanch, Canary did then. “Gon…do not do something foolish. The Master is both wise and clever, but he isn’t beyond petty anger. Not with what was done to him.”

In that moment, everything else in Gon’s mind seemed to freeze. A coldness wafted through the room, as bitter as the winter night he’d recently left behind. And yet, this was no gust of wind. It was something odd, gossamer, barely tangible…and within it he heard a man’s voice crying, “No! Stop! At least spare them…”

Gon shook himself out of the momentary trance, and found himself alone in the room decorated for a woman who would never sleep in it, as long as he had breath left in his body. But that was tomorrow’s fight. Right now, too tired to do anything else, he shucked his boots and pants and shirt and slid between the crisp, pink, cotton sheets.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Gon dreams, Killua daydreams, and we meet some more of the castle's inhabitants.

He was walking in a rose garden, and although he couldn’t see it, he was certain that the castle was at his back. The air was heavy and sweet with the flowers’ scent, humming with bees and birdsong. Gon ran a hand lightly along the tops of the bushes as he wound his way among them, and each one he touched whispered to him: “Look, look, and see…”

And when Gon looked up again there was a figure in front of him, standing a ways off amongst the flowers. A man, dressed in a long, silvery-blue coat, with hair like dandelion down fuzzing around his head. Gon stopped, wondering whether or not to approach him. His stance was contemplative as he absently stroked a shell-pink bloom.

Before Gon could decide, the man looked up at him, his expression changing to one of surprise. For his own part, Gon stood staring back at him in shock, because this man wasn’t old, as the white hair had suggested. He was about Gon’s age, though taller, with pearl-white skin and even features and wide, dark fringed eyes the color of the summer sky above, with a look in them that promised mischief. He smiled, and gestured for Gon to approach. He was so beautiful that Gon found himself frozen in place.

“Don’t look so frightened,” the silvery man said in a soft, low voice, laced with laughter. “I mean you no harm.”

Gon shook his head. “Maybe not, but I think there are others here who do.”

“Who?” the other young man asked.

“The Master,” Gon answered without hesitation.
The fair young man laughed, his eyes curving into half-moons. “The Master is nowhere near as imposing as he’d like to think. And I can assure you, he means you no harm.”

“But he wanted to keep my aunt here, who knows why, and now he has me, and I don’t know what he means to do with me…”

The young man cocked his head, half-smiling and eyes twinkling still as he studied Gon. “You think too little of yourself.”

Gon only shrugged, unable to think of a way to answer that. Instead, he asked, “Do you live here, too? Are you a….” What had Canary called herself? “A Halfling?”

All at once, the young man’s eyes were serious. “I am nothing.”

“Well you’re obviously something, even if you’re only a figment of my imagination. Or maybe some kind of ghost?” The brief idea that he might have a friend with whom to share his odd exile had allowed Gon to relax his shoulders for the first time since he’d come to the castle. Now they tensed again.

The young man sighed. “Something like that.”

“Did you... did you die here?”

The young man frowned. “I’m not dead,” he said, his tone distant. “Not yet.”

“Are you another prisoner?” Gon asked, almost eagerly. “I’ll look for you! I’ll find out where he keeps you, and we can both run away.”

The young man looked up then, his blue eyes wistful. “Really, Gon? You would try to free me?”

Gon shrugged, confused, and wondering how the young man knew his name. “Of course I would.” He clenched his fists in resolve. “I will.”
“If only you knew what you were saying…” the young man said in a low voice, gazing at the tree-lined horizon, blue, snow-capped mountains rising beyond the forest. After a moment, his eyes snapped back to Gon’s. “Well, either way, you’ve said something selfless despite your own unhappiness, and so I’ll give you some advice in exchange: stay true to yourself, and don’t trust too much to your eyes. They will deceive you in this place, where your heart never will.” He drew a breath, and sighed. “And now, both of us must go.”

“Wait!” Gon cried as the other young man turned away. “I don’t even know your name!” But the man was walking away, and Gon could feel the fibers of the dream fraying, the garden dissolving into mist.

Killua

I look down at him, lost in his dreams, and I know one thing: this cannot be how it ends. Of all the bitter ironies that might inflict themselves upon me, it can’t be this. It’s cruel enough to suggest that Illumi is behind it, and I wonder for the first time in years if he is still alive. If he’s sent this boy to taunt and tempt me.

The only thing that makes me doubt it is that Illumi wouldn’t choose a boy like him. He isn’t anything like the boys he saw me admire in my own time. They were all soft and refined, while Gon is jagged edges and brazen fearlessness and sunshine. Even in the dark of this room, he seems to glow. He comes from a different world, and one that I am certain Illumi does not inhabit, if he still lives.

But he cannot be here, for his sake, for mine. And so I leave him, and all night, as he sleeps in that too-pink room, I dig through the piles of research I’ve conducted and commissioned over the long, long decades. I had forgotten how much energy I had in the beginning, when my rage was still fresh and I hadn’t yet learned loneliness. When the vines had not reached far enough nor grown thick enough to sap my strength.

All night I read through page after discouraging page, all of them telling me the same thing: that there is no way to break this curse but the one that my brother set out at the beginning. Likewise there is no way for me to force the boy to return his aunt to me. Magic is a spiteful beast, but it cannot work beyond its own bounds. I set those bounds unwittingly when I demanded the one who asked for the rose. Now, it seems, I have no choice but to live with him.

And that is the cruellest blow of all: I have no choice, but I’m not sure that I would change things now even if I did. Because he is beautiful and brave and steadfast and true. He is the kind of boy I could love, and he hates me. And even if he didn’t, who’s to say that he would want another man? In
all my long life, it’s something that I have seen happen only once.

And still, he is everything that I would wish for, if wishing were my prerogative.

Somewhere, if he lives, my brother is laughing.

Gon didn’t want to wake up, didn’t want to lose the strange camaraderie of the young man in the dream, but it was too late. He opened his eyes to a soft gray sky framed by a rain-spattered window swathed in…not pink flowers. He sat up abruptly, gazing around the room in astonishment. Somehow, in the night, the palette had changed to deep green with accents of gold, like a forest just changing from summer to autumn. Clean lines replaced the frills, though the subtle opulence was equally ostentatious.

Gon was still stroking the deep gold and green brocade pattern on the duvet in disbelief when there was a knock at the door on the far side of the room. He grabbed his shirt from the floor and pulled it over his head, then said, “Come in.”

The door opened and Canary rustled in, carrying a tray. She was even more unnerving a sight in the broad daylight, but Gon hid his shock this time. Canary smiled—or Gon thought she did—but the tree-woman had already turned away before he could be sure.

“Good morning, Gon,” she said, setting the tray on a table near the bed. “I took the liberty of choosing the new colors myself. They seemed to suit you, but if you don’t like them, just ask and we will change it.”

“But…but you changed everything in one night? And while I was asleep? How did I not wake up?”

This time, he was certain she smiled. “We have our ways. As I said, though, if you don’t like—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I do. It’s all so…I’ve never seen anything like it.” He shook his head. “I just don’t understand.”
“No, I don’t suppose you would,” she said gently. “Here, I’ve brought you breakfast,” she continued before he could question her further. “When you’re finished, ring this bell.” She indicated a hand-bell on the heavily laden tray. “Kurapika will come and help you then, and he’ll bring clothes…if, that is, you want new clothes?” She looked askance at the ratty pants he’d discarded beside the bed the night before.

“No,” he said with stubborn pride. “These ones should probably be washed. But I don’t need new ones. I’ve got enough.”

This time, he was sure that Canary smiled. “Very well, enjoy your breakfast.”

When she’d gone, Gon got up, pulled on his pants and then looked at the tray. There were as many dishes on it as there had been on the dinner tray, far more than he could ever eat. It made him uneasy. Despite what Canary had said about his family receiving the inheritance, he didn’t like the idea of so much food going to waste. He couldn’t look at the basket of hot muffins without thinking of Abe washing windows in the freezing cold in exchange for a bag of stale bread.

Still, thinking of that wasn’t going to do either of them any good, and refusing the food in front of him wouldn’t help anyone either. So Gon filled a plate, set it on his lap, and began eating. This time, he ate until he was stuffed, and then, replacing all of the dishware and cutlery that he had used back onto the table, he took up the bell. He rang it, feeling horribly self-conscious.

Gon had thought that he would have some time before anyone would arrive, but the bell had hardly stopped reverberating before there was a rap at the door. Gon pulled his knees to his chest. “Come in,” he said.

The door creaked open, and a figure even taller and more imposing than Canary entered the room. This one also resembled a tree, though one of a different sort: slender and elegant, with white bark and heart-shaped yellow leaves. His bark-skin (clearly he was a he, though Gon didn’t know quite how he knew) was smooth, his foliage sparser than Canary’s had been. It made a cap of yellow hair, and covered his arms and torso and legs, almost like a suit.

Gon was more prepared now to face this strange creature than he had been to meet Canary the night before, and so he didn’t flinch or make a sound as the tree-man drew closer, though his breathing grew shallow and rapid. The creature stopped a step or two from the breakfast tray, and bowed low to Gon.

“Kurapika, at your service. Are you finished, sir?” he asked in a soft voice, which sounded a bit like a wind in a hollow.
“Yes,” Gon said. And then, remembering his earlier thoughts, “Only, last night and this morning—it’s too much food. I don’t like to waste it.”

Kurapika laughed—or that’s how Gon interpreted the low rumble and the shiver of leaves. “Don’t worry about that. Nothing is wasted, here.”

Gon wanted to know what exactly he meant by that—it wasn’t the same as saying that the food would be eaten. But Kurapika was already hurrying the table away. He slid it out into the hallway, where he exchanged low words with someone Gon couldn’t see. Then he returned, carrying a bundle of fluffy, deep-green towels. He set them on the end of the bed.

“Canary said that I could wash clothes somewhere?” Gon said.

“Of course. I will have them seen to while you are in the bath. I will go and draw it now.” He moved toward the door to the bathroom. He disappeared inside, and a moment later, Gon heard water splashing into a vessel.

Kurapika emerged from the bathroom. “Everything you might need ought to be in there. The soap is cruder than we would usually offer a guest, but I did not think that you would much appreciate the ones we had prepared for, ah—”

“My aunt,” Gon sighed, wondering how long he would have to listen to this refrain. “I know. It’ll be fine.”

“Very well,” Kurapika said, “I will leave you to bathe on your own, unless you require my assistance?”

Gon stifled a laugh, wondering what kind of bathing assistance he could possibly require. “Ah, no, thanks. I’ll be fine by myself.”

“Very well,” Kurapika repeated, and Gon thought that the tree-man might be hiding an amused smile of his own, but he was still too unfamiliar with the nuances of these creatures to be certain. “Leave whatever you’d like cleaned on the bed. I will have it collected. And when you are finished, ring the bell, and someone will come and see to you.”
See to me? Gon thought, already shuddering at the implications. In his less-than-a-day at the castle, he’d been seen to almost more than he could endure. He had to remind himself that this wasn’t any ordinary house, and these servants, peculiar as they might be, were only doing their job. So he nodded at Kurapika, and the man turned and departed.

When Gon was certain that no one else was going to intrude, he stripped off his clothes and laid them on the bed. He was ashamed at their shabbiness compared with the rich fabrics and crisp sheets covering the bed, and so he turned quickly toward the bathroom.

Once again, it took him a moment to absorb the opulence of his surroundings. He knew by now that he should have expected it, but still, he was awed by the expanse of glass and marble sparkling in the recessed lighting. All of the fixtures were modern, as he’d assumed they’d be when he heard the running water. The floor tiles were made of some kind of stone that seemed to have fossils running through it.

It was the bath, though, that made him do a double take. He’d expected an ordinary bathtub, if nicer than the ancient one in the bathroom of their tenement. Instead, what looked more like a small pool was sunk into the floor, filled with water that steamed with the subtle scent of a forest: pine, cedar, a tinge of wood smoke. At least it wasn’t roses, he thought, with an ironic twist of smile.

He stepped gingerly into the water, unsure either how hot or how deep it would be. The temperature was perfect, though, and the water came up to his thighs. He sank down into it with a sigh: he couldn’t remember the last time he’d bathed in hot water. The tenement bath seemed unable to produce anything better than lukewarm, and sometimes even that was a stretch. He’d got used to bathing as quickly as possible.

Now, though, he couldn’t make himself hurry. For a long time he just lay there and drifted, trying not to think too hard about his situation. When the water began to cool at last, he sat up and located the cake of soap Kurapika had apologized for. He had to laugh again to himself: it was good quality, apparently handmade, and scented with rosemary. Mito would have killed for a bar of this, rather than the harsh brown soap the family used. Gon washed all of the city grime from his skin, and then picked at random from a number of bottles of shampoo, and washed his hair as well. Finally, reluctantly, he hauled himself from the water and opened the drain. Then he got out, and wrapped himself in one of the towels. It was so big it fell from his shoulders to his feet.

He peered carefully into the bedroom before he entered, to make sure that it was free of plant-human hybrids or any other kind of sentient creature, but though his dirty clothes were gone and the bed was made, the room was empty. He squeezed the water out of his hair, ran his fingers through it, and then pulled on his only other set of clothes, a faded yellow long-sleeve tee and battered olive cargo pants.

After that, there was nothing more to do but ring the bell. He did so reluctantly, standing in the
middle of the sitting room (which had also been entirely re-decorated during the night) and worrying
gain about the possible meanings of “seeing to.” He’d expected Kurapika to respond to the call, but
a few minutes later, he heard two voices in the corridor outside, neither of them male. One, he was
sure, was Canary’s. The other was a young girl’s, excited, talking quickly as Canary tried to subdue
her. Gon recalled the girl’s voice he’d thought he’d heard the previous evening. Before he could be
sure that it was the same one, there was a knock at the door.

“Um…come in?” he answered, realizing that he was still holding the bell; clutching it, in fact, so
hard that his fingers were bloodless. He put it down on the dresser as the door opened.

Canary stood in the doorway, behind a shorter figure with the sweeping yellow lanceolate foliage of
an autumn willow tree. The tree-girl stood staring at Gon, apparently struck dumb. “Well go on,”
Canary said, amusement in her tone, “you were the one who wanted to meet him.”

“But he’s so…” the tree-girl began in a hushed, sweet voice. “Canary, you didn’t tell me that he
looked like that!”

“Alluka!” Canary admonished. “Manners!”

“But I didn’t mean anything bad by it,” the girl said, turning to look up at Canary. “I only mean that
he’s so beautiful.”

At this, Gon felt a deep flush crawling up his neck to the roots of his hair. He looked away, toward
the rainy window, mortified and also irritated. He hadn’t thought that his looks would be a subject of
fascination in this remote place, among these bizarre creatures.

“Alluka, can you not see that you’re embarrassing the poor man? Now stop talking about him as if
he were a piece of furniture, and go introduce yourself properly!”

The willow girl, Alluka, took a few reluctant steps into the room, her leaf-frond skirts and long hair
rustling. She stopped a few feet from Gon, looking at him with what appeared to be a shy
expression. She was about the same height as he was, but he had no real guess as to what her age
might be, beyond her high voice and her obvious deference to Canary.

“Hello,” she said, “my name is Alluka.” She curtseyed to him.
Feeling slightly surreal, Gon bowed to her in return. “Ah, hi, Alluka. I’m Gon. I’m…pleased to meet you.”

She pressed her twig-hands to her mouth and giggled, earning another admonition from Canary. “Sorry,” she said, composing herself. “Do you want to play with me?”

*Hmmmm,* Gon thought. *Pretty young.*

“Alluka,” Canary said, sounding exasperated.

“I mean, since it’s raining, Canary said that you might like to see the house. I asked if I could show you, and she said yes.”

“If!” Canary said.

“Oh, yes…if that’s alright with you.”

Gon’s sense of unreality was deepening by the second. “I—I guess that would be fine?” He couldn’t help glancing at Canary.

“Only if it’s what you want, Gon,” she said. “Feel no obligation. You may do as you please here. The only rule, as you will have guessed, is not to harm any of the plants you find growing in the house and grounds.”

He shuddered. “No. I think I’ve learned that lesson. And yes,” he added, having weighed the option of sitting in this room watching the rain fall against Alluka’s offer. “I’d love to see the house.”

Alluka clapped her hands together, an odd, clattering sound. “Good! I’ll show you everything!” She closed the distance between them, and reached out to grab his hand, the twigs warm and supple as they closed around his fingers, as much a shock as Canary’s had been. She dragged him toward the door.

“Alluka! Be easy on him. Remember, his life has changed overnight, and all of this…well, it will not be much like what he is used to.”
Alluka sobered somewhat, or at least she slowed her headlong rush to the door. “Yes, Canary. Sorry, Gon.”

He found himself smiling. He hadn’t met a child so unspoiled in a very long time—except Komugi. “It will be okay,” he assured Canary. “I have a little sister.”

Canary smiled. “Of course. But don’t let Alluka exhaust you. Whenever you want to come back here, she’ll bring you—right, Alluka?”

“Alluka,” she said impatiently.

“And make sure to bring him to the dining room in time for lunch. And whatever you do, do not disturb the Master.”

Alluka nodded solemnly, and Canary sighed, “Very well.” To Gon, she said, “I wish you luck.” And then she turned and walked off down the corridor, in a trail of whispering foliage.

Left alone with Gon, Alluka was suddenly shy again. “Well…what would you like to see first?”

Gon surprised himself by laughing. “How would I know that?” He peered at her for a moment; her gray-bark face seemed stricken. “Look, why don’t you just show me your favorite things?”

Alluka smiled. “I can do that.” Still holding his hand, she led him out the door. Gon spared a glance at his boots, resting beside it, wishing he had slippers. He ought to have, but they were a luxury his family hadn’t been able to afford. Alluka herself appeared to be barefoot, though he wasn’t sure whether the bark on her root-like feet counted as skin or shoes. Either way, he followed her out the door in stocking feet. It closed softly behind them once they’d stepped through.

Once again, in contrast to the modern suite he’d been given, the corridors of the house were all lit by candles in wall sconces and chandeliers. There had to have been close to a hundred of them in the one long corridor alone.

He asked Alluka, “Why is everything lit? I mean, it’s only the Master and a few helpers living here, right?”
Alluka shrugged in a rustle of leaves. “I don’t know. It’s always been like this. If it’s nighttime, or a dark day like today, the candles are lit.”

“But who lights them?” Gon persisted.

“Nobody does,” she said. “They just…light.”

“How is that possible?” Gon asked, even as he recalled that all of the trappings of his bedroom had been changed in a night, as he slept.

Alluka looked away, and Gon had the feeling that she was about to lie to him. “I don’t know,” she said, clearly uncomfortable.

Gon decided to let it rest, and Alluka lapsed back into bashful silence. And so they walked on through the pristine hush of the empty house, broken only by the swishing of Alluka’s fronds and the patter of rain on the windows. They passed door after door, most of them closed, although the odd one was ajar, showing glimpses of further grandeur. Everything was clean, without trace of the dust or cobwebs that Gon would have expected to find in such a big house with so few inhabitants.

At last, Alluka seemed to tire of her own silence. “Canary said…” she began and then trailed off, clearly uncertain about whether she should speak the thought.

“It’s okay,” Gon said to her, and smiled reassuringly. “You can ask me whatever it is.”

She glanced up at him and then away again, quickly. “Well, Br— um, the Master told us that it was a woman who would be coming to stay.”

Gon sighed. “That plan didn’t quite work out.”

“Oh, I know. Canary already explained it all. I mean, why you’re here instead of your aunt or your sister. That wasn’t what I was going to ask. I just wanted to know about her.”
“My aunt?”

“No. I saw her. Your sister.”

Gon looked at Alluka. They had come to a turning in the corridor, which led to a gallery running along the top of a cavernous, empty room, with a floor made of intricately inlaid wood in different shades and textures. A ballroom? he wondered. He paused to look down at it as he answered, struggling to find the words to describe Komugi to this strange tree-child. Did she even know what a human girl looked like?

“Well,” he began, “I told you she’s twelve. How old are you?”

Alluka considered this for many moments before she answered, “Eleven.”

Gon nodded, though he found it odd that Alluka had had to think about her age. Most children seemed to be obsessed by it.

Shaking her leaves, she asked, “What does she look like?”

“Nothing like me,” Gon said. “We adopted her. She has light blond hair and light green eyes.”

“And what is she like?”

Gon sighed. “She’s sweet. Kind. She always wants to give, rather than take. She’s funny, too. But she’s lonely. She’s blind, and not very well, so she can’t go to school, or really play with other kids her age. There are special schools for kids who can’t see, but we don’t have…” He couldn’t quite bring himself to say that they couldn’t afford those schools, though he didn’t know why. Their poverty wasn’t a secret to this household.

“You really love her,” Alluka said, her voice wistful.

“Yes. Of course I do,” Gon answered, tears burning suddenly in his throat. He leaned on the gallery railing, looking down into the room below to try to stem them. To steady himself. At least he said, “I love all of my family.”
“Your aunt, your sister, and your great-grandmother,” Alluka counted off carefully. “Where are your parents?”

*The million-jenny question.* Gon mastered himself enough to look back at her. “Anyone’s guess. No one knows anything about my mother, and my father…well, he’s probably dead.”

“It’s too bad you don’t have other sisters,” Alluka said, with a tone that suggested she was thinking aloud more than she was speaking to him.

Gon’s niggling sense that everyone in this place was covering something up—something much bigger than magical weather and a mad Master and tree people—rebounded then. “Why?” he asked, not harshly, but firmly.

“It would be better for…” she stumbled. “For all of you, I suppose? Better for us…”

Gon turned his back on the ballroom and leaned against the railing, thinking, as he ran a hand through his rough hair. “Alluka,” he said at last, looking at her, though she wouldn’t meet his eyes, “I’m going to be here for a while, right?”

“Unless Br— the Master finds a way to undo what you did, or your aunt changes her mind, I suppose you are.”

“Well, forever is a very long time to keep secrets. And I know there’s something big about all of this that nobody is telling me. I don’t think anyone’s going to be able to keep it from me forever, and besides, what’s the point?”

“I don’t know,” Alluka said miserably.

“Well then why don’t you tell me now, and get it over with? Why did your Master want Mito to stay here?”

Alluka turned her back on him. “What if I show you—”
“No!” Gon said sharply. “There’s nothing in this place that I want to see, at least not until someone answers my question! What would your Master want with a woman he meant to imprison here forever? Because, to be honest, there aren’t too many things I can imagine that would be anything other than monstrous.”

Alluka turned back abruptly, and there were tears on her face: weird, thick, yellowish tears, which Gon realized with a shock were tree-sap. All at once, he felt like the monster, for making her think about what he was thinking about. Whatever else she was, she was a child. “Oh gods, Alluka—I’m sorry I made you cry. You aren’t the one I should be mad at. You don’t have to tell me anything. Just, please, forget all of that.”

“Yes you should, Gon,” she sniffled. “You should be mad at me. You should be angry at all of us. I would be! But I also don’t want you to think that the Master is bad. He isn’t. He didn’t want to do anything terrible to your aunt—he only wanted her to fall in love with him.”

Gon blinked at Alluka for a long moment, dumbfounded. At last, he repeated, “He wanted her to fall in love with him?”

“Yes.”

Okay then, the Master is insane. “Yelling and threatening dismemberment doesn’t really seem like a great way to go about that.”

“What’s dismemberment?”

“Never mind. But what’s wrong with him that he has to kidnap a woman to find a girlfriend?”

Alluka shook her head. “I can’t tell you any more. If he even found out that I’d told you this much, I’d be in such trouble…” She began to cry again.

Gon sighed, and reached for her. She stood solid for a moment, and then curled against his chest, weeping with abandon. He stroked her leafy hair awkwardly. “Don’t worry, Alluka,” he said. “I promise I won’t say anything. And thank you for telling me.” He meant it, although he was no less confused after Alluka’s revelation than he had been before. “Listen,” he said at last, “I haven’t been very nice to you, and you’ve been trying your hardest to be nice to me. So let’s stop talking about all of this. I promise not to ask you any more hard questions. You can ask me anything you want, and I’ll try to answer honestly. But first, how about if you show me your favorite room in the house?”
Alluka pulled back, clearly brightening. “I can do that,” she said, nodding, and then turned and hurried off down another corridor, dragging Gon behind her. They twisted and turned, went up staircases and down staircases and along snaking corridors until he was completely lost, and convinced that the castle was far bigger and more complex on the inside than it appeared from the outside.

At last, Alluka stopped in front of a high, wide set of double doors, each one carved with a tree, their foliage interlocking in the center. Alluka curled her fingers around one of the double brass latches with clear reverence, and then she pulled the doors open.
Gon hadn’t known what to expect, but in a thousand years, it wouldn’t have been this. For a long moment he stood in the doorway, all of his troubles forgotten, staring at the room beyond in pure wonder. It was a library, but unlike any that he’d ever seen. It was a good three stories high, almost as big as the ballroom, and every inch of wall space was lined with books. The two upper tiers had galleries running all the way around them, with blue-and-silver railings in the shape of twining branches. The room was lit by arched windows that ran along the top of the walls, and a huge glass cupola in the center of the ceiling. There was a long table made of blond wood, and comfortable-looking chairs tucked into corners. There were spindly ladders on wheels for reaching the higher shelves, globes in ornate stands, framed pictures on the walls, glass cases full of rolled papers and smaller objects that Gon itched to investigate.

But the most arresting features of the room were the three tall trees growing out of the floor: a chestnut near the right wall, a walnut near the left, and an oak in the center, its trunk broader than the circle of Gon’s arms and its upper leaves brushing the glass of the cupola. All three bore autumn foliage and ripe nuts. Alluka ran inside, straight to the huge oak tree. To Gon’s surprise (though why he should still be surprised by anything here, he really couldn’t say) it bent slowly until its branches were at Alluka’s level, and then used them to embrace her. A soft, sweet voice emerged from somewhere in its depths: “Good morning, little one,” it said.

“All morning, Senritsu,” Alluka said.

The oak straightened up again, until its leaves brushed the cupola glass once more. Unlike Canary and Kurapika and Alluka, this tree didn’t appear to have any human features, and also appeared to be fixed to the place where it grew out of the floor.
“To what do I owe the honor?” Senritsu asked. “Have you already finished all the books I gave you the other day?”

“No,” Alluka answered. “I wanted you to meet somebody.”

She gestured to Gon to come out of the doorway. Slowly he approached, looking up at the tree for a source of the voice it spoke with, and finding none.

“Senritsu, this is Gon,” she said.

Gon stopped by Alluka, looking up into the oak’s branches. An aura of peace and wisdom came off of it—her?—in waves, and he found himself bowing. “I’m pleased to meet you, Senritsu.”

The tree bowed in return. “The pleasure is mine,” she said. “It is a long time indeed since we’ve had new blood in this house.” Her tone was equivocal, and Gon wasn’t certain what to say, but the tree continued before the silence could become awkward. “Since Alluka has brought you here, I presume that you are fond of books?”

Gon blinked up at the tree-woman, who had risen again to her full height. “…I mean, I don’t know. It wasn’t easy to get books, where I come from. We didn’t have much money, and the library was so far away, and there wasn’t a lot of time for reading…” He trailed off, flustered, and feeling very much like a child in school who knew he’d given the wrong answer to the teacher’s question.

But Senritsu only said, “That is a great pity. No young mind should be deprived of books. Here, you may have as many as you can read.” She swept her branches to indicate the towering shelves. “Tell me, what can I get for you first?”

Gon felt the heat rising in his face; he didn’t have the first inkling of what to ask for. Except, maybe he did? “Um…well…I left school two years ago. I guess I’d like to catch up, if I can.” Gon was trying to remember exactly what he’d been studying when he was sixteen, so that he could ask for something without sounding like a complete idiot.

But before he had the chance to recall a title, Senritsu had turned to the chestnut, saying, “Year ten, the modern Padokean public school curriculum. Pull all of it, please, Cheadle.”
“Yes, ma’am,” the smaller tree said in a brisk, slightly nasal, feminine voice, turning toward a set of shelves and shuffling through its volumes.

“Pull the last few months of year nine, too, please, Wing,” Senritsu said to the other tree.

“Of course,” he said in the voice of a young man, and began rifling shelves as industriously as Cheadle.

Within moments, there were three neat stacks of books on the reading table, along with several notebooks and pencils. Gon could only blink at them, stunned. “I…how…I mean, why would you have the modern public school curriculum here? Everything else is so old…”

Senritsu laughed, a sound like a trill of a flute. “We do respect our traditions here. But any librarian worth her salt keeps her collection current with the times. I think you will find ours quite complete.”

Gon opened his mouth on impulse, and then shut it again. The request seemed too ridiculous to make of this refined creature. But Senritsu, for all of her watchful authority, was clearly quick on the uptake. “Ask what you would ask, child,” she said, tipping her top branches toward Gon.

“I know I’ll sound like an idiot,” Gon began, flushing, “but do you have any books of fairy tales? I mean, my sister had a few, and I used to read them to her, and I miss her, and, well—”

“You do not have to justify your reading tastes to me,” Senritsu said, reaching up into some of the highest shelves and extracting something. “Every book is as worthy as the next. Here: I believe these are the ones that you and your sister favored.” Her wispy upper branches deposited another pile on the long table: three volumes of fairy tales from around the world. They were indeed the editions Komugi had owned.

For a moment Gon just stared at them, dumbfounded. A clear picture of Komugi had formed in his mind when he saw the books: her thin body wrapped in a blanket by the stove, sick with another chest infection but listening intently as he read to her from a battered volume. Once again, there were tears pressing behind his eyes.

“Thank you,” he said softly, picking up the first volume and holding it to his chest. Senritsu’s upper branches tipped toward him again: a nod, Gon thought.
“What is that book, Gon?” Alluka asked curiously.

“And haven’t you ever read fairy tales?”

“What?” Alluka cocked her head.

He looked back in surprise. It seemed odd that a little girl with a library like this at her disposal wouldn’t know what fairy tales were. “They’re stories, but they’re about things that aren’t—” He stopped himself short, swallowing back the word “real.” Because in Alluka’s world, a good many of the things that a fairy-tale portrayed as outlandish appeared to be ordinary.

Alluka was waiting patiently for him to finish. “They’re stories that you read to children,” he said at last. “They’re about princes and princesses and…ah. Things like that.”

Alluka looked up at him, blinking. “Will you read one to me?”

*Read to me, Gon!* Komugi’s voice echoed in his memory. Once again, Gon’s eyes and heart were full of tears, but he forced them back, made himself smile instead. “Of course I will. What kind of thing would you like to hear about?”

“You said there are stories about princesses?”

“Sure. Lots of them.”

“Are there any about happy princesses?”

What, he wondered, would make her ask such a thing—make a little girl imagine that a princess in a story would be anything else? “Well,” he answered after a moment, “that’s the thing about fairy tales: the good guys are pretty much guaranteed to live happily ever after. Should we sit?” He gestured to the table’s matching, carved wooden chairs.

“Yes, but not here. Come this way.” And Alluka was off again, leading him to a blue velvet couch by a trio of long, mullioned windows. Gon sat down on the couch, and Alluka curled eagerly next to him. As the librarian-trees rustled softly and the rain brushed the cupola high above, Gon opened the
book and began to read out titles. Alluka stopped him when he said, “The Little Golden Girl.”

“What is that one?” she asked. “Is it about a princess?”

“No exactly,” he answered. “It’s about a girl who was turned to gold by an evil magician, and the prince who rescues her.”

“That one,” Alluka said. “That’s the story I want to hear.”

**Killua**

*From the highest gallery, deep in the shadows of a curtained window, I watch him read to my little sister. He didn’t hesitate to let her curl up against him, any more than he flinched when Senritsu spoke to him. Why not? Are my people not horrors to him? They are still half-horrors to me, even after so much time has passed.*

*But maybe that’s because I knew them as they once were. I can remember Alluka’s black hair and blue eyes and laughter. I can remember Canary’s reticent smile, and Senritsu, so small and plain, and so utterly remarkable when she played her flute. Gon never knew these things, he only knows them as they are now, and yet he accepts them, embraces them into his brightness without a backward glance.*

*I wish that I could harden my heart to him, but if I held the reins of my heart, none of us would be here at all.*

*I wish that the gentle kindness he shows to my sister did not spell her doom.*

*I can only hope that when the end comes, in some small way, she will understand, having loved him too.*

Gon had finished the tale about the golden girl and three more when Alluka suddenly jumped from
her rapt trance on the couch to her feet. “Oh! Lunch! Come on, or Canary will be furious!”

“But—” Gon began, but Alluka was tugging on his arm. “Okay, okay! Wait a minute!” He made her
pause by the table as she was dragging him toward the doors of the library, grabbing the volumes of
fairy tales, as well as a notebook, some pencils, and two textbooks: Earth Science and Algebra, both
of which he remembered struggling with in his last year at school. “It’s okay to take these with me?”
Gon asked Senritsu, who was humming softly to herself, her branches swaying in time to the music,
dropping the occasional leaf and acorn.

“Of course it is, Gon,” Senritsu said. “You may borrow anything you like, at any time—as long as
you ultimately return it.”

“Thank you,” Gon said, and found himself bowing again. Then he handed Alluka the fairy tale book
they’d been reading from. “You can read some more on your own, but we can read together again
sometime if you want?”

“I do!” She grinned, clutching the book to her with one arm as she dragged Gon with the other.
Once again, they were off on a mad rush through the corridors and stairwells of the house, until they
arrived at another closed door. It was a single one this time, but nearly as large as the ones that led to
the library. It was also far more imposing: lengths of old, dark wood strapped with iron bands that
ended in stylized rose designs, and studded with nails.

Alluka looked at the heavy iron latch and asked, “Will you go first? Canary will be angry that I kept
you so long.”

“Sure.” Gon opened the door. By now, he was beginning to get used to the unbridled splendor of the
castle, and so the immense and ornate dining room didn’t catch him by surprise. Still, its beauty
invited a pause. The ceiling was high and arched with dark wooden beams, like an upended ship’s
hull. The table that spanned the middle was a similar color to the beams, but polished to a high shine,
with a snowy linen runner down the center, set with ornate silver candelabra (all lit, of course) and a
vast array of covered dishes.

The walls were bright with frescoes, depicting the life of some noble family from a much earlier
century. On one of them, Gon’s roving gaze paused. It showed a young man riding a fierce-looking
black horse while a large, rough-coated hound ran beside them. He was in no doubt: the young man
in the fresco was the same one whom he had spoken to in the dream the previous night.

He turned to Alluka. “This guy,” he said, pointing to the painting, “who is he?”
“Ah,” Alluka began, looking quickly at the painting, and then away, her leaves fluttering in what seemed to be anxiety. “He is—”

“A predecessor of the Master’s,” Canary said briskly as she entered the room. “Why do you ask?” She guided Alluka firmly away from the painting as she spoke to Gon, looking at him at last with what he thought was a falsely innocent expression.

“I…” He looked at Alluka and Canary, both hovering, calmly neutral. He looked again at the painting and wondered if he’d been mistaken. It wasn’t actually a perfect likeness, now that he studied it—was it? He shook his head. “I don’t know. For a minute he looked familiar. Canary—there isn’t another man living in this house, is there? I mean, besides the Master?”

Canary laughed, with what Gon thought was a hint of melancholy. “No, Gon. Only you. Why do you ask?”

“I just…I don’t know. It must have been a dream.”

Canary studied him for a moment, and then shook her head. “You are the only guest here. Now, if Alluka has run you through the corridors this morning as I’m sure she has, you must be hungry.”

“I am,” Gon said, honestly. Then he looked up at Canary and Alluka, the woman’s arm wrapped tightly around the child’s shoulders. Protective or preventive? “But—do you want to eat with me? There’s so much here, I’ll never finish it all, and it would be nice to have company.”

Canary smiled. “No. These things are only for you. Take what you like, and when you are finished, ring the bell.” She placed the bell that he had left in his room that morning by the water glass at the single place that was set at the table. “We will go, and leave you in peace.” Alluka looked as if she wanted to argue, but Canary hurried her quickly toward the door. Why?

“You know, you don’t have to keep doing this,” Gon said before they could escape. Canary turned back with a questioning look. “Giving me all of these choices.” He gestured to the absurdly laden table. “I’ve never had choices of food in my life—not even when my family had money. I was too young. So can you just tell whoever it is who makes all of this to send enough for one?”

Canary looked at him appraisingly for another moment, and then she said, “I am not the one who decides such things. If you are unhappy with anything, you will have to take it up with the Master.”
And then she hurried Alluka through the door, as if afraid that Gon would ply her with more questions or demands.

Alone in the suddenly oppressive silence, Gon sat down at the table and uncovered the dish closest to him. Then, he simply sat staring. It was a beautiful, sage-green porcelain plate etched with leaf patterns, so fine it was almost transparent. On top of it, an array of sashimi spread out like a blooming chrysanthemum.

Gon hadn’t had sashimi since the island days, but he remembered the delicate taste of it; also, that it had been his favorite. But how could whoever produced all of this food have possibly known that? And why were they trying so hard to please him, when all of the perfect things they plied him with could only gild the blunt and bitter fact that he was a prisoner?

Still, Canary had been right: he was hungry. He sighed, pulled the plate forward and then picked up a pair of silver chopsticks set on a linen napkin. He put a swirl of wasabi in the sauce dish, poured soy sauce over it and then laid a piece of pickled ginger on a hair-thin sliver of some whitefish he couldn’t name. He dipped it in the sauce, held it dripping over his plate for a moment, and then took a bite.

For a moment time stopped, and then spun backward. He was a little boy, barely old enough to sit at the family table. Mito was cutting fans of sashimi into little pieces for him, dabbing them with soy before letting Gon pick them up with his fingers to mouth them.

“He’ll choke!” he remembered Abe fretting.

“No he won’t,” Mito had soothed her, a strong hand on her birdwing shoulder. “He’s an island child. It’s in his blood.”

And it was in his blood, even now, though it had been so long since he’d tasted it. Without quite realizing it, Gon had finished the whole plate, and uncovered the next, another island delicacy: a salad of wild spring greens garnished with toasted seaweed and soft-boiled gulls’ eggs, with a sharp, gingery dressing. He ate all of that, too, and then looked down the long table of still-uncovered dishes.

“What is the point of this?” he asked the air. But even as he spoke the words, he was wondering if maybe it wasn’t about the quantity of food at all. Whoever had chosen the sashimi and salad had given him more than sustenance. They had given him the precious memory the food summoned, one he’d long since forgotten. He was grateful to have it back, but it also made him uneasy, because it suggested that whoever devised these menus knew him better than he knew himself. They knew his
mind, down to its dark, cobwebbed corners, and who could have figured him out so precisely in less than a day?

Although he hadn’t eaten enough to be full, he was slightly queasy from the direction his thoughts had taken. However, curiosity was burning in him now. Just how far did this go? Leaning over, he lifted the lid on the next dish in the line. The steam that rose from it smelled of tomatoes and saffron and shellfish—it was the stew he had begun to make for his family the night he came here. He couldn’t possibly eat it, but he dipped a finger into the sauce and licked it. It was, of course, perfect. He lifted the lid on the next dish: it was the bread-and-onion casserole he had made the night Mito left, but as it should have been made, with beef broth and layers of cheese, the brandy not watered.

“Screw you all,” he said without much conviction, dropping back into his chair, wondering whether anyone was even listening. He faltered, feeling suddenly absurd to be talking to nobody, not even a tree; but then he plunged on. “And don’t keep doing this. I don’t need it. Just give me ordinary food, enough for me, and leave my memories alone.”

Fruitlessly, Gon waited for a reply: for anything at all to break the ponderous silence. A faint tremor ran along the table, flickering the candles’ flames; then, nothing. And so Gon laid his napkin beside his empty plate, picked up his stack of books from the library, and retreated.

It was only when the doors of the dining room had closed immovably behind him that he realized he had forgotten the bell and he had no idea how to get back to his room. Nor did there appear to be anybody around to guide him. So he wandered through turnings in the empty corridors, until he found himself back in the grand entry hall.

The fire was roaring in the hearth, and the rain flung itself against the windows now with purpose. Having nowhere else to go, and no one to guide him, Gon lay down on the couch and pulled a silky throw folded on the back over himself. He considered the earth science book, and then opened one of the books of fairy tales instead. He began to read, determined never to let this place make him forget who he was.
Chapter Summary

In which Gon and Killua finally have that talk...

Gon read for most of the afternoon, finally tackling Earth Science when he ran out of fairy tales. It came back to him more quickly than he’d thought it would, and he got most of the answers right on the quizzes at the ends of the chapters. Half way through the book, though, he ran out of steam. He shut the volume and laid it on the end of the couch, and then flipped to a new page in the notebook and began to draw. He hadn’t even really decided on what to draw when he found himself sketching out an old oak tree, and then the shapes of the library around it. He didn’t notice the light fading from the windows, the candles flickering to life. He’d almost finished the drawing of the library when a voice spoke from behind his shoulder.

“You are very talented.”

Gon leapt to his feet and whirled around, to see the black-clad figure of the Master standing just behind the arm of the sofa on which he’d been leaning. His left hand rested on the back of the tall dog. He was still dressed head-to-toe in black, and a cowl hid his face. What, Gon wondered, was behind it? And could it really be so awful that he had to resort to blackmail to find love?

“How long have you been watching me?” Gon demanded.

“Long enough to see that you care about what you’re doing. Also, that you ought to have better materials than a schoolboy’s pencil and lined paper. You’ve captured Senritsu perfectly.”

Gon listened carefully, but there seemed to be no irony in the rough voice. Still, he flipped the notebook shut. “I already have better materials,” he said coldly, though really, they weren’t much better than what he was holding. The Master’s whole demeanor made him want to argue with him. “But they’re in my room, and I couldn’t find it.”

A grating chuckle escaped the cowl. “I suppose the house isn’t entirely easy to comprehend, at first.”
“You could say that.”

“Which is why I told Canary to give you a bell.”

“She did…I left it in the dining room.”

“Which is convenient, as that’s where we’re going.”

Gon bristled at the man’s presumption. “What if I’m not hungry?”

The Master shrugged. “Then you don’t have to eat. But I do, and the two of us have matters to discuss. Follow me.”

Gon glared at his retreating back. The dog followed her master for a few steps, and then stopped, turned her soft, questioning eyes back to Gon and waved her tail a couple of times. Well, at least one of them isn’t an asshole, Gon thought. When the Master realized that neither his dog nor Gon were following him, he turned around with an exasperated grunt. “You’re too old to sulk like a child.”

“And you’re old enough to say ‘please’,” Gon shot back.

The Master laughed incredulously. “You’re a demanding one!”

“Says the guy who kidnapped me because of a rose.”

The Master uttered something in between a sigh and a growl. “Very well: will you please do me the honor of accompanying me to the dining room, sir?”

He spoke with a pointed irony that made Gon want to refuse, but that really would have been sulky and childish. So he said, “You’re the Master; I can’t say no, can I?”

The Master let out an exasperated sigh, whistled to his dog, and then turned and began walking
again. This time Gon followed, trying to keep track of the twists and turns they took to reach the dining room. By the time they arrived, he was fairly confident that he could retrace his steps if need be.

The heavy door opened in front of them, and the Master strode inside without pause. Gon, though, stopped short at the sight of the room. He’d thought that the presentation of lunch had been absurdly formal, but that had been nothing to this. The linen runner on the table was gone, replaced by a silver brocade cloth that fell all the way to the floor. Candelabra full of indigo tapers sat on every possible surface, brightening the room almost as much as electric light would have. The table, as Gon had come to expect, was covered with dishes, this time surrounding a huge roast leg of something that had a cloven hoof. At one end of the table, two places had been set across from one another, with cobalt blue plates and heavy silverware and several cut-crystal goblets each.

The Master took one of the places, and indicated to Gon to take the other, as the dog retreated under the table. Reluctantly, Gon sat, watching the man as he began to uncover dishes. Most of them looked heavy, smothered in sauce, but then he lifted the lid on a tureen, and Gon was hit with another familiar smell, full of memories. It was a bowl of mussels, cooked like they were in all of the small cafes along the Idrisi docks, complete with a side dish of flatbreads.

“Are you sure you aren’t hungry?” the Master asked Gon.

“If I had been, that would have been the end of it,” he said, nodding to the bowl of mussels.

The Master stilled for a moment, apparently staring at him. “Is this not one of your favorite dishes?”

“Yes!” Gon snapped back. “And do you have any idea how creepy that is? Who’s making all of this stuff? And how do they know what I’m going to like, when I’ve been here less than a day?”

The Master continued to regard him invisibly for a few moments, and then he picked up a carving knife and began to cut slices from the roast, piling them on his plate. It was only when he’d filled the rest with some of the side dishes that he answered. “The cook’s name is Menchi, and please don’t blame her for unnerving you. For so long, she’s had so little to do. She has...a kind of a gift, for discerning what food someone will prefer. She only wants to make you happy.”

Gon drew a hand across his eyes. “Do you realize what you’re saying?”

“More or less,” the Master answered calmly, pouring himself a glass of wine from a crystal decanter,
and then offering it to Gon. Gon shook his head—he had no desire to lose any kind of control in this place.

The Master shrugged, sipped from his glass, and then cut into the meat and took a bite. Gon could just make out his chin beneath the cowl, his jaw working as he chewed and swallowed. His skin was smooth and very pale despite the few wisps of white hair he could see, but that was the most he could make out.

“Food will hardly make you happy,” he said, “when you don’t want to be here at all. But again, that’s not Menchi’s fault. Your refusal to accept the only comfort she can offer will hurt her, and for what?”

Gon sighed, and pulled the bowl of mussels toward him. He picked up a flatbread, nibbled it while watching the Master eat, carefully keeping his cowl in place all the time. At last, he asked, “Why do you cover your face? I mean, you live with a bunch of tree/human hybrids who seem to have known you for a long time. They must not care about whatever you’re hiding. So don’t do it for my sake.”

The Master stopped eating, and regarded Gon for a long moment. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I think I do. It’s not really complicated, is it? If I have to stay here with you till the end of time or whatever, I might as well know what you look like.”

The man was still and silent for another long count. Then, without a word, he pulled the cowl back and let it drop around his shoulders. Gon froze, stunned—because of all the things that he’d imagined the Master might have to hide, beauty had never been one of them. But if he was beautiful, he was also familiar. The thistledown hair, the pale skin, the dark-fringed blue eyes were almost identical to those of the young man he’d dreamed about the night before—and the one in the fresco on the far wall.

But they weren’t quite the same. The Master’s hair was more white than silver, the pallor of his skin had a sickly tinge, his cheeks were hollow and his eyes haunted. Though he couldn’t have been much older than Gon, there was a weariness to his whole demeanor that suggested protracted age. There was also an odd mark on the little bit of his neck that Gon could see: a splay of fine black lines reaching toward his jaw, like a river delta on a map.

The Master sipped from his glass of wine, and then gave Gon an ironic smile. “Well? Are you happy now?”
Gon narrowed his eyes, shook his head. “I—don’t understand. You’re…I mean, you have no reason to hide your face.”

The Master laughed ruefully. “Appearances can be deceiving.”

Reality slid and tipped, and Gon’s dream of the night before came back to him clearly. His dream-companion had said something similar. Were they the same person, that blinding-bright young man and the tired, beleaguered one sitting across from him now? But that made no sense. He had never seen the Master’s face until now. And what about the hunter in the fresco, who looked so much like them both? Was it only family resemblance?

“Are you certain that I can’t pour you a drink?” the Master asked.

“Ah…yeah, maybe,” Gon answered, and the Master filled his glass from the decanter. Gon picked it up and sipped it, watching him the whole time. “So, you aren’t going to tell me why you hide your face?”

The other young man shrugged, and went back to his dinner. “Force of habit.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

The Master smiled sadly. “Does anything here make sense to you, Gon?”

Gon picked up another bit of bread, and chewed on it before answering. “No. But I have the feeling it would, if someone would just tell me the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“What about why I’m really here.”

“You’re here because you outwitted me, which you know very well.” There was distinct bitterness in these words.
“That’s not what I mean. I wasn’t the one who started all this. And don’t give me any crap about blood debts and stolen roses. You wanted to keep Mito here, but why? Look at you. I bet that you could get just about any woman you wanted, without having to blackmail a mother at least a decade older than you.”

He sighed. “You are assuming a lot about me.”

“Well, what else am I supposed to do? You aren’t telling me anything about you. Like why you think you couldn’t find a girlfriend on your own.”

The Master paused, refilling his glass, something rancorous in the turn of his mouth. At last, he said, “Suppose I did. Suppose I brought her back here. You’ve been here a day, you’ve seen exactly how odd my house is. Do you think that this hypothetical girlfriend wouldn’t take one look at Canary and the others and run?”

Gon leaned back in his chair, holding the Master’s eyes. “I think your money would make a lot of women ignore the weirdness of your staff.”

“And do you think I’d want to have that kind of woman as a companion?”

“I don’t know. How different is it from forcing my aunt to stay here by threatening her family?”

The Master set his utensils down and looked thoughtfully at Gon once more. “I took the measure of your aunt in the short time that she was here. I suspected that she would be the type to look beyond the surface, to the truth of something. Or someone.”

Gon shrugged. “You’re right, she is. But she can’t exactly dump her life to come and keep you company. She has a family to take care of.”

“And your sister? Wouldn’t a life here be better for her than one in the Idrisi slums?” The Master crossed his arms over his chest and held Gon’s eyes, a spark of challenge in his own.

“Listen to me,” Gon said with barely-suppressed anger, sitting forward again. “If there’s such a thing as a perfect human being, then Komugi is it. She’s better than anyone else I know, and yes, she
deserves so much more than the life she has. But she’s also twelve years old, and she’s blind, and if you think there’s any way that I would let her go live with some creep in a castle in the middle of nowhere then all this money has clearly fried your brain!”

The Master started at him for a moment, blinking in shock. “Your sister…the one who asked for the rose…is twelve?” His rough voice was so low it was barely audible.

Gon sighed. “Didn’t it occur to you to ask Mito how old she was when you offered her that trade?”

“I…I suppose I assumed…”

Gon laughed ruefully. “Assumed? When you seem to know everything about everything else, right down to what I used to read to my sister?”

“No, it’s the servants who know these things. They have ways and means that I don’t, and I suppose I never thought to ask.” After a moment, the Master echoed Gon’s laugh. “I have been a fool.”

“You’re just realizing this now?”

The Master only shook his head.

“And you wanted her to fall in love with you,” Gon muttered.

The Master looked up sharply. “Who told you that?”

Realizing that he’d said too much, Gon dropped his eyes at last, reaching for his glass and taking a large sip.

Abruptly, the Master laughed. “No, never mind. Only Alluka would have said something like that.” There was a fondness in his scratchy tone when he spoke her name that surprised Gon.

Nevertheless, he said, “Don’t be mad at her. I made her tell me.”
The Master shook his head. “I would not be angry at Alluka. Not when—” he stopped, clearly censoring himself. “She’s only a child, and she’s very, very lonely. She’s also at the mercy of a wild imagination.”

“So, you didn’t want to make Mito fall in love with you?” Gon demanded.

The Master shrugged. “If she had been in a position to love me honestly, and if I had loved her, then I suppose I would have. Still, it would have been her decision.”

“But you would have locked her up here either way.”

The Master’s face was suddenly and shockingly vulnerable. He looked down at his plate, which was still half-full. “I know why you’re angry at me, Gon,” he said softly. “I would be too, in your place. But please believe that I did what I did because I have no choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” Gon said, but it didn’t come out in quite as caustic a tone as he’d intended. There had been something so real and raw in the Master’s tone when he spoke the last words, something that shaved off the sharp edges of Gon’s retort.

“Hmm. For the likes of you? Maybe.”

“The likes of me? Aside from a castle with a weird staff and a lot of money, are we really that different?”

“We are more different than you can possibly imagine,” the Master answered.

Gon shook his head. “Fine, whatever. Right now, all I really want to know is whether Mito’s off the hook.”

The Master waved a hand. “Yes, of course.”

“And me?” Gon asked. “Will you let me go back to them?”
The Master looked up at him. Their eyes locked for a long moment, and then the Master sighed. “I’m afraid that I can’t. The debt for that rose must be paid, and you offered yourself as that payment. Unless you send someone else in your stead, you cannot leave.”

“Ever?”

The Master paused, then said, “For as long as I live.”

Gon stared at the Master for a moment before he shoved his chair back, making sure to grab the bell before he stormed out of the room. “Mito was right, ” he said over his shoulder, before he slammed the door. “You are a beast!” And he fled as the Master’s attempt at an answer dissolved into a sepulchral cough.

**Killua**

*I cough until his footsteps are long gone; until I feel warm wetness soaking my sleeve.*

*He hates me. It is exactly what I deserve.*

*All the same, when I am certain that I am alone, I let tears soak what the blood hasn’t.*
Chapter Summary

In which Gon faces some painful truths (or faces some truths painfully); Alluka reveals her other half; and Killua continues to brood as only Killua can.

Chapter Notes

So I promised you two chapters today, and now you're saying, hey, this is only one! Well, I decided to combine two that really should have been one, which is to say that a rose by any other name would still be Killua's downfall. (Okay, I know, that's awful!) Ahem. I promise Gon is going to get his head out of his butt very soon...just not quite yet. Cheers!

9

Gon made it to the entry hall by himself, but then he had to admit defeat. When he was sure that the Master wasn’t following him, he went to gather his books from the couch by the fire—and found that they were all gone. Infuriated, he rang the bell. In moments, Canary was hurrying toward him. Gon could tell by her manner that she was anxious.

“Are you finished with dinner already, Gon?” she asked, clearly trying to sound optimistic.

“Extremely,” Gon muttered. “Can you show me where my room is?”

“Of...of course,” she stammered. “I only thought that you might have spent a bit more time with the Master?”

Gon laughed acidly. “I spent plenty.”

“Very well,” Canary said unhappily, clearly full of things that she wanted to ask, and felt she couldn’t. “Come.” She turned, and Gon followed her toward the stairway. They’d walked for many
silent minutes before she ventured another question. “Was he rude to you?”

Gon was about to say something flippant, when he remembered the way that the Master had looked when he told him that he had no choice. Thinking back on it now, Gon realized that he hadn’t just looked vulnerable. He had looked young — entirely different from the tired, sickly, guarded man who had first put back his hood. And although it made him angry with himself, at the same time, Gon suddenly felt a bit guilty for the way he’d left the Master.

So he answered Canary, who was still patiently waiting, “He was honest. I just didn’t like what he was being honest about, so I left.”

Canary didn’t look at him, though he could almost feel the question in her forward-facing gaze. “Well, you have more than a little cause to be unhappy with him,” she said carefully. He glanced at her. Her expression was thoughtful, if slightly absent. It was strange—barely twenty-four hours earlier, the sight of Canary had been almost enough to make him run screaming. But after only a day in their presence, the halflings had ceased to seem so peculiar. In fact, they almost seemed human.

Gon asked, “How did he get the scar?”

“The scar?”

“Yeah. That kind of veiny mark that comes up from his neck toward his jaw.”

Canary stopped walking, going still with shock. “He showed you his face?”

Gon nodded. “I asked him why he hid it, and so he took off his hood. But he never really answered. Is it because of the scar? Is that what all this is about?”

Canary began to walk briskly again, so that Gon almost had to run to keep up. He wondered if it had been rude to ask her about it; if the Master’s staff might be sensitive to whatever had caused that mark. But if he really was going to be here as long as the other young man was—well, that was a long time to go without answers.

“I mean,” Gon said, catching up to her, “is he hung up about how he looks? Is that why he stays here alone, and comes up with bizarre plans to make some woman fall in love with him?”
Canary sighed. “It is all rather more complicated than that.”

Gon considered this, and all at once another possibility occurred to him, one that sent a fresh twinge of guilt through him at the way he’d treated the Master. “Are there others? Scars, I mean? Of course, there must be…the way he dresses…”

But Canary was shaking her head. “I’m afraid, Gon, that I am not at liberty to discuss such personal things about the Master with you.”

Gon flushed. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you that.”

Now it was Canary’s turn to fall silent. She didn’t speak again until they reached the corridor that Gon recognized as the one that led to his rooms. “Don’t apologize to me, Gon. Don’t apologize to any of us. The truth is, we are grateful that you’re here, even if—”

She stopped, one twiggy finger curled against her lips. Then she sighed, and began again. “I wish that I could be more help to you. I can’t imagine how it must be for you, arriving so suddenly and unexpectedly in this outlandish place, with no one willing to tell you anything that truly matters. If it helps, please know that all of it has an explanation. But that is for the Master to tell you…or not.”

Gon nodded, the glimmerings of anger beginning to kindle in him again. Whatever had happened to the Master, whatever terrible secret he might be hiding, Gon couldn’t understand how that excused denying him an explanation. But then, that wasn’t Canary’s fault, and it was more than likely that she was as much a prisoner here as Gon was.

“It’s okay, Canary. Good night.” He began to turn toward his room, but Canary reached out a hand and stopped him.

“There is one thing which I can tell you, Gon: it has been a long, long time since the Master has showed his face to anybody—even us. Longer, actually, than I can remember. And so, perhaps there is a chance that at some point, he will confide in you. I hope for all of our sakes that he does.”

She turned away quickly, but not before Gon saw something that looked very like a trickle of sap running down her cheek.
After that conversation, there was no chance of Gon sleeping anytime soon. He opened the door to his sitting room, dejected at the prospect of a long, wakeful night without even the library books for distraction. And so he was surprised (though he didn’t know why he should be, anymore) and also delighted to find his books piled on a table next to a huge armchair set by the fire.

He walked over to them, planning to pick up the Earth Science again, and then he stopped, his breath caught in his throat. There were five volumes of folk tales stacked neatly beside the textbooks, none of them the ones he’d finished earlier. Who, he wondered, had put them there? It couldn’t have been Senritsu or the other librarians, clearly firmly rooted to the spots they stood in. Alluka, maybe? But how would she have known that he’d finished the others?

That, however, was nothing compared to what was sitting next to them: a brand-new, leather-bound sketchbook with large pages of heavy, creamy paper, and an assortment of drawing supplies. Inside the cover of the sketchbook was a note on thick, silver-edged card: “Please accept these as an apology. I can’t change the way things are, but I can try to make them easier for you. Anything you want, just ask, and if it’s in my power, you will have it.” There was no signature, but Gon didn’t need one to know who had written the words. The handwriting was as graceful and beautiful as the man who had made it.

He collapsed into the soft chair, the sketchbook in his lap, turning the card over and over in his hand as he stared into the fire. Its flames licked in many colors, not just the ordinary orange and yellow and white and blue but also lime green and magenta, violet and crimson. He wondered why—whether it was the effect of some special kind of wood, or whether it was—

The card stilled in his hand, and his hand fell to rest beside the other one on the tooled leather of the sketchbook. He didn’t want to think it, had been avoiding thinking the word ever since Mito came home with her strange story of a hooded man in an empty castle somewhere deep in the mountains. He’d hidden from it all day, as a little tree-girl had showed him stranger and stranger things inside that house. But there really wasn’t any avoiding it any longer. There was no rational explanation for everything he had encountered here. But magic? His mind shied from the very word.

He thought back to the night he’d convinced Mito to let him come here in her place, remembered his flippant words: *What’s he going to do to me, anyway? Lock me in a tower?* That, it seemed, was exactly what the Master had done.

*Or had he?* Gon wondered. True, this place was strange enough to be ruled by magic. On the other hand, there were plenty of strange things in the world, and a madman with enough money might as well be wielding to magic when it came to making the peculiar possible. Luckily, there was a simple way to find out which this was.
Gon grabbed his bag, his jacket and scarf and his boots. He opened the door carefully, half-expecting one of the staff to be hovering there, waiting to see to whatever need he might present. The corridor, however, was empty, all but a few candles extinguished—just enough light to see by.

Gon crept through the corridors, wincing any time a floorboard creaked or a candle flickered, but nothing other than his stockinged footfalls disturbed the silence. He was still uncertain of his way through the maze of hallways, but at last he found himself in the entrance hall. He pulled on his boots, then grasped the handle of one of the doors. Again, he’d expected it to be locked, or for someone to be waiting beyond it to catch him and send him back to his room. Again, he met no resistance.

He made his way down the drive to the briar gate. The perfumed air of the gardens caressed him, gentle fingers urging him back. He almost thought that he could hear the roses whispering to him as they had in the dream, but the words were lost in the murmur of their own leaves, brushing together in the gentle breeze.

Gon reached out for one of the gate’s handles: a thick, looped outgrowth of the briar, worn or polished smooth and thornless. He tugged at it, expecting this to be the hurdle at which he fell, but that side of the gate swung open as if it hung on perfectly-oiled hinges. Beyond it was the frozen, wintry forest, evergreens drooping under feet of snow, their bark dusted with frost. Everything gleamed silver in the stillness and the winter moon.

Gon looked back at the castle, not quite believing that it could be this easy. If anyone looked back, they did nothing to alert him to the fact. And so Gon took a step out of the garden’s perfect summer night, into the winter one beyond. His boots sank into the drifted snow. He took another step, and another, and then he began to run. The next moment, it was as if something punched him in the chest. He was flung backward with a force that left him sprawled breathless on the castle’s drive, his elbows scraped painfully by the gravel.

He scrambled to his feet, furious. This couldn’t be; not when he was so close. He ran again toward freedom, and once again, he was hurled back. Rage consumed him, then: not just the anger that had brewed in him over the last few strange days, but the repressed fury of years and years of struggle against impossible odds. He battered at the invisible barrier, picturing the leers of the customers at Bisky’s cafe, the filthy whispered invitations, the rattle in Komugi’s chest when she lay tossing and turning with fever, the dark thumbprints under Mito’s eyes, Abe’s pitiful requests for something more to eat. He thrashed against it all, and that barrier stood impassive as he bruised and bled and finally collapsed, spent and weeping, into the muddy snow beneath it. He thought he heard footsteps crunching down the driveway at a run, a voice calling his name, but before he could be certain, the world went black.
Gon awakened to bright light pouring in the windows of the bedroom. He was in the bed, and it was as warm and soft as he remembered, but every single part of him hurt. He felt as if he’d been in several fights and probably lost them all. It took him a few moments to remember what had happened the night before, and when he did, he felt like he was going to be sick. Or cry. Possibly both. Probably both.

He was about to pull the covers over his head and try to reclaim the oblivion of sleep, but just as he turned away from the bright windows, he heard a soft tapping at the door. “What,” he croaked, too sore and dejected to even think of being polite.

“It is Kurapika, Gon,” the butler’s voice said softly. “May I come in?”

Gon considered saying no, but he doubted that the tree-servants would leave him be for long. “Fine,” he sighed, and the door opened.

Kurapika rustled forward until he stood looking down at Gon. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

Gon laughed grimly. “Like I’ve gone ten rounds with a magical fence.”

“Sixteen, to be precise,” Kurapika answered, setting a small tray on Gon’s bedside table. “Were you attempting to kill yourself?”

“No,” Gon said. “The gate.”

Kurapika gave a dry, rustling laugh. “If you’d asked, I could have spared you a lot of pain by telling you that that gate always wins.”

“You sound like you’ve tested it,” Gon said as Kurapika poured something from a teapot into a cup. It smelled like a distillation of the sweet summer air coming in through the open windows.

“I have,” Kurapika said. “We all have, at one time or another.”
Gon’s forehead creased at this. “Then you don’t want to be here?”

Kurapika laughed his acerbic laugh again. “No more than you do.”

“So you’re the Master’s prisoner, too?” Gon asked bitterly.

“Oh, no. The Master did not make the magic that imprisons us.”

And there it was, Gon thought: the word he’d battered his body to disprove, spoken so casually by the tree-man. He didn’t have the will left even to flinch at the sound of it. Of course this place was ruled by magic, and of course he’d known it long before he tested the gate, even if he’d tried desperately to deny it. Rooms didn’t re-decorate themselves overnight, as he slept in them. Tables didn’t suddenly appear laden with food that would take an army of chefs days to prepare, three times a day, to satisfy cravings he hadn’t known he’d had.

He asked, “If the Master didn’t make the magic, then who did?”

Kurapika sighed. “Only the Master can tell you that, but after last night, I’m certain he will be quite willing to explain it to you.”

“Why after last night?”

“You knocked yourself out trying to run away, Gon. He carried you back here when he realized what you’d done, and he’s been sick with worry about you ever since.”

“Nice to know he cares,” Gon said caustically.

“He does care,” Kurapika said. “You should talk to him. I could—”

“No,” Gon said firmly. “Not today.”
Kurapika sighed, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he offered Gon the cup of fresh-smelling liquid. “Drink this. It will help the pain, and speed your healing.”

“Is it magic?” Gon asked dubiously.

“Gon—do you think that anything of which you’ve partaken here has not involved magic?”

Again, the man had a point. Gon wished that he weren’t so very reasonable. It would be so much easier to be angry at them all. He eased himself upright—finding, in the process, that someone had taken off what must have been ruined clothes, and dressed him in a top and pants made of some buttery-soft, sage-green fabric. Not wanting to consider too closely who might have seen him naked, he took the proffered cup. The liquid inside was steaming and pale green, like the tea Bisky drank, but it tasted nothing like it. It was slightly sweet, and subtly floral, but also leafy and smoky and utterly delicious. He gulped down the contents and found Kurapika waiting to refill the cup. When he’d finished the second, he did indeed feel the pain diminishing.

“Would you care for breakfast now?” Kurapika asked.

Gon had descended into a hazy calm, no doubt another effect of the tea, that left him wanting little other than to enjoy it. “Maybe in a while.”

“Ring the bell when you’d like something. I would suggest you spend the day resting. Challenging that gate is…well, your injuries will be more than physical.”

Gon didn’t think that sounded like a good thing, but in the thrall of the tea, he also didn’t much care. “Okay. But can you bring me my books?”

“Of course. Which ones?”

“The fairy tales.”

Kurapika gave him an indulgent smile as he turned for the sitting room, no doubt imagining that Gon wasn’t up to reading anything heavier in his current state. In fact, though, Gon wasn’t looking for entertainment. He was embarking on research. If he really was living in a magical castle, then fairy tales were the only guidebook he knew.
Of course, it would also help to know how the castle had come to be governed by magic, and who it was that controlled it. So, when Kurapika returned with the books, he asked, “Does the library have any histories of this place?”

Kurapika stilled, studying him. “You want to know the history of the Master’s family?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Kurapika conceded this with a nod. “Unfortunately, the Master keeps all of the books like that in his own quarters. But I’m sure that if you were to ask him about it—”

“No!” Gon said sharply. “I don’t want to see him now.”

Kurapika sighed, shook his head. “Very well. Ring when you’d like breakfast.”

Gon nodded, and when Kurapika left, he picked up the first book on the pile and began to read.

* *

Gon read through three of the books, and by the time he put down the third one, a few things were abundantly clear. First was that enchantments could always be broken, though the means to do so were never obvious. Second was that the imprisoned parties were never the ones responsible for the magic keeping them imprisoned. As for who was at fault in such situations, those were muddier waters. Sometimes princesses were locked into towers for protection, or through jealousy. Sometimes heroes were locked out of their homes by would-be usurpers, other times because of their own transgressions, intentional or otherwise. The bottom line was that nothing was ever straightforward—or, as the young man in the dream had told him, nothing was ever what it seemed at face value.

Given all that—and given the apparent parameters of what was and wasn’t possible in this place—Gon began to consider the little that he did know in an entirely different light. What if Canary’s admonitions that she couldn’t tell him the things that he wanted to know didn’t actually come from any loyalty to her master (though she did seem to be genuinely loyal to him) but from a literal inability to answer Gon’s questions? What if there was something about the rules of this place that silenced everybody in it, when it came to the truth of how it all worked? What if the Master’s anger at Mito for taking the rose, his demands for recompense, hadn’t been the ravings of a deranged recluse at all, but a heartfelt reaction to some grave transgression?
If that was the case, Gon thought, then what exactly had his aunt done in breaking that stem? The Master had made an allusion to taking a limb for a limb…and all at once, considering the creatures he had met here, Gon’s stomach churned. His heart beat hard and his breath came fast. He felt as if he were going to cry. *I can’t think about this. I can’t*...

And he also couldn’t not. He picked up the bell and rang it. In a moment, there was a tap at the door, and the sound of childish chatter. Alluka? He composed his face, not wanting her to see his distress, because surely, she would ask about it. “Come in,” he said.

The door opened and Canary entered, pushing a wheeled cart covered in dishes. Alluka followed behind her. “Are you feeling better, Gon?” Canary asked.

“Sort of,” he said. “Do you happen to have more of that tea?”

Canary smiled. “Not yet. You need to be careful how much of it you drink. But I’ve brought you lunch.”

“Lunch?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s past noon.”

“Oh. Sorry…”

“Don’t worry,” Canary said. “You had a difficult night; you needed to rest. Come, Alluka,” she said to the girl, who had stood the whole time looking at Gon with wide eyes. He wondered how bad he looked: he hadn’t bothered to check. “Let him eat in peace.”

“No!” Gon said, earning raised eyebrows from Canary and a gaping mouth from Alluka. “I mean, she doesn’t have to go, if she doesn’t want to. The company would be nice. We could read some more.”

Alluka’s face brightened. “Can I, Canary?”
Canary sighed. “Are you certain that it isn’t an imposition, Gon?”

“Definitely not.”

“Alright,” Canary said dubiously. “But ring for me if you need your privacy.”

Gon nodded, and Canary bustled away. Alluka looked at the ground, suddenly shy. “Alluka,” Gon said, “would you like something to eat?”

Alluka shook her head. A few lance-shaped yellow leaves fluttered to the floor. “We can’t eat the food you eat.”

“Then what do you eat?”

“Water…sunshine…and things we get from the earth at night.”

“At night?”

Alluka nodded. “At night we sleep with our roots in the earth.”

“Like real trees.”

Alluka nodded again. Trying not to return to the dark thoughts he’d had before she arrived, Gon reached for the nearest dish and uncovered it: it was a pile of assorted sandwiches, all, of course, types that he liked. He chose one at random and bit into it (soft cheese and thinly-sliced smoked fish, something else he hadn’t tasted since the island.) He ate six more, and then a bowl of tiny, fresh strawberries, as Alluka chattered about what she’d done that morning (read more fairy tales—she seemed to be hooked.)

When Gon was finished, he pushed the tray away and said, “So, how terrible do I look?”

“Oh!” Alluka cried, and it seemed that a faint blush washed over her gray bark cheeks. “You don’t look so bad.”
Gon laughed. “Pretty bad, then.”

“Well, when Kurapika tried to get out the last time, he broke off half his branches. It took years for them to grow back.”

Gon had only half-heard Kurapika when he’d said earlier that he had tested the barrier. Now, though, he was intrigued. “Years? How long have you all been here?”

Alluka’s brow furrowed, and at last she said, “I don’t know. A long time.”

Gon could tell from her anxious tone that this was one of the things she wasn’t supposed to talk about, so instead he asked, “Why did Kurapika break himself on the barrier? He seems more sensible than that.”

Alluka sighed. “He is, normally. Well, he was, until he met Leorio.”

“Alluka?” Gon asked.

Alluka nodded. “He’s the one who drove you here.”

_Curiouser and curiouser, _Gon thought, and then tried to remember what tale that came from. When he couldn’t, he shook his head and said, “What did he want with Leorio?”

Alluka shrugged. “Just to be with him, I guess.” Reading Gon’s puzzled look, she added, “They’re in love.”

Gon choked on the sip of sparkling apple juice he’d just taken. “In love?”

Alluka bit her lip, watching Gon, and then she said, “Please don’t think badly of them because of it. I know they’re both men, but they really do love each other.”
Gon cocked an eyebrow. “I don’t think badly of them, and I don’t see why it matters if they’re both men. Well, it wouldn’t if they were both men. But I mean… Kurapika’s a tree.”

“Alluka rejoineth hotly.”

“Kurapika isn’t a tree!” Alluka rejoined hotly.

“Ah, okay, wrong word. But he isn’t human, either.”

Alluka studied him, tapping her lips with a twiggy finger. Then she said, “Can you get up?”

“Probably. Why?”

She hopped off the bed and went to the window, beckoning to Gon to follow. Slowly, painfully, he unfolded himself until he was standing. He limped to the window, where Alluka was looking out. “See?” she said, pointing.

Far off to the left, the drive was visible. The briar gates were open, and Kurapika stood just inside what Gon now knew to be the castle’s magical boundary. Leorio stood by him, their hands clasped and heads bent together as they talked.

“How did you know they’d be there?” Gon asked, his eyes fixed on the strange scene.

“Because Kurapika always comes to meet Leorio when he’s here, and Leorio usually comes on this day at this time.”

Gon sighed, wanting to coax more information out of her, uncertain how hard he could push. “A halfling and a human,” he said softly.

“Things like that can happen in fairy tales,” Alluka said, clearly defending them.

“And here, apparently.”

“Leorio is nice. He yells a lot, but he’s nice. And he doesn’t care that Kurapika’s a halfling.”
“Still—how could they ever be together?”

“They can’t,” Alluka said. “That’s why Kurapika tried to break through the magic gate. Well, the last time.”

“How would that help?”

“It might not,” she shrugged. “But it also might turn him human.”

“But of course, he can’t get out,” Gon mused, and then turned to her. “ Couldn’t Leorio come in?”

“Yes. But Kurapika doesn’t want him to. He’s afraid that something bad might happen, because of the magic. And he doesn’t want to live a life with Leorio while he’s a halfling.”

“But they’re already in love. What does it matter?”

“It matters to Kurapika,” she said softly. “It’s hard to live in a body that isn’t really yours. Even harder to let someone love you like that.”

Gon looked at her. It was a strange thing to say, and for a child, an uncanny insight. But then, Alluka wasn’t an ordinary child. Rather than press her, he asked, “How did they even meet?”

Alluka twirled fronds of leafy hair around her fingers. A few more fell out, scattering across the gold-and-green carpet. “Leorio fought in a war in his country. Portus Cale. When it was over, he didn’t want to be there anymore. He didn’t want to be near people. So he moved to these mountains. But he’s a doctor, so once a week he goes away to a town that doesn’t have their own doctor and makes people better. One time he really needed supplies, so he came here, and the Master gave them to him. Kurapika saw him, and he liked him. But it was a long time before he would let Leorio see him. He thought he’d be afraid of him, but he wasn’t. Now he comes all the time.”

“But how did he find you in the first place? Mito said she only found the gates when she stumbled on them.”
“Well…” She glanced up at him, then away.

“If it’s okay to tell me?”

“It is, I think,” she said, turning back to him after a moment’s consideration. “You’re going to find out sooner or later anyway.”

Gon waited for her to speak some kind of revelation. Instead, she shut her eyes and went very still, her lips moving almost imperceptibly around silent words. As he watched, her form blurred, and then doubled, and at last split entirely in two. Though not quite: Alluka remained firm and solid, but the copy of her was transparent, with black, almond-shaped holes for eyes.

Looking into them, Gon felt that they could swallow him whole. His instinct was to run, but then Alluka opened her own eyes and smiled. “Gon, this is Nanika.”

Nanika nodded to him. Dazedly, he nodded back. “Ah…what exactly is Nanika? Or should I ask her?”

Alluka giggled. “No. She cannot speak like we can. She’s a dryad. A tree spirit.”

*Right. Of course she is.* “And she’s…part of you?”

Alluka shook her rustling head. “I am me, and she is her. But she lives in me a lot of the time. That’s what dryads do: live in trees.”

Gon took a deep breath. “Okay. So, what does this have to do with Leorio?”

“Oh, well,” Alluka said, glancing at Nanika, who was studying Gon with clear curiosity. “We can’t leave here, but Nanika can. She found Leorio, saw he needed things, and that he was lonely. She led him here.”

“So how did he end up as the Master’s driver?” Gon asked, turning to lean against the window sill.
“When my—um, the Master needed someone to take your aunt home, Leorio was all there was.”

Gon had to laugh at that. “So he isn’t really your Master’s driver?”

“The Master never leaves. So I guess not.”

All at once, Gon had an idea. “If Nanika can leave, could she bring a letter to my family? So that I can tell them I’m alright, and find out how they’re doing?”

Alluka shook her head. “She can’t hold onto things, and the way she travels, she couldn’t bring things with her even if she could.”

“How does she travel?”

“Through trees. They work kind of like doorways for her.”

“Right,” Gon said, although he had no clear picture of how this might work.

“But,” Alluka continued, “if they know how to hear her, she could bring them a message from you.”

Gon cocked his head. “What do you mean, how to hear her? I thought you said she couldn’t speak.”

“Of course she can speak! I only said she can’t speak the way that you and I do.”

“I…don’t understand.”

Again, Alluka looked at Nanika. Nanika gave her a little nod. “She’ll show you,” Alluka told him. “You said that you wanted to know that your family are well?”

“More than anything.”
“Okay. Hold out your hands, and look into her eyes.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Gon offered his hands, palm-up. Nanika glided toward him, and then reached out her own hands, curling her fingers around them. Gon felt the faintest brush at her touch, like a wisp of breeze. It was difficult to look into her eyes, as uncomfortable as looking straight at sun-bright water, although they were entirely lightless. As he held them, though, the feeling faded, and suddenly he was looking into the flat in the Belsonso.

Though it was a weekday, everyone was at home. More surprising still, the flat had changed. The old, rickety furniture was gone, replaced by new pieces. Abe sat in a plush rocker, drowsing by the stove, which was a newer, more efficient model. Komugi was wrapped in a soft-looking blanket, sitting on a sofa by the glass doors. Mito stood in the kitchen, a pile of ingredients on the new tile countertop beside her, chopping vegetables. None of them quite looked happy, but the scene was far from the abject misery Gon had imagined. It seemed that what Canary had told him about the Master looking after his family had been true.

“Thank you,” he said, turning away at last.

Nanika inclined her head, then drifted back to Alluka’s side. “Now,” Alluka said, “would you like Nanika to go to them, so that they can see you, too?”

“Yes!” Gon cried before he thought. Then he remembered the previous evening. “Wait—” Quickly, Gon scrambled for the mirror on the dresser. He groaned when he saw his face: it was a mess of bruises and abrasions from the gravel. “No,” he sighed. “If they see me like this, they’ll think the worst. I’ll wait till it heals.”

“Okay,” Alluka said simply, and then reached out her arms. Nanika stepped into the embrace, and melted back into Alluka’s body.

“Well,” Gon said, shaking himself, “do you want me to read to you now?”

“Yes!” Alluka cried. “But can we go outside? It’s much nicer outside. I can put my feet in the dirt.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “I thought you only did that at night?”
“I have to do it at night,” Alluka said, “but it’s still nice to do it other times.”

Gon shook his head. “Okay…well…how about if you wait in the sitting room while I get dressed—oh. I’m not sure I have any clothes.”

“Yes you do! Look in the dresser.”

Gon opened the top drawer of the dresser. It was full of underwear and socks. Upon investigation, he found that all of the drawers were filled with the kind of things he liked to wear, but new, good quality, and exactly his size. He pulled out a pair of boxer briefs, flushing to the roots of his hair to think that someone had actually gone underwear shopping for him—or at least examined the ones he’d brought closely enough to replicate them in whatever way they had for doing such things here. Then he shook his head, sighed, and took an armful of clothing to the bathroom to dress.

**Killua**

*And this, I learn, is how easy it is to fall.*

*Three hundred years in Illumi’s cage, well past long enough to have become resigned to it, and one cloudbreak smile brings it all crashing down. One smile that isn’t for me, and never will be, and why should it be? Even if I weren’t what I am, he’s a young man, and so am I, and if that makes no difference to me — or, rather, it makes all the difference — it would be too much to hope that he would be like me. And if, somehow, he were like me? Well, Illumi was clear in his curse about the love being pure, and how can a love like this ever be pure? Never mind mutual, when Gon hates me.*

*And so I watch. He wears a shirt the color of a sunflower. The color of his laughter, snatches of it drifting upward as he takes my sister’s hand. She moves in a cloud of golden leaves (many, too many, disengaging from her branches and whirling around her) and I remember that he also has a sister whom he loves.*

*Alluka trusts him. I trust him. But though I love her, and I am glad that she has his friendship, I am not above imagining it’s my fingers twined with his, instead of hers.*

*He hates me, and I long for him.*
That’s *how easy it is to fall*. 
Chapter Summary

In which our heroes finally draw a truce. There's even a little fluff!

Chapter Notes

No real notes except to say thanks for reading and all the kudos and comments, it means so much to me! And come chat with me on tumblr or discord, I'm glittercracker everywhere!

Gon spent several days wandering the grounds with Alluka and Nanika (when she chose to make an appearance), reading and studying when Alluka was busy. Every evening, Kurapika arrived with an invitation to dinner from the Master; every evening Gon declined it.

Likewise, he tried to ignore the sketchbook and art supplies that lay untouched on the table in the sitting room. As Alluka left him at his room on the sixth day since that disastrous dinner, though, she grabbed his hand and looked up at him imploringly.

“Please don’t keep being angry with him, Gon!” she begged. “It’s making him so sad!”

He sighed, not knowing how to answer her. A moment later Canary called to her and she fled, and so he was saved; except that he wasn’t, really. He knew as well as Alluka did that the stalemate with the Master couldn’t continue forever, and truth be told, he wasn’t even certain that he wanted it to.

Gon sat down in the chair by the fire and picked up the silver-edged card that had fallen out of the book. He read the message again. “I can’t change the way things are, but I can try to make them easier for you.” And he had tried, hadn’t he? More to the point, it had become abundantly clear to Gon over the last few days that the Master really couldn’t change the way things were. He couldn’t be cruel, not with the way his people so clearly loved him, and given that, if he could have changed their lots, he no doubt would have.
With that, he made up his mind. He grabbed the sketchbook, and then he reached for one of the pens from among the art supplies. He uncapped it, flipped over the Master’s card, and let the tip of the pen hover for a long moment over the blank white rectangle.

Then, taking a deep breath, he wrote, “I think we got off to a bad start. I’m sorry. Will you meet me tomorrow, to talk? Your choice of place and time.” He considered writing more, but in the end, there really wasn’t any more to say. Not that could be said on the back of a notecard, anyway. And so he signed the note, and then, bracing himself again, he rang the bell.

It didn’t take long before there was a soft knock at his door. Gon got up and opened it. Kurapika stood there, smoothly courteous as ever. The perfect butler, and yet Gon had some idea now of the rage and sadness that must live under his perfect, cool facade. “Yes, Gon?” he asked politely, with just a touch of warmth—almost as if he’d been expecting him to call.

“I wondered if…” All at once, it occurred to Gon that sending a note to the Master might not be something that his servants—or, indeed, the man himself—would look kindly on. Then again, he had amends to make, and he couldn’t think of any other way to go about making them. He took a breath, and started again. “I wondered if you could deliver a note to the Master? If that’s okay?”

“There does not seem to be anything untoward in that,” Kurapika said, and Gon had the feeling that he was suppressing a smile…but his features were far harder to read than Canary’s or Alluka’s.

Uncertain of how much was too much to ask, Gon stammered, “It…would be great if he saw it tonight. It’s kind of an apology. Only, if you can’t do that, or he wouldn’t like it, it’s okay…”

This time, Kurapika laughed gently. “It’s fine, Gon. Although, he’s only just sat down to dinner. You could join him, and tell him yourself?”

Gon was already shaking his head; he needed time to brace himself for this meeting. “Not tonight. But please, will you make sure he gets it?”

“Of course. I will give it to him now.”

Gon smiled. “Thank you,” he said, and passed it to the butler, who bowed as he accepted it.
“If that is all…?” Kurapika asked.

“Um, yes. Thanks. That’s it. Oh. Well. I’m kind of hungry?”

“Canary is on her way with your supper as we speak.”

“Okay. Great. Thanks.”

Kurapika retreated, closing the door softly, and Gon wondered why he felt himself furiously blushing.

* *

When Gon opened his eyes the next morning, the now-familiar breakfast table sat beside his bed, covered with dishes. But he barely noticed them, because set against the porcelain tea-pot was a small envelope made of thick cream paper with silver edging. He snatched this up and tore it open. The note inside read:

“Dear Gon,

“I believe that you are correct about our bad beginning, and I would very much like to talk with you today. I will be ready whenever you are. Kurapika will bring you to me. Oh, and you might like to bring some drawing supplies.

“—The Beast”

Gon groaned out loud, and dropped it on the bedside table. For several long moments, he just stared at the breakfast tray, wondering how he could possibly face the other young man after so many days of snubbing him. But then, he was going to have to sooner or later, if he was going to live here indefinitely. So he ate some breakfast, and then shed his pajamas and went into the bathroom. The bathtub was already full of steaming water, as it had been every morning since he’d arrived. He stepped into it.

He washed quickly, not wanting to keep the Master waiting. Afterward, he dressed in the yellow t-
shirt that was his new favorite, and a pair of olive green shorts. He shoved on his boots and then rang the bell. Kurapika was already knocking at the door when Gon remembered that the Master had suggested bringing his drawing supplies. He dumped the new sketchbook plus an assortment of pens and pencils into his messenger bag, then he opened the door.

Kurapika stood there, composed as ever, not one of his leaves or twigs out of place. “Good morning, Gon,” he said, bowing slightly. “I trust you slept well?”

“Yes, thanks. Does the Master still…?”

Kurapika smiled. “Very much so. Are you ready?”

“I think so?”

“He isn’t angry, Gon,” Kurapika said gently. “Far from it. Come. He’s in the gardens.” He turned and led Gon through the corridors to the entrance hall, and then through the front doors, which were wide open on the beautiful morning.

It was early enough that there was a silvery dampness to the grass on the sides of the pebbled paths. The sky above was a cloudless, clean-washed blue, the sun just cresting the treetops. Swallows and martins dipped and swooped as they hunted insects rising in clouds from the warming flowerbeds.

Gon had seen these gardens several times now, but every time felt like seeing them anew. They outshone anything he remembered from his old home. As far as he could see, blooming plants and bushes stretched out, bordering pebbled walkways, drawn into intricate designs, trained into arbors or left to form their own semi-wild masses that were more beautiful still. Every breath he took felt enchanted, full to bursting with their tangled, intoxicating scents.

Experimentally, Gon reached out and touched one of the blooming roses: a lush pink one, not unlike the one Mito had picked for Komugi. The blossom was warm and quivered under his touch as a small, living creature might have done, but it did not speak to him. When he looked up, Gon saw Kurapika watching him carefully—quizzically.

“Don’t worry,” Gon told him, “I’m not about to repeat my aunt’s mistake. I just…um, never mind.”

Kurapika nodded, and said, “Come, then. It isn’t far now.”
They left the rose garden behind, and the path began to pitch downward as they descended a hill. There were no formal flower beds now, just long grass dotted with wildflowers. There was also the sound of running water. At the bottom of the grassy hill Gon could see a line of willow trees. Their longest branches trailed fronds like fingers in the water of a stream that flowed into a clear, deep pool. A black-clad figure sat against the trunk of one of the willows, his head tipped back in the dappled sunlight that fell through the feathery leaves, his eyes closed. The huge dog who always seemed to follow him lay dozing with her head in his lap.

Gon stood still, arrested by the strange beauty of the scene. His fingers itched to capture this moment, the play of light on the Master’s perfect features, the dark lashes sweeping the milk-pale curve of his cheekbone. Then his blue eyes opened and he leaned forward, regarding Gon with a frank, slightly curious gaze before he smiled, and the moment slipped away.

“You came,” he said in his low, rough voice.

“Of course I did,” Gon answered. “Did you think I wouldn’t?”

The Master shrugged. “I did consider the possibility that you’d think better of your invitation.”

Gon began to walk the rest of the way down the hill, looking to see whether Kurapika followed—but Kurapika was gone. He stopped again, suddenly self-conscious at being alone with this man he’d insulted and then avoided. But the Master smiled again.

“It’s alright, Gon. I don’t bite. Nor does Mika.”

“Mika?” Gon asked, puzzled, at which the dog raised her head and looked up at him with inquisitive, tea-colored eyes, her tail twitching a couple of times. “Oh. Your dog.” Gon smiled, and closed the rest of the distance between them. He crouched down, holding out his hand to the dog. She sniffed it, and then licked it.

“She likes you,” the Master said with an odd wistfulness.

“I’m glad,” Gon said, stroking her rough head. He watched his hand on her fur for a moment, and then he looked up, into the Master’s steady blue eyes. “Listen. I want to apologize for what I said the other night, and then for ignoring your invitations all week.”
The white-haired man shook his head, and Gon found himself studying the strange black mark on his neck and jaw. The collar of his jacket was high enough that it was impossible to see how far it extended down his neck. Given that he was so well covered by his clothing, even on this warm morning, the possibility that had occurred to Gon several nights ago began to turn toward conviction. If the Master was hiding other marks beneath all of that heavy black fabric, Gon wondered how it might tie into his ruined voice, his harsh coughing—his clear sadness.

Gon was so absorbed in his thoughts that he jumped when the Master spoke again. “And as I told you in my note to you, I should be the one apologizing. I’ve made nothing but a mess of my dealings with your family since your unfortunate aunt found this place. I wish to all the gods she hadn’t.”

Gon studied the other young man for a moment. His eyes were shadowed, sad. “Why?” he asked. “What is everyone not saying?”

The Master’s incisive eyes rested on him for another long moment, and then he stood up. The dog, Mika, stood too. “Walk with me, Gon. I will try to explain.”

The Master began to walk along the margin of the stream, back toward the castle. Gon followed. “You want to go home,” the Master said after a moment. “Which is perfectly reasonable.” He considered his words, trailing his hand along Mika’s rough back. “No, it’s not even that. It’s implicit. Not something you should be in a position to have to ask.”

The regret was clear in his words. “I know I can’t go home,” Gon found himself saying, without rancor. “I tried.”

The Master laughed ruefully. “You certainly did. It was an impressive effort.”

Gon laughed with just as little humor. “Not that it got me very far.”

The Master gazed at something in the distance that Gon had the uncomfortable feeling he would never be able to see.

“Kurapika said that you didn’t make the barrier,” he said, when the silence became too heavy.
At last the Master looked back at him. “I didn’t create it, but I am responsible for it all the same.”

“What do you mean?”

The Master shook his head. “A long time ago, I made the wrong person angry. The barrier, and everything it holds in, is the result.”

“Why could Mito get out, if I can’t?”

“It was only temporary,” the Master said. “A dispensation, because she promised to return inside of a day. If she hadn’t, or hadn’t at least sent a replacement, the magic would have brought her back.”

“Because she picked a rose.”

“Yes.”

Gon sighed in exasperation. “And that’s what I still don’t understand. How could her life, or mine, be worth the same as a rose?”

The Master gave him an incisive look. “Do you really not understand?” he asked.

Gon didn’t answer. He didn’t want to, didn’t want to have his worst fears confirmed.

“Gon,” the Master said with weary patience, “you’ve been here long enough to grasp the nature of this place. Or, more to the point, the nature of the people who live here with me.”

“Halflings,” Gon said, recalling Canary’s word.

The Master gave him a startled frown. “Who said that to you?” he asked, some of his original gruff anger returning to his voice.
“Canary,” Gon answered.

“Ah,” the Master said, anger evaporating. “I suppose she would. She was never one to mince words, and she’s taken it harder than the rest of them. She had a lover, you see.”

“Taken what harder?” Gon asked hesitantly, as the Master turned away from the stream and onto a path leading back toward the formal gardens.

“The fact that she used to be human,” he said ponderously. “That all of them used to be human.”

Gon took several moments to absorb the shock of this. It was one thing to accept the existence of tree-human hybrids. But somehow, it was much harder to think that they had once been ordinary people. That something—someone?—had changed them into what they were now. He shivered despite the heat of the sun, but he made himself ask, “What happened to them?”

“They were cursed,” the Master answered bitterly.

“Cursed,” Gon repeated. Magic, he had accepted. A curse shouldn’t be any harder to accept, but somehow, it was. “But…how? Why? I just…I’m trying to understand, but, I mean, I never thought…” Gon gave up trying to articulate what he could still barely wrap his head around.

“Of course you wouldn’t understand. You have no reason to. That kind of thing is…well, it isn’t common anymore.”

_Anymore?_ Gon wondered. Meaning that there had been a time when it was? But when he spoke again, it was to ask a different question: “Who did it to them?”

The Master’s look turned cold, but his shoulders twitched upward in a shrug. “It doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that it was my fault, and so I am bound now to protect them.”

Gon waited for him to elaborate on this, uncertain of the right question to ask to make him do so. But the Master walked on in silence, winding along gravel paths through flowerbeds until they reached the drive that led up to the front doors. Then he stopped, and looked Gon in the eye.
“Do you begin to see, Gon, what your aunt did, however innocent her intentions, when she broke the stem of that rose?”

The nausea Gon had felt the night when he’d taken this train of thought redoubled. “You…are you saying that that rosebush was…like them? Like Canary, and Alluka, and the others?”

The Master’s gloved hands clenched against his sides. “They don’t have the same level of sentience, but yes, more or less. Once, that rosebush was a human girl. Her name was Calla. Most of the plants growing in this garden were human, once.”

Gon put a hand to his spinning head. “And so when Mito broke the stem…you said something about taking a limb?”

“Yes,” the Master said, his voice rough and soft and immeasurably sad. “She did quite literally tear off a limb.”

“And…what happened to it…to her…Calla?”

“She bled to death.”

He said it without rancor; with simple resignation. Gon swallowed hard.

“I know that Mito didn’t mean to hurt anyone, Gon. But with that act, your aunt incurred a very real blood debt.”

Gon looked him squarely in the eyes. “But if you mean for me to stay here forever, then you don’t plan to kill me.”

“I will never lay a finger on you,” the Master answered, holding those eyes steadily with his own.

Gon shook his head. “But how else do you repay a blood debt?”

A dark look crossed Killua’s pale face. “A limb for a limb, a life for a life,” he said bitterly.
“Is that part of the magic?”

Killua didn’t meet his eyes. “It’s more complicated than that.” He sighed. “I’ll admit, when your aunt spilled the blood of one of mine—a helpless creature even when she was human, and one who should never have been here in the first place—my first instinct was to spill hers. But she pleaded with me, pleaded for her family, and I began to consider the possibility that that rule is not necessarily bound to a single interpretation. A life belonging to this place was lost. Does that require another death? Would sowing more misery bring Calla back? Would it have been what she wanted?”

He shrugged. “The answer to that was simple. No on all counts. But the debt couldn’t go unpaid. And so I began to consider whether the payment must be blood spilled, or if it could as easily be another life given to this place to replace the one lost?” He looked once more at Gon, who was gazing back at him dubiously. “You see, Gon, you aren’t the only one who can play with semantics. And so maybe we deserve each other?” His lip quirked upwards, almost a smile.

Gon continued to stare at the Master for another few moments, and then he turned away, shaking his head and kicking at the gravel of the drive. “Can you leave?”

“If I could leave,” the Master said acridly, “do you think I’d still be here?”

Gon still studied him skeptically.

“All right. Come on.” The Master turned away from the castle and walked toward the briar gate. Gon had to run a few steps to catch up with his long stride. When they reached the gate, the Master pulled it open. “Wait here—please, whatever you do, don’t hurt yourself again!”

The Master waited for Gon’s nod of acknowledgment, and then he turned and began to walk toward the forest, as Gon had done that terrible night he’d tried to escape. Unlike Gon, though, he didn’t run. In fact, he moved with a kind of beaten inevitability that made Gon’s throat tighten with trepidation. The Master walked a few feet into the drifted snow, and then he put his hand out in front of him. The winter scene beyond the gate rippled slightly, as if someone had dropped a pebble into a pool of water. The Master pushed harder and harder until he was battering at the barrier, making the world beyond it churn and shake sickeningly.

At last, squeezing his eyes shut, Gon cried, “Enough! Stop it! Please!” He stood there, hands and eyes clenched, unable to think beyond the panic that had overtaken him. He didn’t even realize that he was crying until he felt arms come around him, encased in heavy fabric. He tried to shove them
away, but the Master held on no matter how hard Gon struggled, until finally, he gave up and collapsed against him.

If he’d needed any more proof that the Master wasn’t a monster, he had it now. The other young man had had no choice but to imprison Mito, if he didn’t want to kill her for an innocent blunder. Perhaps most importantly of all, Gon realized that the Master was a prisoner, too. And so the last of the fight drained out of him, and he let himself be held, let himself cry out his frustration and despair and confusion onto the shoulder of this stranger who had turned his life inside-out.

Except that when he’d wrung himself dry at last and pulled back, half-mortified, from the Master’s wet shoulder, and saw that there were tear tracks on his cheeks, too, Gon realized that he wasn’t entirely a stranger anymore. They were both young, and they had both run afoul of whatever had happened here, their lives attenuated and compressed to this terrible paradise. They were, in their way, alike.

“I’m sorry, Gon,” he was saying. “I’m so sorry—”

Gon was shaking his head. “Don’t. You don’t ever have to apologize to me again. I understand… well, not everything. Probably not even half of everything that’s going on here. But I do understand why I’m here.”

“Do you hate me for it?” the Master asked, and there was so much desperation in his scratchy tone, in his deep blue eyes, that Gon almost started to cry again.

But he clamped down on the emotion and said simply, “How could I hate you for saving my aunt’s life?”

The Master gave him a long, searching look. And then he said, “If that’s what you truly feel, and as long as we’re stuck here…do you think, Gon, that we could be friends?”

The turmoil within Gon had by no means settled, but somehow, the answer to this was easy. “I think we could. But—” he continued, as the Master began to smile, “I should tell you right now that there is absolutely no way I am going to call you Master. If that’s a requirement, then the deal is off!”

The white-haired man began to laugh. “Fair enough. And to be honest, I don’t even ask the others to call me that. They just do it, and I let them, because it’s better than my title.”
Gon raised his eyebrows. “You have a title?”

“Did. And if I never hear it again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Okay. What’s your given name, then?”

The Master looked off once more into the hidden distance. “Killua.”

“Killua,” Gon repeated. “That’s a nice name.”

“It’s…” Killua began, and then trailed off, shaking his head. He looked at Gon again, and that strange vulnerability had returned to his expression. “No one has called me that in a long, long time.”

They looked at each other through the laden silence that followed. “So,” Gon said at last, “is it okay if we talk about something sort of normal for a little while?”

Killua shrugged. “If you can find something normal here to talk about, then go right ahead.”

“You asked me to bring drawing supplies. Why?”

Killua’s expression changed, and although Gon couldn’t completely decipher it, it was troubled. “I did, didn’t I?” He sighed. “I was going to ask you a favor—assuming that our meeting went well.”

Gon shrugged. “I guess it’s gone about as well as it could have.”

Killua nodded. “Well then, I was wondering if you would be willing to draw me.”

Gon blinked at him in surprise. “I mean…sure, if you really want me to. But why?”

Killua’s eyes flickered away from Gon’s, and he absently stroked his dog’s head. Mika looked up at him with soft eyes, and Killua gave her a rueful smile. “There is…little record of the passage of time,
here. I would like one.”

“Why not get a camera? It would be a more accurate record.”

Killua shook his head. “It won’t work here. Nothing modern does. Part of the rules. That’s why Leorio can’t drive the car through the gates. Any record I keep has to be entirely of my time.”

“And when was your time?” Gon asked.

Killua’s eyes skirted his once again. “A very long time ago.”

“Okay,” Gon said, bemused, and feeling again the brush of some dark thing that Killua was hiding. Frankly, he didn’t know if he could bear to hear it right now, and so he said, “But that kind of suggests more than one drawing, on more than one day.”

Killua inclined his head. “It does. I’ll sit for you every day…or none. It’s your choice.”

Further confused and uneasy, Gon said, “One thing at a time. Let’s see if you even like what I draw.”

Killua smiled at him. “Oh, I have no doubt I’ll like whatever you draw. My only request is that you be completely honest. Record exactly what you see. Don’t flatter or deceive me.”

For a moment the world swam, as Killua’s words overlapped with the words of the young man in the dream, and the voices of the roses Gon had touched there. Look, look, and see… Don’t trust too much to your eyes. They will deceive you in this place, where your heart never will.

“Gon? Are you all right?”

Gon looked up. Killua was looking at him in concern. “Sorry—yeah, I’m fine. I just…I’ve had weird dreams here, and you made me remember one. So…where do you want me to draw you?”

“Come this way.” He led Gon back toward the castle, and then onto a terrace to the left of the front
door. There, chairs were set out, along with a table holding a pitcher of lemonade and glasses, and an assortment of small sweets. “Are you thirsty?” Killua asked, popping a chocolate into his mouth and then offering the plate to Gon. He took one. It was, of course, delicious.

“Yes, actually,” Gon said, and so Killua filled a glass for him and another for himself. Gon sipped it, but Killua drained his own quickly, and then refilled it before sitting down in one of the chairs. The sun, now half way up the sky, fell directly on him, illuminating the intense blue of his eyes, throwing his pallor and the shadows in his hollow cheeks and under his eyes into relief. It also seemed to highlight the fine scribings of black fanning out on his neck and jawbone. They looked to Gon to have spread since the first time he had observed them, but it was hard to be certain.

Gon took another sip from his glass, and then set it back on the table. He considered the array of chairs set out on the terrace, but they all looked formal and rigid. In the end, he pushed a couple of them aside and sat down on the mossy paving stones, his back against a stone baluster. He pulled out the new sketchbook and an assortment of drawing supplies. There were pastels and colored pens among them, but if what Killua wanted was a record, Gon knew that he’d be the most accurate in black and white. So he selected several black pens of different thicknesses, and then he studied Killua.

The other young man sat perfectly still. His face was expressionless, although the eyes resting on Gon were intent, as if he were studying Gon as carefully as Gon was studying him. Gon began to draw, the first few strokes of the pen shaky and inaccurate, irritating him. He had never been afraid to draw anyone before, and he wondered what was different about Killua.

It was his eyes, he decided. It almost felt as if the other young man could see what he was drawing, and was appraising every line, though with the angle of the drawing pad, he couldn’t be. But eventually the process took over and Gon stopped thinking, just set down what he saw. Killua stopped being Killua; in a sense he stopped being human. He was a butterfly to capture under glass, quickly, before it flickered away again.

Gon found it difficult to come back to himself when he’d been deep in a drawing. When Killua began to cough, though, Gon surfaced, looking at him with dazed concern. At first it was just a few low rasps, but then they grew deeper, until he was half-choking with that hollow, wrenching sound Gon had heard on his first night in the castle. Gon shook off the last few cobwebs of the drawing trance, put his book and pen aside and quickly poured a glass of the now-warm lemonade.

He approached Killua with a wash of guilt. The other young man was doubled over, coughing into his sleeve. He hadn’t moved in all of the time Gon had been drawing, until now. How long had it been? An hour? No, two at least, judging by the angle of the sun. Too long to have sat like that in the full sunlight, dressed as he was.
“Killua?” Gon asked, laying a tentative hand on his shoulder.

Killua only shook his head, still coughing uncontrollably. Gon moved his hand to his cheek; it was burning hot.

“You’re too hot,” Gon said, trained by years of Komugi’s illnesses. “Drink something, and let’s get your coat off.”

Killua looked up at him in panic, clutching the neck of his jacket and shaking his head. He was clearly trying to steady his breathing, to master himself, but it seemed he couldn’t. Mika had stood up, and now she tried to push her head under her master’s arm, whining. But Killua pushed her away—not quite roughly, but almost. Mika looked on with troubled eyes, her tail drooping. Gon hovered by them without any idea of what to do.

“Should I call someone?” he asked. “One of the servants?”

But Kurapika was already hurrying across the terrace toward them. He wrapped leafy arms around Killua and said, “Come, Master—Gon is right, you must drink something.”

“Can’t,” Killua rasped out.

“You need to try. You know you do.”

Gon handed the glass to Kurapika, who coaxed Killua upright, still coughing, and held it to his lips. He took a tiny sip, and managed to swallow it, then took another. His coughing began to subside, his breathing to even out. But Gon stood transfixed, horrified, his gaze set on the trickle of blood that ran from the side of Killua’s mouth to meet the tips of the reaching black lines at his jaw. There was crimson, too, on the rim of the glass that Kurapika held.

Killua pressed his sleeve to the runnel of blood, erasing it, and then looked up at Gon. The turmoil of anger and fear and utter despair in his eyes was one of the most terrible things Gon had ever seen. “I’m sorry, Gon,” he said, barely above a whisper.

“For what?” Gon asked.
Killua only shut his eyes, and shook his head.

“Perhaps,” Kurapika ventured, “the Master ought to rest, now.”

Killua sighed in response, waving a gloved hand noncommittally.

“I’m sorry,” Gon said. “I should never have made you sit so long.”

At that, Killua shook his head and looked at Gon once more. The warring emotions in his eyes had settled into despair. “You, of all people, bear no blame for what you just saw.” He sighed. “Kurapika is right—I need to rest, now. But will you join me for dinner?”

“You’re sick! You should stay in bed, try to get better…” He trailed off as Killua laughed softly. Hopelessly.

“Believe me, Gon, whether I stay in bed or meet you for dinner won’t change this.” He touched the smear of blood on the glass that Kurapika had set down on a side table. “But if, after what you’ve seen, you’d rather not, I’ll understand.”


“I’ll meet you in the dining room at eight,” Killua said, “and I’ll try to answer your inevitable questions. Oh, and if it’s finished, bring the drawing.”

Gon nodded, and Killua stood up unsteadily, laying one hand on Mika’s back and the other on Kurapika’s arm. Kurapika opened a long, glass door behind the chair where Killua had sat, and the three of them disappeared inside.

Killua

When I sleep, I dream that I am in the rose garden with him. But it’s the old rose garden, the one we had before the curse, not the graveyard that has taken its place. He plucks blossoms, and it means
nothing; no one dies for it. No…no one dies for it, but it does not mean nothing. The roses are lavender, and he weaves them into a crown.

When it's finished, he looks up at me shyly, a crimson flush on his cheeks. “Do you know what they mean? Lavender roses?” he asks.

“Yes,” I tell him.

“And do you…?”

“Oh, yes!” I smile, and he smiles back, and places the crown on my head. His hands come to rest on my shoulders. I lean forward, press my lips to that smile. And if I live another thousand years, I will never taste anything sweeter than his mouth in that moment.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're wondering and can't be bothered with a google search, lavender roses signify enchantment and love at first sight. And yes, you can get them, but they're rare!
Chapter Summary

In which Gon and Killua have another heart-to-heart, which is exactly as tangly as you'd imagine when one of those hearts is snared in vines.

Chapter Notes

Just another thanks for all the love this fic is getting. Your kudos and comments make my day! <3

Gon managed to find his way back to his room with only a few wrong turns, and those were mostly because he was preoccupied, thinking about Killua. It was very clear now that he was suffering from some kind of illness, as Gon had initially suspected. But while there were many things that might make someone cough up blood—and every one that he could imagine frankly horrifying—he had never heard of any disease that would leave the kind of mark that was on Killua’s neck and jawline. So, although Gon was by no means an expert, he was forced to the same conclusion once again: whatever the other man was suffering from, it was caused by magic. Or, more specifically, the curse he had spoken of.

Gon opened his door and collapsed with a sigh in the comfortable chair in the sitting room. He saw that the breakfast table was covered with dishes, no doubt to make up for the lunch he had skipped while he was out with Killua, but he wasn’t hungry. Instead he looked down at the cover of the sketchbook and ran his hand over it, willing himself to open it. He hadn’t actually looked properly at the drawing he’d made, and now he was afraid to. Afraid of what it might show him; what he had been too blind, in his earlier anger and later concentration, to see.

The afternoon was breezy. Fractured shadows of the leaves and branches of the tree outside the window played over his hands and the tan leather of the book’s cover. Finally, drawing a deep breath, he opened it and looked down.

Killua looked back at him. Gon had captured his eyes well, he thought: too well. It seemed the other young man was actually staring up at him from the page, his gaze haunted, even frightened. The emotion was set off by the stark monochrome color scheme, the paleness of his hair and darkness of
his clothing. The splay of black lines at his jawline seemed to reach up toward those eyes, clawing for them.

Gods, Gon thought—what had Killua been thinking as he sat there and Gon drew, oblivious to him in those hours as anything other than an object to record? Was he afraid of what Gon was seeing? Or was he afraid of what he himself would see, when Gon had finished? Because something else had just occurred to Gon: other than the ones in his own rooms, he had never come across a mirror in this house. How long had it been since Killua had looked at his own face?

Sighing again, he put the book aside. He stood up, paced to the table and uncovered one of the dishes. It was an arrangement of cold meats and cheeses. He took a few pieces of each, and then stood by a window, looking out at the beautiful gardens and not seeing them as he nibbled on the food. If he was honest with himself, he was dreading that evening, but not because of a possible repeat of whatever attack Killua had suffered that afternoon. Rather, he was afraid that the other man might tell him that there was no cure for it.

Abruptly, he turned from the window and dumped the few bits of food he held back onto the plate, wondering why he felt so sick at that thought. Mere hours had passed since his truce with Killua—since he’d agreed to be his friend. How could the possibility that Killua was dying elicit such despair in him? He had no answer except for Killua’s eyes, rendered in his own hand, wide and intent and swarming with depths of pain Gon couldn’t begin to decipher, no matter how well he’d captured them.

*Stop it,* he told himself, shoving his hands through his rough hair. After all, until he knew something concrete about what was wrong with Killua, there wasn’t much point in worrying about it. So he returned to what was quickly becoming his favorite chair, shut the sketchbook, opened one of the textbooks, and made himself study.

Darkness had fallen by the time the knock sounded on his door. At some point, the lights in his room had come on, and the breeze from the gardens carried the heady scent of some night-blooming flower through the open windows. Gon had finished reviewing the Earth Science book and moved on to biology, which he’d studied briefly before he had to leave school. He found it a good deal more interesting than Earth Science, but he was still glad to put the textbook aside. He stood up stiffly, stretched, and then opened the door. Kurapika stood there, impeccable as always.

“It is nearly eight o’clock, Gon,” he said, bowing slightly.
“Thanks. I lost track of time,” Gon answered.

Kurapika nodded. “I was also uncertain as to whether you know the way to the dining room yet?”

Gon smiled. “Almost, I think. But I don’t really want to get lost, so thanks again. Just a minute.” He went back to the table beside his chair and picked up the sketchbook. There was a twist of trepidation in his stomach as he did so, which he tried to ignore. It only grew, however, as he followed Kurapika to the dining room. His throat tightened, too, as the butler opened the door, to show Killua seated at the place he had been the previous night, staring pensively into the flames of one of the clusters of candles.

As Gon entered, he looked up and his face brightened. There was more color in his cheeks than there had been earlier, and Gon relaxed a little. “You’re impressively punctual,” Killua said, his eyes sparkling with amusement. It was almost enough to mask the shadows that never quite left them.

“Only thanks to Kurapika,” Gon answered. “I lost track of time.”

“Drawing?” Killua asked.

“No,” Gon answered, moving to sit at the place that was set for him across from Killua. “Studying.”

Killua raised his eyebrows. “Of course. Senritsu did say that you’d expressed an interest in continuing your studies.”

Gon laughed, shaking his head, and set the sketchbook down against the leg of the table. “More like attempting to remember something about them.”

Killua lifted the wine decanter with a questioning look. This time Gon nodded, and Killua poured some into his glass. The candles turned the stream a rich garnet color, and the crimson trickle of blood on Killua’s white skin flashed in Gon’s memory. He picked up the glass quickly and sipped from it, hoping to hide whatever trace of that memory might be showing in his expression.

But if Killua had seen anything there he chose to ignore it, saying instead, “If you ever need help with any of it, just ask.”
Gon looked at him curiously. “I will. But you can’t be that much older than me. I mean, have you even been to university?”

Killua sipped from his own glass. “I’m eighteen,” he said, “like you, and no, I haven’t been to university. I’ve never even been to school. I was privately tutored. But my education was well-rounded, I think, and I’ve had a good deal of time to read on my own.”

These revelations raised a host of questions for Gon—so many that he didn’t know where to begin. He was also painfully aware of the looming topic Killua had not yet broached.

As if he’d read Gon’s thoughts, Killua sighed and said, “You’re waiting for me to explain what you saw this afternoon.”

“I…only if you want to?” Gon faltered.

“Whether I want to or not is neither here nor there. If you’re going to live here, then you need to know. But first, you must be hungry.”

Gon was, having skipped lunch. He nodded.

“Help yourself,” Killua said.

Gon smiled ruefully. “I never know where to begin with all of this.” He gestured to the long table covered in dishes.

“Has any of it yet not been to your liking?”

“Good point,” Gon said, and chose what looked like a large soup bowl at random. The steam that rose up from it curled him into another memory: a trip to the mainland when he was very small. Mito had taken him and Abe to a noodle shop and ordered a huge bowl of soup, which they had shared. The one in front of Gon now could have been an exact replica. Sighing, he dipped the ladle that lay beside it into the bowl and served some of the soup and noodles into the smaller bowl at his place.

Killua considered the array of dishes, and then served himself some of the soup as well. For a few
moments they ate in silence. Then Gon raised his eyes to find Killua’s resting on him. He set his chopsticks aside, and waited for whatever was coming next.

“May I see the drawing?” Killua asked.

Gon reached down and picked up the sketchbook, handed it to Killua. He opened it carefully—apprehensively?—and then studied the drawing for a long time, his expression unreadable. At last he put it aside, laying it, still open, on the empty end of the table between them.

“Are you happy with it?” he asked.

Gon thought for a long moment. Then he said, “As a record of what I saw, yes.”

Killua chuckled. “There’s a ‘but’ not too well hidden in there.”

Gon shook his head, smiled apologetically. “But, as portraits go, it’s hard to like it. You look completely miserable.” He considered his words, then frowned, looking up at Killua. “Were you miserable? I mean, before you started coughing. Were you in pain?”

“No more than usual,” Killua answered, which did little to soothe Gon’s fears.

“So, are you happy with it?”

Killua considered the picture again, sipping his wine. “You are an excellent draughtsman, and you did exactly what I asked. Insofar as I’m able to be happy with an image of myself, then yes, I’m happy with this one.”

Gon considered his next words carefully, not wanting to offend Killua (and the irony of this, given his attitude the last time they’d shared dinner, wasn’t lost on him.) “But you don’t like seeing yourself.”

Killua smiled his bitter half-smile. “Not particularly.”
Gon sighed. If Killua wasn’t going to be forthcoming, then he’d have to be blunt. There was simply too much that he needed to know. “Is it because of the scar?”

“Scar?” Killua asked, his eyes snapping up to Gon’s.

“What it is. This mark.” He touched Killua’s jaw in the drawing.

Killua’s expression shifted, but it was unreadable. “I suppose it is a scar, of sorts…” he said slowly. “And yes, it is difficult to look at. But not out of vanity; only because of what it stands for.”

“What does it stand for?” Gon persisted.

Killua touched the mark on his own face. “It’s a badge of my guilt.”

Gon huffed in exasperation. “Stop being cryptic!”

Killua gazed at Gon, blinking as if he were surfacing from water. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I am being cryptic. I keep forgetting that you don’t know what happened here. It’s a story I’ve never had to tell.”

“Then take your time.”

Killua gave an ironic laugh in response.

“What’s funny about that?” Gon demanded.

“Time is the point. The crux of the curse that all of this springs from. But let’s begin with what you saw this afternoon. I showed you that I’m as much a prisoner here as you and the others.” He took another sip of wine. “Obviously, I’m also ill.”

Gon nodded, sipping his own wine. But at Killua’s next words, he had to force himself to swallow it.
“And what I have…there’s no cure for it. There isn’t even a name for it, because it’s part and parcel of the curse that turned my people into plants and me…now you, too…into a captive in my own home.”

Killua lapsed into silence, and Gon thought for a moment before he said, “So it’s more magic. This…whatever it is you’ve got.”

“Yes.”

“And your cough…your voice…the scar…they’re symptoms?”

“Yes.”

“I…” Gon shook his head, turning his glass around in his fingers. “I don’t really know how to ask this. I mean, you said what you’ve got doesn’t have a name. But what exactly is it? Something to do with your lungs?”

Killua laughed again, until it turned into a sandpaper cough. Gon looked at him in alarm, but Killua held up a hand, and after a moment, he had it back under control. “It isn’t just my lungs, Gon. It’s…” He shook his head, sighed, and then picked up his gloved hands from where they rested on the table. He looked at them for a moment, and then, slowly, he tugged off one glove, then the other. He held his hands up in the flickering candlelight. They were beautiful hands, the kind that Gon would have loved to sketch: narrow, with long, tapered fingers. But their smooth white skin was covered in river-map lines, like the mark on Killua’s jaw. Completely covered, from wrist to fingertip, the lines thickening as they reached his sleeves, and the little bit of them that Gon could see on his wrists were different, the lines cut by jagged marks that looked like fangs, or claws, or—

“Thorns?” Gon said, before he could stop himself.

Killua smiled sadly, and laid his hands down on the blue-and-silver tablecloth. “Very astute, Gon.” “Killua—are they…?” His eyes flickered from Killua’s face to his hands to his tight black jacket.

Killua lifted his wine glass in one patterned hand and drank deeply. “Oh, yes,” he said grimly, when he lowered it. “They cover all of me except my face, and I suppose even that will be covered soon.” He seemed about to say something more, and then he stopped, looked up at Gon, then took up his gloves, clearly ready to replace them.
Surprising both of them, Gon reached across the table and laid one wide, brown hand over Killua’s fine, pale one. “Don’t,” he said. Then, realizing what he’d done, he snatched his hand back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…” He stopped, shook his head, trying to clear it of the cool, smooth feel of Killua’s skin. “I only meant, don’t cover them on my account.”

Killua was looking at him in wide-eyed astonishment. “It doesn’t disgust you?”

Gon felt a welling pity for the man across from him, but he meant it sincerely when he said, “No, it doesn’t. It’s…” He faltered on the words that wanted to come, but the tremulousness of Killua’s expression gave him courage. “It’s beautiful.”

For a moment, Killua seemed to have stopped breathing. Then he looked down again at his glass, clutching it in both hands as a petal-pink blush climbed his cheeks. “That isn’t something anyone’s ever called me. At least, not since…” He shook his head.

The twining lines were beautiful though, and Gon was about to argue the point when he had a sudden, clear memory of the discomfort of Bisky calling him “Bishie”; of the hot, prickly feeling of the cafe patrons’ eyes on him. If Killua didn’t want to be called beautiful, then there must be a reason for it, and it wasn’t right for him to press the point.

Gon drew a breath, let it out. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Killua asked, looking up again, his eyes curious.

“Well, you said it was a curse. Calling the marks beautiful was probably the wrong thing to say.” Before Killua could respond, he plunged on, “Who cursed you? And don’t say it doesn’t matter, because it does.”

Killua gave him an acrid smile. “My brother.”

Gon paused, making himself digest the words. “Your brother cursed you?” Killua nodded. “Why?”

Killua sighed. “I was the chosen heir, but he was older.”
“That’s not how it usually works, is it?”

“No. But it’s how it worked in our family. One son in every generation got the silver hair and blue eyes, and he was always the successor.” He shrugged. “My brother didn’t like that, though. And he didn’t like other things about me.”

“What things?” Gon asked, trying to catch his eyes.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Killua said, evading them, though his flush deepened. “The point is, his magic was strong. Stronger than any of the rest of ours. He tried to take the inheritance, and when I wouldn’t give it up?” Killua shrugged. “Everything you see now is a result of that. The servants. The rose bushes. The summer that never fades.”

“And you,” Gon said softly. “Whatever’s happening to you.”

Killua sighed again, passed a hand across his face. “You were right about the thorns, Gon. Our estate was once famous for our roses. Well, my brother planted one in me, and over the years it has grown. You saw me cough blood today: it’s because the thorns now encircle my lungs. They’ll wind around all my organs and squeeze them until they can’t function. They’ll stop my heart. And then, Gon, you’ll be free. It won’t be long, now.” Killua smiled at him—a horrible, heart-wrenching smile—and then calmly sipped his wine and resumed eating.

“No,” Gon heard himself say, as if from many miles away.

Killua lowered the spoon that was half-way to his lips. “No?”

“No. If it’s a curse, there’s a way to break it. That’s how it works.”

Killua smiled, a tiny spark of light in his eyes. “Is it, Gon? And how would you know that?”

“Because I’ve spent years reading fairy-tales to my sister,” Gon said, “and a curse always comes with a way to break it.”
Killua leaned his cheek on his hand, gazing at Gon across the table. The candlelight turned his fair skin to pale gold, his hair to silver. Even the lines on his hands, terrible as their meaning was, looked like artwork. *Gods,* Gon thought, *he is beautiful.* On the heels of the thought, he flushed hotly.

Killua watched him a moment longer, and then he said, “There is no way to break the curse that will ever be possible for me.”

“So you just let it kill you?” Gon demanded, wondering why his voice sounded so angry.

Killua’s brows drew together. “Isn’t that what you want? When I die, you’ll be free.”

“No!” Gon cried. “Yes, I want to go home. But not because you’ve choked to death on some curse! I meant it when I said that I wanted to be your friend, Killua, and that means that I don’t want you to die.”

Killua set down his glass and dropped his chin into both hands. His eyes were soft—more than soft. Full, and wet. “And yet, however you fight it, time won’t stop for me,” he said gently. “Illumi’s magic will run its course. But your kindness, Gon…” He trailed off, bent his head. Several long moments passed, and then he said, thickly, “It might be best if you left me, now. I’ll send food up to you if you’re still hungry.”

“But Killua—”

“Go, Gon,” the other young man said. His voice was mild, but there was steel in it, and Gon didn’t dare disobey. He picked up his sketchbook, and quietly left the room.
Gon sat up late that night reading one of the history texts Senritsu had pulled for him earlier that week and munching on bits and pieces from the tray that had arrived in his rooms not long after he did. He hadn’t asked for it, but Killua had been right: he was hungry, having eaten almost nothing since breakfast.

The book was a history of Padokea, and it seemed to have been written with the express purpose of boring its readers to death. Gon was about to put it aside in favor of a novel that was part of the set reading for his current year of school when he turned the page onto a new chapter, focusing on the history of the Dentora region. There was an illustration opposite the text, an engraving of a castle, and for a moment he stopped breathing. There was no doubt in his mind that it was the same castle in which he was currently imprisoned. The caption underneath the illustration read, “Zoldyck Family Seat, Mount Kukuroo, Dentoran Alps.” Dropping the bit of bread he had been eating, Gon scanned the chapter until he found the Zoldyck name, and then he began reading:

“The Zoldyck family were once the most powerful family in the Dentora region of Padokea. From their seat on Mount Kukuroo, a castle said to consist of over a hundred rooms, they dominated trade in the region for centuries, amassing vast fortunes and landholdings. Their downfall in the 18th century is thought to be a result of their unusual means of transferring the title. Rather than bequeathing control of the family home and fortune to the eldest son, or even the eldest child, the heir in each generation was the son who inherited the white-haired, blue-eyed coloring particular to certain members of the family.
“The last Lord Zoldyck, Silva, planned to bestow the estate on the third of his five sons, Killua, upon his eighteenth birthday. A lavish celebration was planned, and was attended by many members of the Padokean gentry. There, the historical record falls silent. None of the guests who attended the celebration ever returned, and attempts to reach the castle to enquire into their whereabouts all ended in failure. The estate and all of its inhabitants seemed to have fallen from the face of the earth.

“For a time, there were reported sightings of the eldest Zoldyck son, Illumi, but none were ever confirmed. And so, within a few generations, the once-powerful Zoldycks were largely forgotten, though their influence in shaping the region can hardly be discounted.”

Gon dropped the book on the floor, staring at the far wall without seeing it. Most of this was no more than Killua had already told him. However, what he hadn’t realized—and still couldn’t quite grasp—was just how long ago all of it had happened. Hundreds of years, if the book was accurate. Had Killua spent all of them alone, aside from his staff? How had he borne it?

Gon’s guilt at how he had initially snubbed Killua redoubled, along with the terrible pity he had felt when the other man had revealed the nature of his affliction. He had been so shocked when Gon hadn’t been disgusted by it, but Gon truly hadn’t been. He’d seen sailors on the docks, bodies covered in tattoos far more elaborate and garish than Killua’s twisting vines. But for Killua, it must have been torture to watch those marks creep slowly across his body over the long, long years since his brother cursed him.

His brother. Gon frowned, biting his lip. Logically, the man ought to be long dead. But if he had commanded the kind of magic that could imprison a household and change their forms and turn all of their party guests into rose bushes—because surely, that must be where they had all come from?—then he might well have the power to last through centuries, too. And if that was true, then perhaps he could be found, and made to free Killua.

Gon sighed, rubbing his eyes. There was no use speculating before he’d spoken to Killua about it, but that would have to wait until tomorrow. The long day had tired him, and so he went to his bedroom, shed his clothes and climbed under the covers.

但她不需要催促。他一看到那银发的男人—Killua，但不是Killua—他就跑了过去。另一个年轻人对他微笑着。现在他看到了Killua的脸，两者的相似和不同在梦中的版本要清楚得多。这个人的眼睛

Gon stood again in the garden of whispering roses. This time, they urged him, “Go, go, go to him!”

But he didn’t need urging. As soon as he saw the silver-haired man—Killua, but not Killua—he ran toward him. The other young man smiled brightly at him. Now that he had seen Killua’s face, both the resemblance and the difference to this dream version were much clearer. This man’s eyes
sparkled, his cheeks were fuller and tinged pink, there were no violet shadows under his eyes. There were also no marks on his skin, at least as far as Gon could see from his gloveless hands and the open collar of his tunic.

Before he quite realized what he was doing, Gon had caught Killua’s hands in his, examining them carefully, running his thumbs over the smooth white skin, unmarked by anything other than the blue webwork of veins beneath. He stopped when Killua laughed.

“You won’t find them, no matter how hard you look. Not here.”

Gon looked up at him and met his eyes. The young man’s lips quirked into a small smile. “But you are Killua?”

Dream-Killua sighed, his smile fading. “Yes, and no,” he said, and then disengaged one of Gon’s hands, though he kept hold of the other one, lacing their fingers together. “Walk with me?”

Silently, Gon nodded, and Killua led him deeper into the rose garden. A few long moments passed before he decided what he wanted to ask. “Are you him before he was cursed?”

Killua stopped walking and looked at Gon, his eyes enigmatic. “Again, yes, and no.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m what he might have been if he hadn’t been the heir.”

Gon chewed his lip for a moment, then asked, “So I’m not just making you up?”

Killua laughed. “No.”

“Is he dreaming this, too?”

Killua sighed. “No. He is no longer capable of seeing himself this way. Perhaps he never was.”
“Why not?”

Killua shook his head. “Killua was always in thrall to illusion. Now that is more true than ever.”

“How so?”

Killua smiled at him with gentle sadness, stroked his cheek with the cool backs of his fingers. Gon wanted to shut his eyes, lean into the touch and forget everything else, but he knew that what this dream-companion was telling him was important. He made himself listen.

Killua let his hand fall from Gon’s cheek. “I cannot tell you that. He has to realize it himself to have any hope of breaking the curse.”

“So he can break it?”

“Not alone.”

“Tell me how to help him!”

“You are already helping him.”

“But he’s so sick, and I don’t think it’s enough.”

“It can be.”

“I don’t understand!”

“Not yet,” Killua said with another gentle smile, “but you’re beginning to, and so is he. Just remember what I told you. Trust your heart. Everything here might conspire to deceive you, but your own heart will always speak the truth.”
And with that, he dropped Gon’s hand and lifted his own, laying them on either side of Gon’s face, and kissed him.
Gon started awake in the blue pre-dawn light. He sat up gasping, the sense of soft lips still lingering on his. *What was that?*

Well, alright, he knew what it had been, but it rattled him all the same. He had never kissed anybody—he had been too busy with work and family, too busy dodging people with dubious intentions to go looking for romantic entanglements. He had dreamed of kissing before (and more than kissing, if he was honest with himself) but the someone he kissed in those dreams was always just that: a vague impression, no one real, no face he could remember when he awakened.

This, though? This had been crisp and clear, colors brighter than a paintbox, and nothing he had ever experienced had been as thrilling as dream-Killua’s lips pressing against his. His heart was still pounding, and he was bereft to find that it hadn’t been real. He buried his head in his hands.

Trust your heart? He had to laugh. There was nothing trustworthy about his heart. The very idea that Killua could ever want to kiss him was absurd. Killua was cool and refined and beautiful. Killua was *Lord Zoldyck*, for the love of the gods, and Gon was little more than a gutter rat. And there was nothing at all to say that Killua even thought about men that way.

Gon flopped down, pulled the covers around him and tried to will himself back to sleep. But he couldn’t stop seeing the garden, the laughing, healthy Killua. He couldn’t rid himself of the feeling of their linked hands, Killua’s fingers on his cheek, the warm bliss of their lips meeting.

Finally he kicked the covers back off and reached for his shirt, padded into the sitting room. The fire was nothing but embers, so he turned on the lamp on the table by his favorite chair. He sat down, looked at the history book on the floor, and then at the stack of novels on the table. He picked up his sketchbook instead, opened the box of pastels he hadn’t yet tried, and selected a green one.

The garden grew under his fingers, blooming in soft, chalky colors. Killua followed them, the cornflower blue of his tunic vivid, his eyes wide and bright as the sky behind him, his lips petal-pink and slightly parted, as if he meant to call to somebody. *Wishful thinking*, Gon told himself ruefully, and then wondered what was wrong with him. He’d known Killua barely a week, they’d been friends barely a day, how could he be thinking anything wishful about him?

Staring down at his drawing of Killua, he heard the whispered response: *Trust your heart.*
He gazed at the picture a moment longer, and then shut the sketchbook.

When Canary brought his breakfast tray, there was a note balanced against the coffee pot. He tore the envelope open as the tree-woman smiled behind her hand, and devoured the note inside:

“Would you like to meet me after breakfast? I’ll be in the rose garden. —K”

Gon hurried through his breakfast and then pulled clothes from his overflowing dresser and put them on. He picked up his drawing supplies and then headed out the door, practically running through the corridors and down staircases until he reached the front door.

There, he checked his headlong rush. He stepped out into the summer morning and turned right at the bottom of the steps, toward the sea of roses. He could see Killua standing among them, not far from the place that his alter-ego had stood in the dream. But this Killua wore his habitual heavy black coat, and his stance was stooped; dejected?

Still, when he heard Gon approaching he turned and smiled at him. “Thank you for coming,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t I have come?” Gon asked.

“I wasn’t very courteous to you last night at dinner.”

Gon shrugged. “You were overwhelmed. I understand.”

Killua sighed. “I was, and that’s kind of you to say—but still, I ought to have treated you better, when you listened to my story without flinching. When you said that you weren’t disgusted by… this.” He raised his patterned hands—gloveless, Gon was happy to see.

“I didn’t just say it, Killua. I meant it.”
Killua gave him a dubious look. Then he said, “Ready to draw?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s go back to the terrace.”

“No,” Gon said, quietly resolute.

“No?” Killua asked, eyebrow raised.

“No. That’s too stiff and formal, and besides, it was too hot for you there. Let’s stay in the gardens. In the shade, if you want.”

Killua shook his head. “I don’t need shade this early in the day.”

“Still. I like it better here.”

“Okay. But there’s nowhere to sit, here. Come.”

He didn’t offer a hand, to Gon’s disappointment, but Gon followed him nevertheless, winding along paths through the flowers until they emerged into a clearing with a fountain in the middle. The centerpiece of the fountain was a carved marble pedestal with roses clambering over it. Marble benches surrounded the fountain, and Killua indicated to Gon to take one, then he sat down on the edge of the fountain.

Gon studied him, wondering how he could be so dismissive of his own beauty. Wondering if it was possible to make him see it. His eyes traveled up from the knee-high boots to the leather trousers to the tight, heavy brocade jacket buttoned to the neck. There he paused, thinking of the previous day, when he had tried to loosen that collar to help Killua breathe, and Killua had stopped him. He also thought of dream-Killua, his laced tunic casually open at the neck, showing collarbones like the wings of a bird on the brink of flight.

“What,” he asked slowly, “are you wearing under that jacket?”
Killua blushed pink, his eyes widening. “I—I—why?”

“Because I think you’d be more comfortable without it.”

“I’m fine.”

Gon sighed. “But I want to try something.”

Killua’s blush deepened. “Something that involves me taking off my clothes?”

Now it was Gon’s turn to blush. “Not all of them! Just your jacket…I mean, if you’ve got something on underneath.”

Killua continued to gaze at him for a moment, and then he dropped his eyes. The blush was gone, making his pale skin look whiter than ever. “Gon…I haven’t been entirely honest with you.”

Gon levelled a gaze at him, but Killua didn’t look up. “About what?” he asked.

“I…” Killua sighed, tipped his head to the sky and closed his eyes for a moment. Then, finally, he looked at Gon. “I’ve showed you a little bit of my skin, but not all of it.”

Gon smirked. “I’d say that’s probably normal for our level of friendship?”

Killua reddened again. “Oh, gods, no, I didn’t mean—!” He stopped, ran his hands through his hair, drew a breath and then said, “What I mean is, you’ve seen marks on my skin. But it isn’t just marks. It’s worse. Much worse, the closer you get to the site of the…infection.”

“Show me,” Gon said.

“I don’t think you’ll want to see it.”
“I do want to see it,” Gon countered. “I want to know who you are, and that’s part of it. Besides, I know now there’s more to your marks, and if you don’t show me what it is, I’ll come up with something much worse than reality.”

“Doubtful,” Killua muttered.

“Just show me, please?”

“Okay,” Killua sighed. He stood, and put a hand to the first button of his jacket, and then paused. Visibly bracing himself, he finally began to pull them open, revealing the singlet he wore beneath. It was black, but it glinted in the sun. A closer examination revealed that it was made of fine metal links, like chain mail, but far more delicate.

Killua paused again when the last button fell open. Gon, already transfixed by the sight of the fluid lines curving up Killua’s throat, swallowed hard and nodded. Killua drew another deep breath and then let the coat fall from his shoulders.

Gon stilled, only his eyes moving as they traveled from the tips of Killua fingers with their splays of fine lines, up to his hands where the marks thickened, then to his wrists where the images of thorns showed under his skin—the most Gon had yet seen of Killua’s unclothed body. Then, because he had asked for this, he forced back the tears stinging his eyes and aching his throat, and made himself look at the rest.

The first thing he took in was the beauty of Killua’s body. It was a dancer’s body. His shoulders weren’t as wide as Gon’s, but they were well-shaped and wiry with muscle. His chest and belly were slender but toned, his arms sinewy.

But those arms and shoulders were covered in thorns, pushing out of his skin like claws. Just as the vines grew thicker the closer they came to Killua’s heart, the thorns grew crueler, black and hooked as a raptor’s talons. This, of course, was why Killua thought he was hideous; and it was a terrible thing to see, to imagine feeling. But it wasn’t hideous, as far as Gon was concerned. It was who Killua was, as much as his white hair and his blue eyes and his strange, grating voice.

However, Killua didn’t see it that way, and apparently taking Gon’s prolonged silence for dismay, he said, “I knew this was a bad idea,” and bent to retrieve the jacket.
“No, don’t do that!” Gon cried, snapping out of his daze.

Killua looked at him questioningly. “But you’re clearly horrified.”

Gon frowned, irritated at being told continually what to think of Killua’s appearance. “Stop telling me what to think! You’re—”

“Monstrous,” Killua said, at the same moment Gon said, “Beautiful!”

Their gazes locked, wills clashing. And then Killua began to laugh, softly at first, but it took hold of him until he was laughing helplessly. Gon stared at him, wondering if he’d gone insane. Or if, maybe, he always had been.

But then Killua wiped his eyes, laughter quieting until he could say, “I’m sorry.”

“What was that about?”

Killua smiled, looking like he might topple again into hysterics. But he held his composure and said, “No one I used to know would ever have contradicted me. No one I know now would, either. But you do, and it’s just…” He tilted his head, studied Gon. “It’s refreshing,” he said at last.

Gon grinned. “So you agree with me?”

“That’s not at all what I said!”

“Hm, okay. Well then let me draw you the way I see you, and then you can tell me what you think.”

Killua nodded, and Gon took out his pens.
A very welcome addition - cazzarts drew two beautiful illustrations for the dream kiss for this year's Big Bang! I'm so honored that she chose my fic, and can't stop squeeing at the beautiful images! <3
Chapter Summary

Gon finally gets the whole story about the curse and its ramifications - well, mostly. And Killua sews up all of those loopholes you've probably been wondering about - well, mostly. After all, this show ain't over yet!

Chapter Notes

Yes, this chapter is angst central, but it's very much necessary, and I think the bonding that comes out of it makes up for it. If you're quick on the uptake, you'll probably have been wondering why Killua hasn't tried some rather obvious solutions to his problems. This is where you get the answers. H/C abounds - but it clears the way for the fluff (and smoochies!) that I promise are coming! Oh and if you see any wrong names in this, can you let me know? I proof-read but didn't get my betas to go over the revisions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a while Gon drew in silence, concentrating, but once he had Killua’s basic form and the fountain behind him set down, curiosity infiltrated his reverie.

Still looking intently at his drawing, Gon asked, “Do they hurt you? The thorns?”

“Not really,” Killua said. “It’s uncomfortable when they snag on things, the way it would be if you snagged a ragged fingernail. I can scratch myself with them. But aside from that, they’re part of me.” He paused, and then added, “They can hurt other people, though.”

Gon wanted to toss the sketchbook aside and question Killua face to face, but instinct told him that that would spook him like a wild animal. So, glancing up quickly to capture more of the image he was recording, he asked, “How do you know that?”

Killua was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “I suppose I don’t, for certain. But if I scratched you with my fingernails we can be pretty sure it would hurt, right? Same thing.”
“I guess,” was all that Gon said to that. There really wasn’t anything else to say to that, unless he intended to test the theory, and that, too, would no doubt result in Killua fleeing. Instead, he said, “I was reading a history of Padokea yesterday.”

“Ugh,” Killua replied, crumpling his face. “Why?”

“It’s part of the school curriculum I’m trying to make up.”

“Well, that’s a good reason, I suppose.”

“I mean, you’re right,” Gon continued. “It’s boring as all hell…mostly.” He glanced up at Killua, who was gazing at him unblinking. “But I found something interesting when they got to Dentora.”

Killua paused for a moment, but he didn’t move his eyes from Gon’s as he said, “Did you?”

Gon nodded, looked back down and began delicately shading Killua’s hair. “You know what I’m going to say, don’t you?”

Killua sighed. “More or less. You read about the mysterious disappearance of the mighty Zoldycks.” He practically spat the last two words.

“That’s your family, isn’t it? I mean, there was even a picture of this place.”

Killua raised his eyebrows at that. “Was there? Those are hard to find.”

“It was old. An engraving.”

“Yes. It would have to be.”

“Killua, have you really been here for three hundred years?”
Killua made a small, ambiguous noise. Then he said, his scratchy voice low, “More or less.”

Gon paused in his drawing to look up at his companion. Once again, Killua met his eyes unflinchingly, but they were dark and terribly sad. “You shouldn’t pity me. What happened here is my fault.”

Gon frowned. “You’ve said that before, and I don’t understand why. From everything you’ve told me, it was your brother’s fault.”

“He set the curse, but I provoked him.”

“How? By being born with the right coloring? I don’t see how that’s your fault, either.”

Killua dropped his eyes, running the fingers of one hand across the surface of the fountain’s water. “There were other things, too.”

“Like what?” Gon persisted, though it was clear that Killua didn’t want to talk about this.

“He just—he didn’t like me. And he didn’t think that I was fit to head the family. To be honest, I’m not certain that I was, either. But I also couldn’t let him take over. That would have been…” He stopped, appeared to consider his words, and then gave a hollow laugh.

“What?” Gon asked. “What were you going to say?”

Killua looked back up at him. “Disastrous,” Killua said. “But it ended in disaster anyway, so?” He shrugged. “Maybe I should have just let him take the inheritance.”

Gon looked at him for a moment longer, and then went back to his drawing. “You couldn’t have known what he’d do.”

“I ought to have guessed that he would never challenge the inheritance without the means to fight for it. And he was better practiced at magic than I was.”
Gon’s eyes shot back up at this. “You can use magic, too?”

“Could. Before the curse. But the curse took it away.”

Illumi took it away. Gon considered what he’d thought about the day before, reading about Illumi. He knew that Killua probably wouldn’t like the subject, but if it was something that Killua didn’t know, or hadn’t considered, wasn’t it his responsibility to say it?

Drawing a deep breath, he began, “That book…it also said that there were sightings of your brother, after what happened here.”

“Mm,” Killua answered, “so I’ve been told.”

“Do you think he could still be alive?”

Killua shrugged. “I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

“Have you ever looked for him?”

“Difficult when I can’t leave,” Killua said with a touch of ironic humor.

“Well, you have Leorio helping you. You must have had others in the past.”

“No,” Killua said, his tone abruptly chilly, “he’s the first person who ever wanted to help us, since the curse.”

“So why don’t you ask him to help now? Find out if Illumi is still alive?”

Killua’s mouth twisted in bitterness. “Why in the name of all the gods would I want to do that?”
Irritated, Gon cried, “Because if you could find him, maybe you could get him to reverse the curse!”

Killua shook his head. “Even if it were possible, he would never do it.”

“Why not? Haven’t you suffered long enough?”

“That isn’t how my brother thinks. But I don’t believe that the curse can be reversed, other than by the terms originally set out.”

Gon looked up, caught Killua’s eyes before they could flicker away. “Which, by the way, you still haven’t told me.”

Killua’s eyes dropped again to the water, but his faint flush wasn’t lost on Gon. “Because there’s no point.”

“Why not?” Gon asked, fighting to keep his voice neutral, not to think about dream-Killua’s lips on his. He finished drawing the twining marks and thorns on Killua’s left arm and started on the right. “Because you got me instead of Mito?”

“What do you mean by that?” Killua asked, clearly flustered.

Gon sighed in exasperation. “I’m not Lord of anything, Killua, but I’m not stupid!”

“What?” Killua blinked at Gon, eyes wide. “What does being Lord of anything have to do with—well, anything?”

“I left school too early,” Gon said drawing carefully, deliberately, so that his anger wouldn’t ruin the lines, “and I’m a penniless nobody from the worst part of a terrible city. But I’m not an idiot.”

Killua shook his head. “When did I call you an idiot?”

“You didn’t have to,” Gon said, and he knew that he sounded petulant, but he couldn’t help it. “You must think I’m an idiot if you think I could forget what Alluka told me about you wanting Mito to
fall in love with you.”

“Gon, you don’t understand.”

But all at once he did, with crushing clarity. “Is that it?” Gon asked, looking up again. “You need a woman to fall in love with you to break the curse?”

Killua let out a long breath. “It isn’t anything like that simple.”

“But it’s part of it, right?”

“Yes, it’s part of it,” Killua said, as if he were spelling out his own death sentence.

Gon bit his lip to keep it from turning outward in a pout he knew he was far too old for. He had no right to be hurt by the terms of Killua’s curse, or the fact that he had tried to break it the way he had. Any way he turned it, though, the fact remained that it did hurt to think of Killua in love with a woman. In love with anybody. He kept drawing, not trusting himself to speak.

“Gon,” Killua said, his voice imploring, “this is why I didn’t want to discuss it. There’s nothing that you can do about it, so you shouldn’t worry about it.”

At last Gon spoke, though he still couldn’t bring himself to look at his companion, his voice so low it was almost lost in the bright jangle of the fountain: “But if I don’t try to help you, then I’m letting you die.”

“Gon,” Killua said, “look at me.”

“I’ve been looking at you this whole time.”

“No. Look at me!”

Sighing, Gon laid his pen down and looked up. Killua’s eyes were waiting, deep as the sea, his expression soft. “The fact that you care whether I live or die—that you’re even willing to speak to
me after everything I’ve put you through—means more to me than you could possibly realize. But my life and death are not your responsibility.”

Gon worked his lip with his teeth, finally relinquishing it to say, “But they kind of are, aren’t they? Since I’ve wrecked it all for you.”

“How so?”

“Well, like I said, you’ve got me instead of a girl. I can’t help you, can I?” Too late, Gon heard the hope in his own voice, and blushed.

Hope crossed Killua’s face too: a sudden slant of light from a rent stormcloud. Just as quickly, defeat followed it. Both were equally inexplicable to Gon. “You being here doesn’t preclude someone else entering,” he said at last. “A woman entering.”

That stopped Gon short. “It doesn’t?”

Killua shook his head. “Why would it?”

“I don’t know. Mito said that the gate wouldn’t open for her at first.”

“Mmm. Some trick of Illumi’s. But if a person persists, it will open. Or, of course, I could open it myself. Illumi made this place hard to find—it’s invisible until you’re almost upon the gates—and he made the gate hard to open. But he set no limit on how many people could enter the castle grounds. Maybe he couldn’t. The only law that governs visitors is that if they harm one of the hybrids, they will be punished in kind.”

Gon was biting his lip again. After a moment he realized that Killua was watching him do it, apparently fascinated, and he stopped. He didn’t want to say what he said next, but he also knew that it would be terrible not to. “So why not have Leorio invite girls here?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual. “I’m sure one of them would like you, even if this place is kind of weird. Especially once she heard the whole story.”

“I’m covered in thorns, Gon,” Killua said grimly.
“You wouldn’t be if you got a girl to fall in love with you.”

Killua rolled his eyes. “So what—I have Leorio invite a slew of women here in the hopes that one will look past the mind-boggling insanity of my existence and fall in love with me?”

“One might,” Gon defended, though he almost choked on the words.

“But what if none did?”

“Then they’d leave again, and you’re no worse off than you already are—but at least you’d have tried.”

“Hmm. And you think Leorio would do that for me?”

Gon considered that. He barely knew the man, but in their little time together he had sensed a deep kindness beneath his gruff exterior. And then, of course, there was Kurapika. “He’d probably do it for you alone,” he answered at last. “But he’d definitely do it if it means freeing Kurapika. Because it does, right? Breaking the curse puts everything back to normal?”

“No doubt,” Killua said, but Gon knew that his mind wasn’t on that. After a moment he said, his expression strange, as if he were working hard to repress a number of strong, conflicting emotions. “But Kurapika and Leorio—you know about them?”

“Yes,” Gon said. “Alluka told me, but also, I saw them together. It was pretty obvious they have a thing for each other.”

Killua cocked his head. “And you don’t think that’s strange?”

“Well, I mean, a half-tree and a human? Sure, it might get tricky. Unless,” he added pointedly, “someone were to, you know, break the curse.”

Ignoring the jab, Killua said, “No, I meant, you don’t think it’s strange that they’re both men?”
Gon sighed, wanting to hit something hard. “What was this place, the County of Homophobia?”

Killua looked at him. “I—what? I don’t even know what that means.”

Gon shook his head. Of course he didn’t. They’d have called it something else in Killua’s day, probably something appalling—that was, if they talked about it at all. “Look, Killua,” he said, forcing himself to patience, “I don’t know what it was like here in your time, but these days plenty of men have boyfriends, or husbands. Women have girlfriends and wives. And some people are neither women or men, and they like whoever they like, or no one at all, or three of them like each other and live together…the point is, outside of this place, no one really cares who fucks who.”

Killua blushed furiously, and Gon couldn’t quite suppress a smile at having rattled his cool, elegant friend. But there was tentative hope in Killua’s voice when he asked, “Truly?” that wrenched Gon’s heart. “Your world doesn’t see it as unnatural?”

Gon shrugged. “Well, some people do of course. For any given thing, there’s always someone who doesn’t like it. But generally speaking? No. It’s old news.”

Killua was silent for a long time; Gon wished he knew what the other boy was thinking. At last, Killua said, “You asked if this was a place where people hated people like Kurapika and Leorio. At least, I think that’s what you were asking.”

“That’s what I was asking.”

“Well the answer is—I don’t know. Certainly my family would not have approved of them. But my family was unusual in more ways than one, and I almost never left this place, growing up. So my experience is probably not much of an indicator of the wider views of people of my time.” He ran a hand through his hair. A few gossamer strands came loose, drifted away on the breeze, making Gon’s throat and stomach clutch with worry.

“Anyway,” Killua said, and Gon dragged his eyes back to his face, “the point is, bringing in a slew of eligible women isn’t going to work.”

“But if you don’t even try—”

“Gon,” Killua said, finally with exasperation, “it wouldn’t work!”
“How can you know that?”

Killua’s face was fixed, waxy-white. “Please, can you just accept that I know?”

Gon capped his pen with a snap. “No. I can’t. I need a good reason if you want me to give up on this. On you.”

Killua’s look was pained. “Don’t ask me for that, Gon.”

“I’m asking, Killua,” Gon shot back. “And I’m not going to stop, and since you can’t get rid of me, you might as well tell me.”

Killua looked like a man on the way to the gallows, but he met Gon’s eye when he answered, “Very well, then. The first thing you need to know is that your aunt wasn’t the first to incur a blood debt in this place.”

“So other outsiders have come here?”

“Of course others have come here! It’s been over three hundred years!”

“And some of them picked roses, too?” Gon asked, his mind beginning to race forward even as he dragged on the reins, because he was fairly certain that it was racing toward a fatal precipice.

Killua laughed bitterly. “No, Gon. All of them picked roses. They did it as if they were compelled to, and I’m fairly certain that they were.”

“Compelled by Illumi.”

“By whatever magic he used to bind the curse—yes.”

“Why? Couldn’t he just have killed all of those people himself, if that’s what he wanted?”
“Probably,” Killua said. “But Illumi was never one to pass up an opportunity to cause me pain. When he cursed me, and I saw that it was affecting the party guests too, I swore to protect them, or avenge their deaths if I couldn’t. Then I passed out. When I woke up, I lay in a garden full of roses that had never been there before, and the Halflings were gathered around me. They explained to me what had happened. Except for the four of them, all of the party guests and servants who had not fled in time were turned to rose bushes. Rose bushes of enchanting, irresistible beauty. The type that beg you to pluck a bloom.” His expression now was murderous as well as sick. “Illumi had made them helpless, and their fate was my fault, and so I swore again to protect them, or avenge them if I could not.”

A chill was creeping up Gon’s spine, but he had insisted on hearing this; there was no retreating from it now. “Okay. So everyone who gets in here picks a rose. They owe you a blood debt. Then what happens to them?”

Killua gave him a long look, and then he asked, “Is the drawing finished?”

“No, but I’ve got everything I need to finish it later.”

“Oh, then come with me,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Killua led Gon out of the rose garden and into the meadow beyond, Mika following in a meandering path, nose to the ground as she wandered off after one scent or another. Rather than turn downhill toward the stream, Killua turned upward. They climbed until the grass and wildflowers gave way to a stand of rustling aspens, and Killua pushed inside it. Twenty yards in, the trees thinned again to reveal a small clearing.

A small clearing full of headstones.

Killua stopped at the edge of the trees, but Gon continued on, looking at each stone in turn. There were seventeen in all, some with single names carved into them, some with nothing. Their meaning was clear, but he still needed to hear Killua say it in order to believe it.

“These people all died here,” he said, looking back at Killua, who had his arms wrapped around a tree-trunk at the edge of the clearing, as if he needed it to remain standing.

“Yes.” His voice dissolved into the murmur of leaves, but he held Gon’s gaze.
“How?” Gon asked, slowly walking back toward Killua through the wildflower-spangled grass.

Killua shut his eyes, bowed his head. “You know the answer to that.”

“You killed them,” Gon said, his voice sounding strange to him, thick and faraway.

“That’s how a blood debt works, Gon.”

Gon stood very still, gazing at Killua. Killua was right: he had known as soon as Killua had told him the others had all picked roses. He knew that he ought to be horrified. He ought to run from this place and this person who had made it. But he didn’t, and after a time Killua opened his eyes and met Gon’s. Tears hovered in their corners.

“Say it, Gon.”

“Say what?”

“I’m a monster.”

“Don’t tell me what to say. Don’t tell me what to think.”

“How can you think anything else?”

He and Gon exchanged a pointed look, and then Gon answered, “Because you spared Mito.”

Killua choked out a laugh as if he were expelling something poisonous. “And do you think that I did that out of the goodness of my heart?”

Gon considered the question, and then he answered, “Yes.”
“You’re a fool, then,” Killua said, his voice like the crunch of broken glass. “I didn’t care about your aunt any more than I cared about any of them.” He swept a hand, indicating the headstones.

“I’d argue with that,” Gon said, “but not right now. Because that isn’t what I meant.”

That seemed to startle Killua enough that he asked, “Then what did you mean?”

“I mean that you did act out of the goodness of your heart, in the sense that you killed these people and saved my aunt in hopes of saving your own.”

“What?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean,” Gon said harshly. “You can’t imagine a world where two men can love each other openly, but you accept that it exists. And I can’t imagine a world where it was normal for debts to be paid in blood, but I know that it also existed once, and still exists for you. You acted by the laws and values of your time, and since that’s the only world you know, how can I condemn you for that?”

“But your aunt…”

“Yeah, I get that too,” Gon sighed. “You didn’t save her out of pity for her. I know that you wanted to kill her like you did the others. I also know that you realized she was probably your last chance, so you didn’t.”

Killua’s mouth hung open, stunned. Gon laughed mirthlessly.

“I did tell you that I’m not stupid, Killua. And actually, I’m pretty smart when it comes to figuring out people’s motivations. That’s what a life of the streets of a slum teaches you. I’ve seen those marks moving up your face. I’ve seen the Halflings’ leaves falling, and your own hair thinning. You don’t have much time left, and you needed a woman to love you. So you let Mito live.”

Killua winced. “Gon, I’m so sorry. You must hate me.”

“Why?” Gon asked. “You think I’d have preferred you to kill her? In a fucked-up way, she was
lucky. You, not so much, because you ended up with me. Sure, I wish none of this had happened. I wish those people under those stones hadn’t died, but it isn’t my place to judge you for it. I don’t know what I would have done in your shoes. Maybe something much worse.

“And there’s something else: you let her go. Mito. You let her come back and say good-bye to us. I don’t think that had anything to do with blood debts and honor. I think you listened to her story, and you felt for her, and you allowed her the one little kindness you could. So no, Killua. I don’t hate you.”

Abruptly, Killua burst into tears. He sank to his knees. Gon stared at him for a moment, bewildered, and then he went to him, knelt by him and took him into his arms. And just as Killua had done for him a few days ago—had it only been a few days?—he held him until he’d cried himself out.

When he’d calmed at last, Killua disengaged himself and sat back against the tree trunk. Gon moved to sit beside him. For a long time they sat in silence, watching the swaying grass and wildflowers, butterflies flitting among the timeworn stones.

“I guess you see now why I can’t bring anyone else here,” Killua said at last.

“Yes,” Gon said. And then, “I’m not going to give up, though. There has to be a way around this.”

“Gods, Gon,” Killua said softly. “I’m not quite sure what I did to deserve your friendship, but if you are my friend, please drop this. I’d like to spend what time I have left just being with you.”

Gon considered this, running his hand back and forth over the smooth leather of the sketchbook’s cover. It was a sweet request, and part of him wanted to accept it. To stop worrying and scheming, and pretend everything was alright until they couldn’t, anymore. But he knew what lay at the end of that path, and though he didn’t much want to examine the reasons, he couldn’t take it. So he opened the book to the picture he’d drawn the night before of the blooming garden and radiant Killua, and handed the book to him.

Killua’s eyes widened in shock. He studied the picture closely for a few moments, and then he looked up at Gon. “How did you know?” he asked.

“Know?”
“This is the garden as it was before the curse. And this is me, as I was then. That tunic was my favorite one. But how could you know all of that?”

“I dreamed it.”

“You dreamed it,” Killua repeated, dazed and for some reason, flushing. “Here?”

“Yes. I’ve dreamed of that garden and that version of you twice, now. The first time was my first night here. The second time was last night.”

Killua nodded, still clearly unsettled by this information. “And did you speak to me? Him?”

“Yes. And last night he told me that I could help you break the curse.”

Killua blinked at him. “Did he? He didn’t happen to tell you how?”

“No. But he said that we could do it together.”

Killua sighed. “A lovely dream.”

“Was it only a dream?”

“What else would it have been?”

Gon shrugged. “You said it yourself: how could I have dreamed those details, when there was no way for me to know them?”

“Maybe Alluka mentioned something to you.”

“No. Alluka is very careful in how she talks about you.”
“Well, she would be.” He smiled fondly.

“Killua—who was Alluka?”

He looked questioningly at Gon. “Was? She’s still here.”

“I know, but I mean, before the curse. Everyone else I’ve met had a job here before. They were adults when they were changed. But Alluka’s a little girl, so what’s she doing here?”

“I spent a long time wondering that,” Killua said after a moment, “after Illumi cursed us. Why he kept any of them semi-human, I mean. Why he didn’t leave me to drive myself insane, alone in the castle. I finally understood the first time I had to take payment for a broken rose.” He indicated the gravestones. “If I would kill for a person I had barely known, reduced though he or she might be to semi-sentience, what would I do for one who I had known and who still had a consciousness. Who still cared for me?

“There weren’t many people in my old life who I loved, Gon, but Illumi knew who they were and he changed them into Halflings. Canary was a childhood friend, although she was a few years older; my only one, really. Kurapika was too old to be a playmate, but he was always kind to me when my parents were cruel. The library was my refuge from the same, and the librarians helped such as they could. And Alluka was the only one of my siblings that I loved.”

Gon raised his eyebrows. “She’s your sister?”

Killua nodded.

“Did you have other family?”


“Are they rose bushes now?”
“No,” Killua answered.

“So…what happened to them?”

Killua sighed. “My father died trying to protect them from Illumi. From the curse.” He laughed sourly. “A pointless sacrifice. Illumi always intended to keep them alive—Mother and my brothers. He was mother’s favorite, and they looked up to him. He took them with him when he left this place.”

“But not Alluka? Why—because she was a girl?”

Bitterness crossed his face like a cloud-shadow over bright water. “Yes, because of that. And because she loved me. Because she’s the one of them who means the most to me.”

“Then why would he leave her with you?”

“Because as long as she lived, and I had a chance to save her—her, and the others who had been my friends—then Illumi knew that I would never end my own life. As such, I would live long enough to truly suffer.”

Gon was speechless at the cruelty of this; at the bleak matter-of-factness with which Killua spoke the words. “I’m so sorry, Killua,” he said at last, and laid a tentative hand on Killua’s shoulder. The thorns were hard, as real rose thorns would be, and Gon could tell that their points would be sharp, but the skin in between was warm and soft, and made him want to touch more of Killua. Made him want it, in fact, more than he’d ever wanted anything.

The other man looked at him in wide-eyed shock.

“I’m sorry!” Gon said quickly, snatching his hand away. He had only meant to comfort Killua, but he should never have touched him without invitation or consent; not when he knew what that felt like.

“No!” Killua said vehemently. “It’s alright. You just startled me. No one has touched me in so long…”
There was a terrible wistfulness to his voice that wrung Gon’s heart. After a moment, he replaced his hand and said, “This is okay?”

“It’s more than okay,” Killua said softly, and Gon let the weight of his hand settle there. He felt Killua exhale, his muscles slump, but he didn’t shrug Gon’s hand off. At last he said, “Don’t feel sorry for me, Gon. Especially when life hasn’t exactly been kind to you.”

“How do you know that?”

Killua shrugged. “Partly from what your aunt told me. Partly because…I don’t know. I can just feel it. See it in your eyes.”

“Great,” Gon said, “and here I thought I was tough and inscrutable.”

Killua laughed. “You are. But You also feel deeply, and that’s difficult to hide.”

Gon sighed.

“Tell me,” Killua said. “I want to hear all of it. All about your life.”

“I thought Mito told you about us already.”

“She told me what a woman in a desperate situation would tell the person who caused that situation. I want to hear your story.”

And so, haltingly at first, Gon told him. He recounted what little he remembered of their life of wealth, and how it had ended. He described the Belonso, his brief time at school, the odd jobs, and the slow torture of work in the café. He told him about his family. And he told him of the near restitution of their fortune, then the cruel way that Morow had tricked them out of it.

“You know the rest,” he concluded, and realized with surprise that at some point while he’d been speaking he had dropped his hand from Killua’s shoulder, and now they leaned against each other instead.
“Maybe,” Killua mused after a time, running his hand over the soft grass between them, “we were meant to know each other, if only for a little while.”

“Do you think so?” Gon asked, looking intently at him.

Killua nodded. “This way, I won’t spend the last of my time alone. And you—well, when you leave here, you’ll have enough money to do whatever you like. Take your family back to that island. Go to university. Anything.”

Gon blinked. “What?”

Killua’s eyes were clear and frank when he looked up. “When this curse consumes me, it will consume my people, too. There will be no one left with a claim on my estate—well, unless Illumi crawls out of some hole to try to take it, though after this much time, I don’t know why he would. It doesn’t matter. Leorio has been selling off valuables and banking the money for me for years now. He already knows that whatever is left goes to him—and now, also to you.”

Gon was speechless. A part of him wanted to weep with joy at the thought that he and his family would never have to worry about money again. But a bigger part of him wanted to weep for Killua, speaking so calmly about his own death.

“Killua,” he said at last, “that’s—”

“The least that you deserve,” Killua interrupted.

Gon clenched his fists in the grass. “And I’m grateful that you think so much of me. But I’m not letting you die.”

Killua laughed. “Stubborn!”

“You aren’t the first to say so.”
“Curses are stubborn, too, unfortunately.”

“I’m not giving up on this, Killua. I’m not giving up on you.”

“Well then, I wish you luck.” He closed the sketchbook, and handed it back to Gon.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr or twitter - same name! Oh, and I'm writing (and guest-writing) for two upcoming zines, check them out here:

https://hxhdowntimezine.tumblr.com/
https://milestonesxzine.tumblr.com/

Apps are closed for the first, but they open on the 15th for the second if any of you are killugon artists or writers! There are some great guests lined up!
Chapter Summary

In which Alluka and Kurapika whack Gon over the head with the obvious, and Gon takes a very Gon-like approach to "making Killua feel comfortable." They're getting there, albeit slowly!

Chapter Notes

The love this is getting is making me weepy! Thank you all! <3

14

It wasn’t long before Gon’s days took on a rhythm: meet Killua in the mornings, draw him while they talked, have lunch together. Alluka began to join them for lunch, chattering to them while they ate. She and Killua clearly loved each other deeply, and Gon found watching them both endearing and saddening, because they reminded him so much of himself and Komugi. He could relate to Killua’s fierce protectiveness of his little sister, but also the wordless despair in his eyes when he stroked her head and came away with a handful of leaves: a reminder that his affliction was not confined to his own body. Gon remembered how it felt to watch Komugi burning with fever and gasping for breath and be completely unable to help her.

After lunch Killua would go to rest, while Gon drew or read, studied or played with Alluka. When his bruises had faded, he allowed her to send Nanika to his family. Though she couldn’t carry physical messages, but he poured everything he wanted to say to them into her in images, hoping that they would trust her enough to accept them. She returned a day later replete with images from them in return, all of them overflowing with love.

He was relieved to see that his family were no longer living in the dingy flat in the Belsonso, but in a cottage by the shore with a small garden. All of them had lost the pinched look that came from never having quite enough to eat, and the bruised crescents of exhaustion were gone from beneath Mito’s eyes. Abe spent her time in a rocker on the porch or in a sunny whitewashed room, and a rosy-cheeked Komugi seemed to have made a friend: a stocky, solemn boy who played board games with her. She was inexplicably adept at them.

Gon’s eyes filled with tears when the images faded and Nanika slipped back into Alluka. He felt
Alluka’s fingers in his hair. “Has something bad happened to them?” she asked anxiously.

“No. Not at all. I owe your brother an awful lot.”

Alluka shook her head. “You don’t owe him anything. It makes him happy to help them. And you.”

Gon sighed. “I only wish I could help him back.”

“You do help him.”

“You all say that to me, but it sure doesn’t feel like it.”

“You help him by being his friend. He’s never had one before.”

Gon glanced up at her in surprise. They sat in the meadow beyond the rose garden, and the wind ruffling her leaves cast delicate shadows across her face. Her expression was faraway, slightly sad. “He must have had friends before the curse,” Gon said. “He said that Canary was a childhood friend.”

Alluka shook her head. “Not a real one. She couldn’t be, Mother and Father wouldn’t allow it. None of us had real friends.”

“Why not?” Gon asked.

“I don’t know; that was just the rule. No friends, only family.”

“That’s terrible!”

“Yes,” Alluka said, but there was no heat in her tone, only a very old acceptance.

Gon watched the wind play in the grass, and in Alluka’s leaves. After a time, he asked, “Do you
think that the curse can be broken?"

Alluka gave him a long, searching look. At last she said, “I hope so.”

“Do you think that if we found Illumi—”

“No,” she said firmly, once again reading his intentions before he could put words to them. “Illumi is not the answer.”

Gon sighed, but didn’t push the point.

* *

Every few days Leorio would arrive at the gate and Kurapika would meet him, handing over boxes of goods and then standing talking to him, sometimes for an hour or more. Gon watched them with a mixture of pity and interest, the oddness of their obvious attraction gradually fading with familiarity. *And why not?* he thought. Kurapika had a human consciousness, a human heart. Leorio was able to look past the enchantment and truly see him, love him for who he was. *Trust your heart...* dream-Killua whispered at the back of his mind.

Trusting his heart, however, was fraught with problems. Or really, with one overarching problem: the fact that that heart was drawn more and more to Killua with every day that passed. At first Gon told himself that it was only loneliness; that it was pity for Killua’s affliction. But even as he thought those things, he knew that they were false.

Yes, he was lonely, and yes, he felt terrible sadness for Killua’s situation, but that wasn’t what drove him to make Killua laugh. It wasn’t what made him put more and more detail into his daily drawings, or his throat tighten at the way the black marks slowly crept up Killua’s cheek. It wasn’t what made him pace away the last hour before dinner each evening, and it wasn’t what kept him up afterward, replaying their conversations and the subtle shifts of expression on Killua’s vivid face long into the night. And it certainly wasn’t what made him dream of the young man in the garden, whose kisses grew ever deeper and lingered longer, leaving him breathless and aching with desire when he awakened.

Gon didn’t know what to make of any of it. He had never felt this way about anyone before, and at first he told himself that this was what people meant by a crush; that is would pass soon enough. Rather than ease with time, though, the roil in his heart only grew. He wanted to put a name to it, but
the one that kept suggesting itself felt like a travesty given the terms of the curse.

He finally reached his breaking point a month or so into his stay at the castle, after a long, sleepless night. “How did you know you were in love with Leorio?” he blurted when Kurapika came to collect his breakfast tray, exhaustion and desperation obliterating his verbal filter.

Kurapika set the tray back down with a clatter and gazed at Gon in surprise before finally saying, “What makes you think that I am in love with Leorio?”

Gon let out an exasperated huff. “I’m not an idiot, Kurapika! I’ve seen you with him.”

Kurapika lifted an eyebrow. “Spying, Gon?”

“It’s kind of hard to miss you, given how my windows face.”

Kurapika turned to gaze out the window. After a few moments, he sighed, and said, “I didn’t know, for a long time. Or I didn’t let myself. But in the end, well, it became harder to deny it than to accept it.” He turned back to Gon, scrutinized him. “Why do you ask?”

“I…I just wondered,” Gon said, feeling the flush climb his neck to his cheeks.

“Of course,” Kurapika said mildly. There was a long silence, during which Gon couldn’t bring himself to look at Kurapika, and Kurapika kept his gaze fast on Gon. “If you feel it,” Kurapika said at last, his voice filling the silence as a soft wind fills a tree, “then don’t fight it.”

Too tired to prevaricate, Gon said, “But I’m not what he needs.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“He said that a woman had to fall in love with him. You know, to break the curse.”

“Did he,” Kurapika said, musing.
“Is that not right?” Gon asked, unable to keep the quaver of hope out of his voice.

Kurapika shook his head. “I truly don’t know. The only people who heard what Illumi said, besides Killua, are all dead, or as good as dead.”

Gon sighed, the hope curling away like a skein of smoke from a snuffed candle. “Well, Killua would know, wouldn’t he.”

Kurapika cocked his head. “Memory is subjective, Gon, and easily corrupted. Our senses can always deceive us, moreso when we are under strain.”

“So you think he could have heard wrong?”

“I think that anything is possible, and while love may be blind, the heart always sees clearly.”

_Those words again._ “Which is all great,” Gon said, “but it doesn’t matter how clear my heart is if it’s not what he needs.” He paused. “Or wants.”

“Mmm. Two very different matters.” Kurapika drummed his fingers on the breakfast tray. before Gon could think of a response to that, he continued, “What exactly did Killua tell you about the curse, aside from needing a woman to love him to break it?”

“That there was more to it, but it was complicated.”

Kurapika stopped tapping, and fixed his eyes on Gon. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, and keep in mind that I didn’t hear Illumi speak to Killua that night. But I think that you deserve to know that among the other conditions of breaking the curse was the imperative that the love cannot be one-sided.”

“What?” Gon asked.

Kurapika sighed, as close to exasperated as Gon had ever seen him. “I’m saying that it isn’t simply a
matter of someone falling in love with Killua! Killua needs to love that person back.”

“Um. Oh. Well that’s…” Gon stopped, shook his head. “Are you telling me that I don’t have a chance?”

“No! I’m telling you that you might very well be the only person who ever has or ever will!”

“So Killua likes guys?”

Kurapika shrugged. “I really couldn’t say. In all the time that I’ve known him, I’ve never seen evidence that Killua has been romantically inclined toward anybody at all.”

“Then why the hell do you think I have a chance?” Gon snapped.

“Because,” Kurapika said, struggling for patience, “when it comes to love, Killua is a wild card. He was sheltered growing up, he didn’t meet many new people, and those he did meet were carefully chosen. He also knew from the time he was a child that he was expected to marry a well-born woman, one of a handful also carefully chosen. Gon—Killua has had precious little sovereignty over his own life, and between his inheritance and the curse, none at all over his love life. I’m not sure that he’s ever really thought about what he wants.”

“I’m still not seeing much hope here, Kurapika.”

Kurapika threw up his hands. “Will you listen to me, Gon? What I’m telling you is that you are the one and only person Killua has ever chosen for himself! Whatever the nature of his feelings for you might be, he does have feelings for you, and so yes, you have a better chance of him falling in love with you than anybody ever has. Or will.”

Kurapika didn’t need to tell him what that grim coda meant. Gon chewed his lip, thinking. None of this gave him much hope that Killua would return his feelings, but then again, Kurapika hadn’t said that he wouldn’t. “So what do I do?” he asked at last

“What you’re already doing.”
“Wasting his time?”

Kurapika sighed. “You can’t think like that, Gon. Maybe the curse won’t be broken. Maybe it was never meant to be. Maybe a few months of you loving him is the only redemption that Killua will ever have, but maybe that is the only redemption he needs. Whatever the answer is, don’t waste the time you have second-guessing yourself—or him. And if you do love him, let him know that. He’s had little enough of it in his lifetime.”

“I don’t think he’d like it if I just said it.”

Kurapika laughed. “No, I imagine that is something you would have to work up to. But you can still show him.”

“How?”

“Make him comfortable, and trust your instincts.”

Gon nodded, a thought already taking hold of him. With a small smile, Kurapika withdrew.

* *

When Gon met Killua by the stream later that morning, he pulled a twilight-blue tank top and a pair of gray shorts out of his bag, and handed them to the other young man. Killua held them up, one piece of clothing in each hand, looking at them as he might have done if Gon had handed him a pair of flopping fish.

“What are these?” he asked.

“Clothes,” Gon answered.

“Well, obviously, but why are you giving them to me?”

“Because I want you to be comfortable, and your clothes don’t look comfortable.”
Killua looked down at his ubiquitous black chain-link singlet, heavy trousers and tall boots. “They are…necessary.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“I’ve seen the thorns, Killua,” Gon sighed. “Seeing a few more won’t hurt me.”

“It’s not about you seeing them,” Killua said. And then, with a quick glance up at Gon and a faint blush, “Well, mostly not. But either way, the thorns would ruin clothes like these.”

Gon shrugged. “I have drawers full of them, and I’m pretty sure they’ll stay full of them no matter how many you destroy. Besides, I’m tired of drawing you in black and white, and I hate that you look so stiff and uncomfortable. Please, just try them?”

Killua cast him a dubious look, but then he stood up and disappeared into the willow thicket, leaving Gon and Mika to wait. Mika inched into Gon’s lap until she was sprawled across it; Gon wrapped his arms around her. “Is this the right thing to do?” he asked the dog softly. She lapped his face with a warm, wet tongue, then turned as Killua emerged from the willows.

Gon watched him approach, mesmerized. The blue top made the color of his eyes all the richer, and the shorts showed off legs as gorgeously proportioned as the rest of him, twined though they might be with vines and thorns. He was barefoot, and his feet, long and delicate like his hands, only bore the barest of markings.

Killua stopped in front of Gon, blushing, holding his old clothes to his chest like a shield. Slowly, Gon shifted the dog off of his lap and stood up. He reached out, and after a moment Killua relinquished the black uniform to him. It was heavier even than it had looked. Gon tossed it aside in distaste.

“How does that feel?” he asked Killua, watching him carefully for signs of unease, but though Killua seemed slightly abashed, he didn’t seem distressed.
“Better,” Killua said after a moment. “How does it look?”

“Better,” Gon echoed, smiling at him. “So much better.”

Killua nodded. “Thank you.” He sat down, his toes curling into the soft grass.

“How long has it been?” Gon asked.

“It…hasn’t. I’ve never worn this little in front of other people. I should be mortified.”

“Are you?”

“Not really.”

Gon laughed, opening his sketchbook and pulling out the pastels. “Good! But actually, I meant, how long since you’ve felt grass under your bare feet?”

Killua was silent for many moments. “I don’t know,” he said, finally. “A very long time.”

“Well,” Gon said, selecting several shades of blue and beginning to draw, “you aren’t allowed to wear your other clothes anymore.”

Killua smiled. “I’m not?”

“No,” Gon said. “I won’t draw you if you do.”

“I’m going to ruin all of yours, then.”

“I get the feeling,” Gon said, “that replacing them won’t really be a problem.”
Killua sighed. “You have me there.”

“Good,” Gon nodded.

They sat for a time in companionable silence, until Killua asked, “Who taught you to draw?”

Gon’s hand paused on the page, and he met Killua’s eyes. “Nobody.”

“So you’re some kind of prodigy?”

“No,” Gon laughed. “I had to practice a lot before I got remotely decent at drawing.” He resumed setting down Killua’s figure, and then he said slowly, “But it was Mito’s idea.”

“Was it? Why?”

“It was hard for me when we moved to the city. I mean, of course it was hard for all of us, but for me—I was used to running around outside, doing whatever I wanted. My world had been mostly outdoors, it had been so big, and suddenly it was just a tiny flat and dirty streets. It drove me crazy, and I drove Mito crazy. She tried a lot of things to get me to calm down. I couldn’t concentrate on any of them, until she bought me a pad of paper and some crayons and told me to draw what I remembered about the island.

“I liked that. It wasn’t hard to focus on that. So then, whenever I felt like I would explode from missing it and being shut in, she would tell me to draw. It wasn’t perfect, but it helped a lot. Later on I found classes and things…well.” He carefully didn’t meet Killua’s eyes. “I mean, I couldn’t afford to go to them, but I’d find ones with windows, and pick up what I could.”

“I think you probably are a bit of a prodigy, then,” Killua said after ruminating on this. “Not many people get as good as you are, let alone when they’re self-taught.”

“I’m glad you think I’m good,” Gon said. “I don’t really know. I’ve never even been to a museum.”

“Really? There are no museums in Idrisi?”
“There are,” Gon said, not wanting to speak the words, knowing that Killua deserved the truth, “but not in the part of the city where I live. Ah…lived.”

Killua ruffled the grass with his toes. He didn’t seem to be able to get enough of the sensation of it. “Were you confined to your own section of the city?”

Gon chewed his lip, wondering how to explain without sounding sorry for himself. Without making Killua feel sorry for him. Somehow, that thought was unbearable. “I wasn’t confined, no,” he began. “I mean, there weren’t fences or anything like that. But still, people there stick to their own place. The museums were in places where someone like me never went.”

“It seems that an artist is exactly the type of person who should go to a museum.”

Gon shook his head. “That isn’t how it works. The money for museums comes from rich people, and so the museums are near where they live. And I was poor.”

“How would anyone know that?”

Gon felt his face heating. Even here, so far away from that life, the shame of his past poverty burned. “I don’t know. Lots of things. My clothes. The way I talked. Besides, I never had extra money for the admission ticket even if I had tried to go.”

After a time, Killua said, “I’ve never been to a museum either.”

Gon had to laugh. “Then how do you know my drawings are any good?”

“I didn’t say that I’ve never seen any art.”

Gon raised his eyebrows. “So where did you see it?”

“Here,” Killua answered. “The Zoldycks always collected art. We have a gallery.”
“Of course you do,” Gon said, rolling his eyes. “And it’s full of priceless paintings.”

“Quite likely.”

“How come you never told me about it before?”

“I didn’t think of it. I…don’t like to think of it.”

“Why not?”

“When we’re done here, I’ll show you.”

Gon nodded, and they lapsed again into easy silence.

Killua

There is something so intimate about watching him study the pieces in the gallery that it almost seems a violation to do so. It’s similar to the way he looks when he draws: so completely in his own world, all of his defenses down. His eyes are intent, but soft; his lips parted slightly, as if he is trying to taste the shapes and the colors as he leans close to the canvases. His bottom lip is red and a little swollen from his habit of worrying it with his teeth.

I can’t look at it without thinking of taking it gently between my own. My mind tells me that this should mortify me, but my heart…well, hearts don’t lie.

And so, shamelessly, I wonder whether his lips would taste as sweet as the crushed berries whose color they borrow. I know that he has caught me looking before, and I’m half-certain that he knows why. Does it embarrass him to know that I think of him this way? Does he pity me this pathetic, unrequited love? I shouldn’t look at him like I do. I shouldn’t think of him like I do. But for now, while he’s paying no attention to me, I do both to my heart’s content.

(If only my heart were content with that.)
The first time around the long room, he studies the pictures silently. The second, he asks me to tell him about them. For many of them I have no story: if anyone ever did, they were lost with my family. For others, I wish I didn’t: the portraits, so stiff and formal. But I name them all for him. My father in his brazen, blue-and-silver glory. My mother with her black eyes full of shuttered secrets. My siblings, all with Mother’s black hair and eyes and haughty expression; all except for blue-eyed Alluka. And somehow, he knows, reaching out with a tentative finger that hovers just above her shy painted smile.

“This is Alluka, right?” he says.

“How did you know?” I ask, although really, I don’t have to ask. He knows because that is who he is. Because he sees beneath the surface, those bright bronze eyes cutting straight through the smoke and mirrors. And gods, I didn’t think I had any further to fall, but I learn in that moment that I was wrong.

“Her smile,” he says fondly, and my heart contracts, and it has nothing to do with the murderous stems encasing it. “Only, why is she dressed like a boy?”

Why indeed? Do people like Alluka exist in his world? I think that it might kill me if he shows disgust at the answer, but this is something about which I will not lie or pretend—to him or to anyone. One more reason why Illumi believed me a degenerate.

“When she was born, that’s what she seemed to be,” I tell him. “And so they dressed her as a boy, treated her as one. Once she was old enough to put words to her feelings, though, she made it clear that she was a girl. But my parents and my brothers wouldn’t accept it.”

I watch carefully for his reaction, and it isn’t disgust. He’s furious, biting hard on his lip, glaring at the portrait as if his anger alone could reduce it to ash. At last he turns to me, his eyes fierce, fiery. “But you did,” he says, and his voice wavers around the words like the leaf-shadows on the floor around us.

“Of course I did. Who would know better than she does who she is?”

“I’m glad she had you,” he says simply, and I know then that we are all doomed, because even if I had countless centuries still to live, I know that I would never love anyone the way that I love him.
Chapter Summary

I could try to be creative and eloquent but basically it comes down to this: Gon and Killua are loopy for each other, and even Nanika is getting fed up with their inability to JUST ADMIT IT! But it’s a killugon slow burn. You know how it goes.

Chapter Notes

I promise - *promise* - the smoochies are imminent!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every day Gon brought Killua new clothes, partly because Killua had been right, and they seldom survived the thorns for longer than a day; partly because it made him unaccountably happy to test the play of different colors against his friend’s pale coloring. Just as Killua had abandoned his dark prison of a uniform, Gon had abandoned the clinical black-and-white palette of his early portraits. Now he drew him in full color, and he loved the way that his choices always surprised Killua.

“I’m wearing a red shirt,” Killua said when Gon handed him the sketchbook after one session was complete.

“I’d say crimson, but close enough.”

“But you drew it more purple. Everything has purple in it, even my hair!”

“Right. Because your hair does have purple in it.”

Killua pulled a strand of it in front of his eyes. “It’s white, Gon. Just white.”
“Nothing is ever just one color,” Gon answered. “And besides, white is all the colors together.”

Killua laughed. “What?”

“I don’t know. It’s something the teacher said in one of those classes, I didn’t hear the whole explanation. Anyway, all of you feels purple today, hair included.”

Killua gave him a skeptical look, but Gon had no better words to explain it. His words were written already, in the brush strokes of the watercolors he’d chosen for today’s picture. The pale blue-violet of snow shadows in the waves of Killua’s hair; the twilight shadings of the dips in his muscles; the heliotrope twinings of his vines. Those were his words.

“You can feel colors?”

Before Gon could answer the question, however, an aspen leaf fluttered down onto the paper. It wasn’t green, but golden. Silence strung out between the two young men, cold and leaden, as they stared at it. At last their eyes met, and then they looked up into the tree beneath which they sat. There weren’t many yellow leaves, but there were enough to notice, now that they knew to look for them. The surrounding trees, upon inspection, showed the same.

“Is this normal?” Gon asked, hoping for reassurance, knowing he wouldn’t find it.

“No,” Killua said, all of the laughter bled from his tone. “The leaves haven’t changed since the day of the curse.”

“What does that mean?” Gon asked softly.

Killua sighed, flicking the leaf away. “It means that time is running out.”

Killua pleaded exhaustion not long after that and disappeared with Mika into the house. Gon knew that tiredness wasn’t why he left; he hadn’t coughed once that morning. He wanted to stop Killua, to make him stay or at least bring Gon with him to wherever it was he was running to. Gon didn’t like
to think of him brooding alone, blaming himself for what wasn’t and had never been his fault.

He also knew better than to chase him. Killua had shaken him off with an abruptness that bordered on anger the first couple of times a coughing fit had made him cut a drawing session short, and Gon had tried to stay with him. Gon had wondered at first if there was more that Killua was hiding from him than the thorns. As he got to know him though, he realized that this was simply Killua trying to maintain a little bit of dignity, a little bit of control over the rampantly monstrous thing consuming him.

Gon sighed and packed up his supplies. He was dumping out the jug of dingy painting water when he heard movement behind him, and turned to see Alluka and Nanika approaching. Alluka’s leafy hair floated behind her, and though it was beautiful, the darts of yellow spiralling loose brought the earlier panic of the golden aspen leaf crashing back down around Gon. Don’t let them see you rattled! he admonished himself, and forced a smile as they approached.

But Alluka was far too wise for that. “What happened?” she demanded when she reached him. Nanika drifted in the wind, nearly transparent in the bright sunlight, except for her black eyes, as demanding as Alluka’s words.

“What happened when?”

“Just now, when you and Brother were together. He stomped into the house and he wouldn’t talk to anyone. Not even me.”

Gon sighed, and indicated to Alluka to sit. They were at the edge of the woods where the grass was thin, and when Alluka sat, she stretched her root-like toes and buried them in the earth with a sigh. Gon had seen her do it before, but it never ceased to fascinate him.

“Stop staring at my feet,” Alluka snapped, “and tell me what happened!”

“You know what he gets like,” Gon said as Nanika drifted into the branches above, weaving among them, catlike.

“Yes,” she said, “but he’s not like that when he’s with you, and he doesn’t leave you this early unless he’s coughing, and he wasn’t coughing.”
“Something else upset him.”

“Did you have a fight?”

“No.”

“Did he not like your drawing?”

Gon laughed. “He thought it was strange, but he always thinks that these days.”

“So? What was it?”

“I’m not trying to keep things from you, Alluka, but I’m not really sure it’s for me to tell.”

“Well he won’t tell me.”

Gon could see how hurt she was by this; he didn’t blame her. He’d felt Killua’s dismissal, and it was as sharp and bitter as a midwinter wind. “Give him time.”

“We don’t have time!” she said, her voice uncharacteristically petulant. That and the resonance with Killua’s earlier words broke Gon’s wavering resolve.

“That’s why he’s upset,” he said. “He always gets upset when something reminds him of time running out, and something did.”

Gon was still trying to formulate the right words to tell her when Alluka let out a sigh that fluttered the hair that had fallen forward as she bowed her head. “He saw the leaves.”

Gon studied her for a moment, and then he laughed sadly. “You don’t miss anything, do you?”

Alluka shrugged. “I might not have noticed, but Nanika knew right away.”
“Of course—she’s a tree spirit. How long ago did it start?”

“A little before you came here.”

Gon frowned. “You’ve kept it a secret that long?”

“Not just me. All of us felt it after a while. Around the time our own leaves started to come off.”

“But you didn’t tell your brother.”

“I would not have helped anything. And he was going to realize sometime.”

“Well, now he has, and he blames himself.”

“Yes,” Alluka said sadly.

“What can I do to help him? And don’t tell me I’m already helping, because everybody says that, and obviously it’s not enough.”

Alluka was studying him, and he wasn’t certain whether it was only the paintings of her that he had seen, or if her knothole eyes really did bear a faint shimmer of blue. Either way, they were wiser than a child’s should be; wise as Komugi’s.

“Maybe,” she said musingly, her gaze faraway, as Killua’s often was, “you both need help.”

“What does that mean?” Gon asked dubiously.

“Nothing,” Alluka said, snapping back to the present, her tone abruptly brightening.
“Alluka, I think you’re scheming.”

She smiled at him, and he could almost see the keen-eyed child from the gallery, spirit unbroken despite her hateful family. “Nanika wants to play tag,” she said, dodging the not-quite-question as she stood up and Nanika shook herself free of the tree branches. “Play with us?”

“Okay,” Gon sighed. “But I’ll be watching you!”

* 

He didn’t watch carefully enough. He was too busy watching Killua who, though he skipped dinner that night with a transparent excuse of illness, was waiting for him in the garden the next morning. Killua didn’t mention the turning leaves as he talked and laughed and pretended to be fine, but their shadows were there in his eyes, and Gon, true to his initial promise to record what he saw, didn’t leave them out of that morning’s portrait. He drew it in smudgy charcoal, Killua’s eyes close to black. It hurt to know that he’d have to show it to his friend. It hurt more to watch Killua’s smile fade when he did.

“You draw what I’m thinking,” Killua said.

“I can’t not,” Gon answered apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It would be dishonest of you to try not to.”

“Well, you asked me to be honest.”

“I did,” Killua said slowly, “but that isn’t what I’m talking about. You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t honest.”

And here I am, not telling you the most important thing of all. Gon sighed. “Are you sure you want to keep doing this?”

“The drawings?”
“Yeah. I mean, I know you wanted a record but…well you don’t really need it, do you? Especially if it makes you unhappy.”

There was a long silence. Then Killua asked softly, “What else would we do?”

Gon gave him a long look, but Killua wouldn’t meet his eyes. He knew what he wanted to ask, but not whether it would be too much; and so he jumped when Killua said, “Ask.”

“Ask?”

“You want to ask me something.”

“How do you know that?”

“You look at me a certain way when you’re trying to decide whether or not to say something.”

“But you aren’t even looking at me! How do you know how I’m looking at you?”

“I don’t know. I just feel it. Like you feel colors.” Before Gon could think too hard about that, Killua said, “Please, just say it?”

“Okay. I was just wondering…have you only been having me draw you because you thought I wouldn’t want to spend time with you otherwise?”

Killua flushed, but he finally met Gon’s eyes. “Well—would you?”

“Of course I would!”

“I guess you don’t really have much choice.”
“Killua. I like being with you.”

Killua flushed more deeply still. “Very well.”

Gon had to laugh. “‘Very well’? Is that how much fun I am?”

Killua tossed a pebble from the path behind him at Gon. “You know that that isn’t what I meant!”

“Okay. So what do you want to do?”

“Actually? I have no idea.” Killua grinned at him shyly.

What do you do when you aren’t with me? “What did you used to do before I started drawing you?”

“Read. A lot.”

“Do you like to do that?”

“Yes. But it isn’t really an activity for two.”

“It is if you read to me.”

Killua blinked, and Gon tried not to stare at the way his dark eyelashes brushed his pale cheeks. “You…want me to read to you?”

“Yes. I want you to read me your favorite book.” Seeing Killua’s apprehensive look, he amended, “I mean, unless it will hurt your throat.”

“That’s not the problem.”
“Then what is the problem?”

“What if you hate it?”

“I won’t.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it’s your favorite book.”

Killua rolled his eyes, but he laughed. “Very—ah, alright. Wait, where are you going?” he asked as Gon began to stand.

“The library. I mean, I thought—” Gon stopped short. Killua was holding a leather-bound volume in his hands. “How did you…?”

“The same way your drawers are always filled with clothes, and the tables with food, and everything else.”

“Okay.” Gon stared for a moment longer, and then sat back down. “What is the book?”

“It’s a collection of poems from all over the known world.”

“I don’t really know much about poetry,” Gon said. “I probably won’t get it.”

“You don’t have to know anything about poetry to get it,” Killua said, flipping through the book. “Liking it, of course, is a whole different story.”

“I’ll like it as long as it isn’t about falling leaves,” Gon muttered.

Killua gave him a sharp, appraising look. Then, with a small smile, he flipped to a page he had
obviously learned by heart. He splayed his hand across the book and began to read in a soft, scratchy voice:

“Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.” *

Gon let the words roll and tumble through his head in the silence that followed. “Read it again,” he said at last. Killua obliged, and when he had finished, Gon said, “You cheated.”

One side of Killua’s lips quirked up. “Not one leaf falls in that poem.”

“It does. The author just doesn’t say it.”

Killua’s smile blossomed. “I told you you would get it.”

“Don’t try to change the subject!”

“Okay. Tell me why you say that, then.”

“Because it’s about a tree going from spring to fall. The last line tells you what’s going to happen next. Well, it doesn’t, but you still know. There’s probably a word for it…”

“Inference.”

“Whatever. It’s all about dying trees, so you cheated.”

“Yes, I guess I did.” Killua flipped a few pages. “How about this, then?
“The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

“Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

“Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.” *

Gon flopped onto his back, ruminating, and then said, “Better. But still kind of cheating.”

“It’s about spring!”

“No, it’s about cycles. Cycles that end with death.”

“All cycles end with death.”

“Killua!” Gon growled.

“I told you you wouldn’t like my book.”

“There have to be poems in there that aren’t about death. Or leaves.”
“There are.”

“You don’t like them?”

“Once I did. Now, most of them remind me of what I can’t have.”

Gon considered this. “What do you want, Killua?”

“You already know that.”

“Yeah, you want to break the curse,” Gon said, flipping over onto his stomach, resting his chin on his stacked fists so that he could look at his friend. “But what about after that?”

“I—I don’t really think about it. The first part is hard enough.”

“Okay then. What did you want before the curse happened?”

“I wasn’t allowed to want anything,” Killua said, his voice very low. “Not since my hair grew in silver.”

“But you didn’t want to be Lord Zoldyck.”

“No.”

“So you must have thought of other things?”

Killua shrugged. “Sometimes. But it was hard even to imagine anything else. I only left the castle a few times as a child, and then it was to go places that were more or less the same as this.”
“So if the curse lifted right now, what would you do?”

“Run,” Killua answered grimly.

“Fair enough. But where to?”

“Anywhere. No—everywhere. I’d go and see the world.”

“I’d like to see the world someday,” Gon mused.

“Well, soon enough you’ll be able to.”

Gon sighed. “Killua?”

“Yes?”

“I’m making a rule.”

Killua quirked an eyebrow. “Are you, now?”

“You can’t talk about dying anymore. At least not to me.”

“Why not? It’s the reality.”

“No. It’s a possibility, same as it’s a possibility for anyone. Right now you’re alive. So be alive!”

Killua opened his mouth, apparently ready to argue, and then he shut it again. “Alright.” His look was searching, as if, having agreed to be alive, he found he had no idea how to do so. “Um…so…do you still want me to read to you?”
“No. I want to borrow that book, and next time, I’ll read to you.” Half-smiling, Killua handed the book to Gon, who put it in his messenger bag. “What now?”

“Well?” Killua said, glancing down at Gon’s sketchbook. “I’ve always wanted to learn to draw. Do you think that’s possible?”

Gon grinned. “Only one way to find out!”

Chapter End Notes

* The first poem that Killua reads to Gon is by Robert Frost and has no title (other than the first line.) The second one is "The Trees" by Philip Larkin.
Chapter Summary

In which we find out what Alluka has been up to, and that slow burn finally pays off. Sort of. Plus my one nod to Disney, because who can resist that ballrooms scene, or that yellow dress? (Hint: not Killua!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They spent the rest of the morning together, Gon showing Killua the rudiments of drawing. It didn’t surprise him to find that Killua had a knack for it. When the sun was high and hot, they retreated to the shade of the willow trees by the stream-fed pool, where someone had left a picnic lunch. They ate their fill (which didn’t even amount to half of the basket,) and then lay on the mossy bank with their feet in the cool water as Mika rested her head in Killua’s lap, panting. Gon told stories of life in the Belsonso to a rapt Killua, until he saw Killua’s eyes growing heavy in the long afternoon light.

“Come on,” he said, standing up and holding out a hand to the other young man. Killua stared at it for a moment in surprise, and then he grasped it, and Gon helped him up. They stood like that for a moment, eyes and hands locked, until Killua flushed and slipped his hand free and looked away. Then Gon picked up the picnic basket and his messenger bag, and they made their way back to the castle.

Halfway there, Killua began to cough. Gon put the picnic blanket over his shoulders and then pulled Killua’s arm across it. Though he stiffened for a moment, Killua didn’t pull away. Likewise, he seemed reluctant to leave Gon when they reached the castle, but the coughing had deepened to that terrible, tearing choke, and in the end he allowed Kurapika to guide him toward the stairs, Mika following at their heels.

Gon watched until they were gone, and then he made his way to his own room, trying not to see the trail of blood-droplets on the steps. He dumped his bag in the sitting room, dejected and feeling Killua’s absence like a hole punched out of his heart. Though the clock told him it was after three, the hours until dinner seemed to stretch out toward a limitless horizon. He didn’t want to draw and he didn’t want to study. He didn’t particularly want any company. In the end, he took the book of poetry from his bag and made his way to the bedroom, hoping that he could lull himself into a nap.
As he entered the room, though, he stopped short. There was a pile of shimmering fabric folded neatly on his bed, with an envelope resting on top of it. It wasn’t the cream-and-silver stationery that Killua used, but one of equal quality in pale pink. His name was written across the front in a child’s hand, and there was a gold wax seal on the flap with a moon pressed into it. The moon was two-faced, half smiling and half frowning. Gon broke the seal, and pulled out a matching, pink, gold-edged card, covered in the same handwriting.

“You are cordially invited to dinner followed by dancing in the ballroom this evening, 8:00. Formal attire required. (Don’t worry, everything you need is in that pile.) RSVP Alluka, as soon as you read this.”

Gon had to laugh, although he was slightly apprehensive in regard to what Alluka might be planning, and whether Killua would be up to it. He put the card down and picked up the pieces of clothing: a tunic that looked like it belonged to Killua’s time, made of heavy yellow silk with a delicate brocade leaf pattern and sunflowers embroidered on the hems; leggings of fine, buttery, cream-colored suede, edged in gold; soft gold shoes to match. He chewed a fingernail for a moment, and then he shrugged to himself. He’d known that Alluka was up to something, and all of this seemed relatively harmless. He picked up the bell on his bedside table and rang it.

Barely thirty seconds passed before a scrabbling knock sounded on his door. “Come in,” he said, and Alluka burst through, Canary at her heels.

“I understand that you need an RSVP?” he said to Alluka, who was visibly trembling with excitement.

“Please, feel no obligation,” Canary said, before Alluka could get a word in.

“I don’t. But I do have a question for Alluka.” Clutching her hands together, she raised her eyes to Gon’s, imploring. “You invited Killua too, right?”

“Of course!” she cried.

“And is this something that will make him happy?”

She smiled. “If you’re there, he’ll be happy.”
Gon raised his eyebrows. “You’re sure about that?”

“Yes!”

He glanced at Canary, who was chewing on one fingertip, but she confirmed with a slight nod. “Okay, then,” Gon said. “Invitation accepted.”

Alluka squealed and flung herself at Gon, spilling a sleepy-looking Nanika behind her. Gon hugged Alluka carefully, aware of how fragile her foliage was. When she pulled back, Canary said, “And now we’ll let Gon rest, since I think that was his intention?”

“All right,” Alluka sighed, her smile dying. Then she brightened again. “But I’ll see you tonight!” With that, she allowed Canary to guide her back out of the room, Nanika drifting behind her.

Gon smiled to himself, moving the fine clothing to a chair and then flopping down on the bed. He leafed through the poetry book, and then stopped abruptly at a page in the last section of the book: love poems. There was a small yellow flower there, pressed between the pages. It looked like the ones he’d seen growing in the cemetery, and judging by the still-vibrant colors of the petals and stem, it couldn’t have been there long.

He set the flower carefully on the bedside table, and then smoothed the pages it had marked. The end of a classical poem was on the left-hand side. A shorter, more modern one was on the right, in full. It read:

```
Even as I hold you
I think of you as someone gone
far, far away. Your eyes the color
of pennies in a bowl of dark honey
bringing sweet light to someone else
your black hair gripping through my fingers
is the flash of your head going
around a corner
your smile, breaking before me,
the flippant last turn
of a revolving door,
emptying you out, changed,
away from me.

Even as I hold you
I am letting you go.
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Had Killua meant for him to see this? He didn’t know whether it would be better if he had or he hadn’t. As beautiful as the words were, as much as the reasons why the other man might have marked this poem made his pulse race, at the same time, they broke his heart. Yes, it was a love poem, but it was also a valediction; and if Killua did have feelings for him, it spoke more clearly than Killua ever could have of the fact that he had given up on those feelings before ever giving them a chance to take root. Not only did Killua consider himself unlovable; he believed he didn’t deserve to love.

And if that’s what he thought? Well, Gon would prove him wrong. He flipped back to the first of the love poems, and began to read.

It took him the rest of the afternoon, but by the time he needed to dress for dinner, Gon was fairly certain that he had found a poem to refute Killua’s. He carefully marked the place with the pressed flower, and then he shed his clothes and went into the bathroom. He bathed carefully, shaved, and tamed his wild hair as best he could. He sniffed at the various bottles that lined the shelf above the sink, colognes which he’d never thought to use before. Many were too sweet, or too strong, or simply not to his taste. At last, though, he found one that reminded him of the air of the island: sharp with salt, soft with wild growing things. He pressed the stopper to his pulse points. He studied himself in the mirror for a few moments, wondering if he really was as handsome as Bisky seemed to bank on. Then he shook himself. If she’d been exaggerating, there wasn’t much he could do about it now.

Gon took the clothing from the chair where he’d laid it earlier and pulled it on. He’d had to loosen a set of intricate laces at the back of the tunic to get it over his shoulders, and now he didn’t know how to tighten them again. He was still struggling when there was a soft scratching at his door.

“Kurapika?” he asked.

“Yes. I wondered if you needed help with the clothing.”

“Oh, gods, please!”

Kurapika came in laughing, then began lacing Gon into the tunic with surprisingly nimble fingers.
“Were these clothes Killua’s?” Gon asked, watching as the drape of the tunic changed, falling properly under Kurapika’s expert adjustments.

“No,” Kurapika said. “His wouldn’t have fit you: you are very different shapes.”

“Then someone made them just for tonight?”

Kurapika nodded. “Alluka thought that since you’ve been dressing Killua in your own style of clothing, he might appreciate seeing you in his. She picked out the colors.”

Gon cocked his head at his reflection in the mirror. “She has a good eye.”

“She does,” he agreed, seemed about to add something, and then fell silent again with a small shake of the head.

“Kurapika,” Gon said when the butler had finished adjusting his clothing. “is Killua afraid of me?”

Kurapika’s head snapped up. “Why do you ask that?”

“It’s just a feeling.” Okay, not the truth, but he didn’t particularly want to show that poem to Kurapika. Or anybody.

Kurapika considered this, a fine finger trailing along his lips. “I don’t think that he is afraid of you. Of what you make him feel, though? Quite possibly.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No. He doesn’t tell anybody things like that. But one would have to be quite blind not to notice the way he looks at you.”

“I guess I’m blind, then.”
Kurapika smiled. “No. He’s just good at not letting you see it.”

“Then enlighten me.”

Kurapika’s smile widened. “He looks at you the way a starving man looks at a filled dinner plate that he doesn’t think he can reach.”

“But he can reach me.”

Kurapika sighed. “I know that. But Killua was taught to believe that he was unlovable, and the curse only compounded that.”

Gon scowled. “His parents told him that?”

“No. To his parents he was valuable, at least as a means to an end, and love didn’t figure into any of it as long as he did what he was told and produced an heir. Illumi, though…he was something else entirely.”

“He told him he was unlovable?”

“Worse. He made Killua believe that only he could love him, because only he was willing to forgive Killua’s shortcomings.”

“What shortcomings?” Gon growled.

“Precisely,” Kurapika sighed. “But he was clever, and subtle. As a little child Killua worshipped him, and Illumi preyed on that.”

“But why?”

“Because he wanted what Killua had, and the only way to take it from him was to make Killua give it up voluntarily. And the only way to make him give it up voluntarily was to simultaneously make him believe that he didn’t deserve it, and that Illumi did.”
“But in the end, Killua stood up to him.”

“Yes,” Kurapika sighed, “and look where that got him, and everyone he loved. Is it any wonder that he considers himself worthless?”

Gon chewed on this for a time. At last, he asked, “Do you think it’s possible for him to un-learn it?”

Kurapika shrugged, his coin-shaped leaves rustling, a few of them drifting to the floor. “I think that if anyone has a chance at it, it’s you. Now, are you ready? You don’t want to keep him waiting.”

* 

Gon had only really looked at the ballroom that first day when he’d spoken to Alluka on its gallery. Then it had been a hollow space, echoing with disuse and the spindly voices of ghosts. Now it was transformed, the chandeliers like ice sculptures full of hundreds of candles, their light flickering off the polished wood of the floor and the beaten silver that limned the molding on the pale blue walls. The golden light gave the statuary in the walls’ niches the semblance of flesh, softening their faces to those of benevolent onlookers. Huge vases of flowers adorned the room: no roses, but a host of sunflowers.

But the room’s beauty paled in comparison to the figure standing facing the row of long doors open onto the star-spattered night. He wore a cornflower blue tunic like the one in Gon’s dreams, the hems embroidered with silver moons and stars, over soft, silvery-gray leggings and silver slippers. His thistledown hair glittered with tiny spangles that caught the light like droplets of water—jewels? Gon laid the book of poetry on a corner table and then walked toward Killua, hardly daring to breathe. His beauty was so ethereal, he couldn’t quite believe that he wasn’t dreaming; but then Killua turned at the sound of his soft footsteps, and his eyes, his smile, were warm and very real.

Those eyes widened a bit as they took Gon in, the smile fading into something like wonder. “I—Gon—you didn’t have to do this for me.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Gon said. “It was all your sister.”

Killua cocked an eyebrow. “Really? You had nothing to do with it?”
Gon shook his head. “I wish I could take some credit, but no. It was a complete surprise to me.”

They gazed at each other for a long moment. Gon had never yearned so painfully to touch another person. More than that, he thought that he saw the same longing mirrored in Killua’s eyes. He was just mustering the courage to offer Killua his hand when there was a rustling behind them. Kurapika, Canary and Alluka came into the room, all carrying large trays of food. They set them on a side table, and Canary and Kurapika began arranging dishes as Alluka rushed forward, arms outstretched to embrace Gon and Killua at once.

“You look perfect!” she cried, delighted.

“Well, it was your doing,” Gon said. “Thank you. The clothes are beautiful.”

Alluka beamed. “I imagined them myself.”

“And you did a good job!” He had never seen Killua look so soft or so happy.

Killua was still smiling, but he was also looking a question at his little sister. An unspoken conversation seemed to pass between them, and then Alluka shrugged, saying, “Come on! Dinner will get cold.” She grabbed them each by a hand and pulled them toward a small table as Killua shook his head. But his smile, if anything, had widened.

Kurapika held their chairs for them. They were set close together, on either side of a table corner, so different from the formal distance of their chairs in the dining room. They both sat, and Kurapika laid snowy linen napkins in their laps as Canary set plates of delicate hors d’oeuvres in front of them, and Alluka filled their glasses with a pale-gold sparkling liquid. Gon saw Killua narrow his eyes at the towel-wrapped bottle she poured from, but he didn’t comment on it.

“Is there anything else that you require?” Kurapika asked when they were both settled.

“No, thank you,” Killua said. “Gon?”

Gon shook his head. “No. This is perfect.”
“Very well,” Kurapika said, and with a bow, he turned and retreated. Canary and Alluka curtseyed, and then followed him.

When they were alone, Killua lifted his wine glass and surveyed its rising bubbles. “What are you looking for?” Gon asked.

Killua studied the wine for a moment longer, and then he turned back to Gon. “More like wondering. Anyway, we ought to toast to something, seeing as this is an occasion…even if I’m not quite sure what occasion.”

Gon lifted his own glass. “Whatever it is, we owe it to your sister. So? To Alluka.”

“To Alluka,” Killua repeated, touching the rim of his glass to Gon’s. The meeting of the fine crystal vessels sent a sweet, bell-like tone echoing around them. They sipped from their glasses and then Killua said, apparently to himself, “Where did she find this?”

“The champagne?” Gon asked.

“It isn’t champagne. It’s far rarer than that. In fact, I didn’t think there was any left in existence. This particular grape was meant to have died out in an infestation of Wraith Ants two centuries ago.”

“So? Couldn’t one of the Halflings just magic it back into existence?”

“That isn’t how it works. Yes, they can ‘magic things into existence,’ but only if they already exist, if you see what I mean?”

Gon nodded. “You can’t make something out of nothing. So I guess a few of those vines must have survived, and I’m glad they did.” He sipped again from the glass. “This tastes like summer. And rain on warm soil. And stars.”

Killua laughed, sipping again. “You’ve been reading poetry.”

Gon smiled shyly. “Maybe.”
“Did you find any you liked?”

“Lots,” Gon said.

“Which ones?”

“I told you, I’ll read them to you tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Killua asked, resting his chin on his palm. The palms of his hands and the soles of his feet were free of either marks or thorns, Gon had noticed some while back. He still hadn’t garnered the courage to ask why. “Then why is my book sitting on a side table by the door?”

Gon felt himself flush, watched Killua’s smile widen in conjunction. “It’s already past eight. Tomorrow really isn’t so far off.”

“Are you planning to keep me up past my bedtime, Gon?” Killua asked, a glint in his eyes, dark as lapis in the mellow light. “Reading me poetry, no less?”

_Gods, is he flirting with me?_ Gon wondered. It seemed that way, but at the same time, there was a warmth and affection to it that was worlds away from the brazen coquetry of the cafe patrons. He realized with a shock and no small degree of panic that he had never in his life had an occasion to flirt back. For a moment he froze; but he relaxed almost as quickly. This was Killua, his friend, shy and soft-hearted despite the shell he built around himself. Killua’s eyes were soft as a summer sea, and the starry wine was zinging through Gon’s veins, and he wanted to laugh for joy.

“An impossible question to answer,” Gon volleyed back, “considering I have no idea when your bedtime is. For all I know, you never sleep at all.”

Gon reached for his glass again, and found that it was empty, as was Killua’s. Almost as soon as he realized it, though, Alluka was back, refilling them and then ducking back into the shadows.

“I sleep,” Killua said, a shadow creeping into his tone, “though neither much, nor well.”
“Why not?” Gon asked, cutting into the goat’s-cheese tart on the plate in front of him. The crust was as thin as the first ice on winter water, and melted likewise on his tongue.

“I think too much, alone in the dark,” Killua said, taking a bite of his own tart.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t sleep alone in the dark,” Gon said, and then blushed fiercely. He had meant only to think the words, not speak them. “I—I didn’t mean—” he began, but Killua only laughed, his eyes bright again.

“That’s another thing about this particular type of wine,” he said. “It makes you speak your heart—or so the wives-tales say.”

“Do you believe them?”

“I don’t know,” Killua said, pausing to sip again. “The few times I’ve had this before, there was no one around to whom I’d have been particularly inclined to speak my heart.”

“No one?” Gon asked, aware that his words weren’t quite his own. Or maybe they were entirely his own; more his own than any words had ever been.

“No one,” Killua confirmed. “If I felt any such effects coming on, I hid. Better than tell my parents or Illumi what I really thought of them.”

“Okay,” Gon said, running a finger lightly around the rim of the glass, pulling out a high, fluting tone. “But wasn’t there anyone who you might have said nicer things to?”

“‘Nicer things?’” Killua repeated, his smile bright. “What kind of things?”

“Well, I mean…someone like you, you must have had…”

Killua watched him, smile lapsing into a smirk, his eyes never leaving Gon’s. “Don’t fight it, Gon. Just say what you want to say.”
“There must have been so many girls who wanted you,” Gon blurted.

Killua laughed, but it was more rueful than anything else. “Oh, there were.”

“And you must have wanted some of them back.”

“No. Not a one.”

“Really?”

“The grapes don’t allow for lies, remember?” Killua drained his second glass, and held it out for Alluka to refill without ever looking away from Gon.

“So you’ve never been in love,” Gon said, looking down to find his own glass full again. He paused for a moment, considering whether it was wise to drink more, and then he thought, *What the hell?* This wasn’t like any wine he’d ever drunk in the effect it seemed to be having on him, any more than it was like them in taste. He didn’t feel at all drunk. If anything, his head felt preternaturally clear, as if he’d seen the world through smudged glass for all his life before this.

“I never said that,” Killua answered mildly, passing him a basket of bread.

Gon took a slice, spread it thickly with butter that smelled of honey and lavender before he spoke again. “So you *have* been in love?”

“Yes,” Killua answered, dangling the glass from his long fingers.

“Who with?” Gon demanded, fluctuating between the need to hear the answer and the utter terror of it.

“I don’t think that I’ve drunk enough yet to tell you that,” he said after a moment. He picked up a perfect, glossy strawberry, bit into it, caught a drop of juice that trickled down his chin with his finger and licked it off as Gon watched, mesmerized. “What about you?”
“Oh, no! Not when you won’t tell me.”

“I’m not asking who. Only if.”

“If I’ve been in love?” Gon asked. Killua nodded. Gon drew a breath, and then said, “Yes.”

And gods, Killua, I didn’t think that I could. I didn’t even think that I could want to. Not until you pulled your hood down and your eyes were like oceans and the only choices left were to leap or look away—which is to say, there was never any choice at all.

But he didn’t speak those words. He wasn’t sure whether or not he was sorry that he retained that much self-control. And then Kurapika and Canary were back, Alluka hovering behind them as they cleared plates and brought out others. There seemed to be an endless array of them, but for once, none of them contained more than a few bites of food. None of it was anything Gon had tasted before, all of it was exquisite. They ate and drank and laughed and talked and all of it seemed to Gon to be some kind of dream, bright and warm and easy.

When the last course had been cleared away—rich chocolate mousse dotted with fat raspberries, which Killua had inhaled in seconds—the candlelight seemed to deepen to bronze. From somewhere—from nowhere and everywhere—soft music began to play. Killua stood and smiled down at Gon, offering a hand.

“What?” Gon asked.

“The invitation distinctly said ‘dinner and dancing’. This, if I’m not mistaken, is the dancing part.”

“I—wait—that was serious? I can’t dance!”

“Mmm. Just like you can’t understand poetry.”

“Poetry is words. I know words. I definitely do not know how to dance!”

“And I don’t know how to draw, but I tried. So?” Killua wiggled his fingers.
Gon couldn’t help but grin. “Okay. But you’ve been warned.”

Killua only laughed, and placed Gon’s left hand on his right shoulder. Then he slipped his right hand around to rest on the small of Gon’s back. “When I step forward, you step back,” Killua said, and that was the beginning and end of his instruction.

But somehow, it was enough. After a few stumbling steps, Gon’s natural athleticism and sense of rhythm kicked in, and then he and Killua were turning in sweeps and loops around the empty ballroom. The candles, the dripping chandeliers, the bright splashes of color from the flowers were all a blur, but Killua’s eyes remained steady. One piece of music ran into another, or perhaps they were all variations of the same. Gon didn’t know, or care. He couldn’t look away from Killua.

Time suspended, or maybe it turned inside-out. At some point Gon realized that they were no longer in the ballroom but on the terrace that adjoined it. The stars jostled for room in the navy sky; a round yellow moon drifted above the jagged black line of forest; the mountains were plum-colored shadows beyond. It was a night more beautiful than any Gon had ever seen, and yet he barely saw it. His world had shrunk to the circle of Killua’s arms around his waist, Killua’s eyes fixed on him as if he could look for a lifetime and it wouldn’t be enough.
“You,” Gon found himself saying softly, as his own arms looped around Killua’s neck.

“Me?” Killua asked, his voice, for once, without the rasp. It was cool and smooth as the starlight in which they floated.

“Your question. The answer. I have been in love. I am in love. With you, Killua.”

Killua froze. “Me? But…how…?”

“There is no how. I just am.”

“You love me,” he said, slow and disbelieving, and then Gon was kissing him. Or was Killua kissing Gon? No, they were kissing each other, the way they had always been meant to, the way they had been made to.

It was hesitant at first; this was ground neither of them had ever trodden, or ever quite believed that they could. And then the hesitancy was gone, swept away on a current of magical wine and jangling stars while the low-slung moon beamed down at them like an indulgent mother. Killua’s lips were soft and warm, as were his fingers, twining gently in Gon’s hair as Gon opened his mouth, his whole body seeming to sigh as their tongues danced together.

A warmth was growing in his belly, a wanting that was both an ache and a balm to so many years of loneliness. This was nothing like the coiling serpent that knotted in his guts sometimes and drove him to touch himself, quickly and furtively, under the covers in the dark. This was something he could draw out for a thousand years and never spend, never tire of.

Killua was pressing him against a stone baluster, kissing him as if he needed it to breathe. Gon disengaged a hand from Killua’s soft hair, stroked it down his cheek, his throat, until it rested over his heart; and then a sharp pain made him suck in his breath. Killua broke away abruptly, breathing fast and reaching for Gon’s hand. He held it up between them. The light of the setting moon showed a dark, wet gash in the center of Gon’s palm.

For a moment, both of them stared at it in shock. Then Gon heard himself speaking, as if from miles away: “No. No, no, no, this can’t be! I love you, I love you, Killua, and I think you love me, and so the curse should be broken, shouldn’t it?”
Even as he spoke the words, though, doubt began to creep in. Didn’t Killua love him? Wasn’t that what he’d been telling him without telling him for all of these weeks? Except that no: he had never said those words.

“Killua?” Gon asked, his voice small and tremulous.

Killua looked at him for one more anguished moment. Then, with a cry that was more beast than human, he turned, and ran.

Chapter End Notes

The poem Gon finds marked is by Alice Walker, no title. Not quite sure how she managed to write a poem that precisely describes Gon, but there it is! Thanks to @akumeoi for introducing me to it. Also, I couldn’t make mornintide’s sketch for this chapter embed, so link it is. Sorry!
Chapter Summary

In which I go off on a long, meandering and entirely dry tangent about the history of tea-growing in Lukso province and leave you to wonder for another five days what happens to poor Gon and Killua. ;-)

Chapter Notes

Hang on, this one's a wild ride! (But still T-rated!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

17

A split-second later Gon followed. On instinct, he grabbed the book from the table by the entrance, and then he turned—and ran straight into Kurapika.

“What happened?” Kurapika demanded.

“I don’t know! I…we…” Lost for words, he held up his gashed hand.

“Oh,” Kurapika sighed, and in that sigh Gon could hear exactly how much Kurapika and no doubt all the others had banked on this night.

“Where did he go?” Gon asked, frantic. “I need to see him.”

“His rooms, most likely.”

“Then take me there.”
“I can’t,” Kurapika said. “He made me promise never to take you there.”

“When?”

“The first time you saw him cough blood.”

“Well things are different now!” Kurapika shook his head. “Kurapika, please! If it were Leorio who was hurt, and I’d made that promise, would you really expect me to keep it?”

Kurapika bristed at the name, and a tinge of red flashed across his eyes. After a few moments, though, he had contained himself. “I do know how you feel, Gon. But I cannot break his trust.”

“Fine. Did he make Canary promise, too? Alluka?” Canary and Alluka, who had come up behind Kurapika silently, affirmed this. “Then I’ll find him myself!”

“Gon,” Canary said gently, “you will never find him by searching.”

“Why not?” Gon glowered. “All I have is time.”

“Yes,” she sighed, “but he retains enough magic to cloak the door to his rooms. Someone would have to show you, and we’ve all promised not to.”

Gon glared at the three of them, even Alluka. Alluka… “Did he make Nanika promise?” Gon asked her.

“No, of course not,” Alluka said. “A human can’t bind a spirit that way.”

“Good,” he said. “Then Nanika can show me.”

The three halflings looked at each other in surmise. They turned back to Gon all at once. “If Nanika agrees,” Kurapika said, “then yes, I suppose she can.”
As if she’d been called, Nanika slipped out of Alluka and reached for Gon’s hand. It was insubstantial as always, seeming to brush right through his own solid flesh. But he understood the gesture, and turned to follow her.

“Be gentle with him!” Canary called after him. Gon looked back at her and nodded, then followed Nanika.

*]

She led him through a tangle of corridors and stairways, climbing ever higher into the castle. At last she stopped in front of a blank stone wall and hovered there. “There’s no door,” Gon said.

Nanika inclined her head, then brushed one spectral hand down a section of the wall.

“Is this what they meant by Killua cloaking his door?”

Nanika nodded, her weird black eyes swirling. Gon touched the wall where Nanika had, and sure enough, it felt not like stone but studded wood.

“Thank you, Nanika,” he said. “I can take it from here.”

She watched him for a moment, and then she vanished. Gon felt again around the door, until he touched cold metal: a handle. He’d half-expected it to be locked, but the handle turned and the door swung open easily enough onto a sitting room.

If Gon had thought that his quarters were opulent, they looked shabby compared to what lay before him. The room was vast, every surface shining, all of the blue and silver of the carpet and upholstery lush and pristine. There were shelves upon shelves of books, a wide fireplace, obviously priceless statuary and paintings. But there was no Killua.

Gon stepped into the room, calling his friend’s name. There was no answer, and so he moved to the door at the far side of the room, which stood slightly ajar. It opened onto a bed chamber as coldly beautiful as the sitting room had been. A curtained bed took pride of place against the far wall, but it was empty, as was the rest of the room. None of the candles here were lit.
Gon was about to turn around, go looking for Killua elsewhere, when he caught a slight movement in the shadows by the bed. Cautiously, he stepped forward. “Killua?” he asked, his voice hushed.

“Leave me, Gon.” His words wavered, as if he had been crying—or, maybe, still was.

“No,” Gon said.

“I don’t need your pity!” Killua snapped.

“This isn’t about pity, Killua.”

“What, then? And don’t try to tell me that you’re here because you love me.” his voice oozed bitterness like poison sap.

“But that is why I’m here!”

This time, he heard Killua choke on a sob. A few more steps, and Gon found him. He was sitting in front of an open doorway, dark except for the flicker of a few small candles. It took Gon a moment to make sense of what he was seeing because, in the dim and flickering light, there seemed to be two of Killua.

But no, that was wrong; there was only one Killua. The other was a reflection in an ornate full-length mirror, which had been shoved into a closet and, apparently, covered by a satin shroud which now pooled around it on the floor. The real Killua’s back was to Gon, but he could see the front of his friend in the mirror.

Except that this was no Killua Gon had ever encountered. The front of his beautiful tunic was in tatters, torn by thorns or fingernails or both. It was streaked with blood, as was his face, which was covered in scratches. Tear-tracks ran through the blood.

“Killua,” Gon said softly, crouching down beside him. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t want your sympathy, either!”
“Well too bad, because you have it! Please, turn around and look at me.”

For a moment, Gon thought that he would refuse. But then, with a terrible, defeated twist of a smile, Killua turned around. The rent tunic had left his chest exposed: the first time Gon had seen it. It was covered with thick vines and claw-like thorns, the thickest and cruellest of them emerging from his chest just over his heart.

It was Killua who broke the silence, speaking as he tried to cover himself with the ruined tunic. “Tell me that you love me now,” he said bitterly.

Heat rose to Gon’s face, but not in embarrassment. It was pure anger. “Do you actually think that I’m so shallow that the way you look could make me stop loving you?”

Killua wept harder at that, but he stopped struggling with the torn garment, just let it hang open. “Maybe not,” Killua conceded when he’d mastered himself a bit, “but it doesn’t matter, does it? I hurt you, Gon, and it only took a touch. Imagine what would have happened if that kiss had gone any further.”

“Frankly, I wish it had.”

“No. No, you are not going to sacrifice yourself to me!”

“Well, newsflash, Killua,” Gon snapped. “You don’t get to decide who I want to be with!”

Killua dropped his bloody face into his hands. “You’re a fool.”

“Fine, maybe I am! I’m still in love with you!”

“And you really want to condemn yourself to a chaste love?” Killua said, his anger fading quickly to dejection.

“Chaste?” Gon shook his head. “What, you don’t want to have sex?”
“Of course I want to have sex! But it’s impossible.”

For a moment, Gon’s mind and body short-circuited: Killua wanted to have sex with him? How long had he been thinking about this? It wasn’t as if Gon hadn’t thought about it too, but it had always been a distant, abstract thought. One he hadn’t really let himself consider in any depth, because it did seem impossible—impossible that Killua would ever want him like that. Now, it seemed, it wasn’t impossible at all. Don’t get ahead of yourself! he told himself firmly.

Drawing a deep breath, he said, “Even if that were actually true, it has nothing to do with loving you. I don’t care if we never have sex. But…” He shook his head, trying to clear it of the plangent voice screaming, He wants you, too! Another deep breath. “Let’s just say that I don’t think that’s off the table, if it’s something you want. It’s also very far from the real problem.”

“There’s only one?” Killua muttered.

Gon willed his voice not to shake. “There’s only one that matters: you don’t love me.” His voice shook anyway. All of him was shaking.

Killua’s eyes snapped up to Gon’s face. “Is that what you think?”

“You ran away after we kissed. You shut yourself behind a door I shouldn’t have been able to find. What else am I supposed to think?”

“Gon, I ran because I hurt you! Because I let myself slip, I let myself think for a moment that…” He trailed off, voice and eyes anguished. When he continued, he was calmer. “All that loving me will ever do is hurt you. And as for me loving you—well, that dooms everybody else I care about.”

“Because I’m not a girl?” Gon asked bitterly.

“Precisely.”

“Do you even want a girl, Killua? Did you ever?”
Killua flushed and looked away, but this time he did answer: “No. And no.”

Gon sighed. “Then stop trying to fight that. Accept that you were meant to love me, just like I was meant to love you.”

“But if I give up—”

Still far from appeased, Gon interrupted, “Give up what, Killua? You’ve told me all of the reasons why no girl can fix this—why you won’t even try that. You were never going to try, were you?”

“Maybe not. But how can I be with you, knowing that I’m sealing all of their fates?”

“Maybe that isn’t for you to decide, either.”

“You think that they want to die?”

“No. But they also don’t want to see you unhappy. Why else would they have done what they did for us tonight?”

Killua’s answer was an abject silence. Gon tapped his lips, and then he asked, “What exactly did Illumi say about breaking the curse?”

“I’ve told you that already.”

“I’m not sure that you’ve really told me. Or yourself.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Remember what you said to me about semantics, when you showed me that the magical gate locked you in, too?”
“I said you’re good at them.”

“Right. Parsing words got me here, so maybe it can get us all back out. Tell me exactly what Illumi said about breaking the curse.”

Killua looked at Gon through the near-darkness, and then, shakily, he stood. Gon followed him back into the sitting room, and Killua pulled a book from one of the shelves. As he opened it, Gon saw that it wasn’t a printed book, but one full of handwriting. Killua’s handwriting. The other young man skimmed some pages near the front, and then he read:

“‘I will grant you this one mercy: true love’s kiss—true, pure, mutual love—will break the curse… should you ever manage to compel such a thing.’”

“See?” Gon cried, smiling triumphantly. Killua looked at him as if he’d gone mad, so Gon continued, “There’s nothing in there about this true mutual love having to involve a woman.”

Killua laughed acridly, and replaced the journal in the bookshelf. “It was certainly implied in the ‘pure’. My brother knew that I liked boys, and he most definitely did not approve.”

“Who cares? Even if he meant that you had to fall for a woman, he didn’t say it, so it isn’t a real condition.”

“Alright,” Killua said, dropping wearily into an armchair. Gon perched on a coffee table in front of it. “Suppose he did leave a loophole. Then why didn’t it work? You say you love me, but we kissed, and I’m still being throttled by a rose bush. The only answer is that you don’t actually love me.”

“Or vice-versa.”

“I don’t think that that’s the problem.”

Gon wanted to cry with rage at Killua’s doubt, at his non-confession, but he forced his voice to calm when he said, “That isn’t the only answer, Killua. Maybe that part of the curse never took, or Illumi did something to undo it after he left.”
“Then what am I supposed to do?” Killua asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“You can start by not blaming yourself. After that? Stop fighting this.”

Gon leaned forward and kissed him. At first Killua didn’t respond, but as Gon persisted, he let go of the breath he had been holding and kissed Gon back. He ran tentative fingers down Gon’s chest as Gon deepened the kiss, hands settling at last on Gon’s hips. But when Gon leaned into him, dipping to kiss his throat, Killua pulled away.

Gon let out a small, frustrated sound. “Why did you do that?”

“Because you’re getting close to the thorns.”

“I’ll be careful this time,” he said, and then went back to kissing Killua’s neck. And when Killua tentatively returned the favor, he thought, *He’s right. We are doomed.* Because there would be no turning back from this. It would be a hunger that grew until it eclipsed everything else, and that terrified him, because he had known since the morning when Killua asked him to be his friend that it would be hard to lose him. Now he knew that it would be impossible.

When they finally came up for air, Killua said, “Sometimes I don’t believe that you’re real.”

“I’m real, Killua. Promise.”

They gazed at each other through another long silence, but something had eased. It didn’t feel loaded anymore, or even uncomfortable, although a tiny part of Gon’s mind and heart wouldn’t let him forget that Killua hadn’t actually confirmed that he loved Gon back. *Give him time,* he told himself. *This is hard for him.*

“So now what?” Killua asked, blushing slightly.

“Now,” Gon said, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, “I help you out of those clothes and into a bath. You look like hell.”

This time, Killua’s blush was florid. “I can’t let you see me without clothes!”
Gon let out a strangled cry of exasperation. “Didn’t you undress me after I tried to beat up your magical wall?”

“Well, yes, but only because you couldn’t do it yourself.”

“And can you get all of those clothes off alone without hurting yourself?” Killua looked away. “Right, that’s what I thought. Where can I find a pair of scissors?”

Gon turned the bath on to fill, and then carefully cut Killua out of his ruined tunic. Killua, however, insisted on doing the leggings himself. Gon knew that it was because of the bulge he could see quite clearly through the thin fabric; the truth was, he had one of his own. But if acknowledging that desire was too much for Killua right now, he could pretend that he hadn’t seen it.

Gon fussed with bath taps and scented oils as Killua worked, turning around only when the scissors fell silent. Killua sat on a stool in the corner of the bathroom, hunched around himself and quivering and flushed deep pink.

“You don’t have to stay,” he said. “I can do this alone.”

“I’m not leaving you alone, Killua. But I’ll close my eyes until you’re in, if that will make you feel better.”

Killua nodded, and Gon dutifully shut his eyes until he heard the splash of Killua stepping into the bath. Then he turned back. It was a deep, sunken tub like Gon’s own, although much larger. The water covered Killua up to his shoulders. He shut his eyes, releasing a sigh as he sank deeper into the steaming water.

Gon sat down, cross-legged, at the side. Then he dipped a washcloth in the water, and gently began to wipe the blood and tears from Killua’s face, trying his level best not to think about the black lines that now reached as far as his temple.

Killua’s eyes flew open at the touch. “What are you doing?” he asked.
“Cleaning you off. Where did all of this blood come from, anyway? You didn’t…?” Gon couldn’t finish that sentence.

“No,” Killua said. “I didn’t do it on purpose. But I was upset, and even now, sometimes, I forget…” He shut his eyes again, sighed. “I put my head on my arms. That was a mistake.”

“Hmm,” was all that Gon said, though he flinched as the dried blood came away, revealing the long scratches on Killua’s porcelain skin. When the blood was off his face, he started on Killua’s hair, washing it carefully, making sure that every last streak of blood was gone from the fine, white strands. Too many of them came out in his hands, and that, too he tried to ignore. Because under his touch, Killua was finally beginning to relax.

When Killua’s hair was clean, Gon said, “I’m going to get rid of these.” He scooped up the bundle of Killua’s shredded clothes, intending to give Killua time to get out of the bath privately.

Killua said, “Just put them into the corridor. They’ll be gone in the morning.”

Gon took the clothes away. He half-expected the others to be waiting anxiously outside the door to Killua’s apartments, but the corridor was empty. Then he returned to the bathroom. Killua had flipped over, and was gazing intently at him over the rim of the tub.

“Do you want me to go?” Gon asked.

“No. I really don’t.”

“Okay. But you’ll shrivel up if you stay in there all night.”

Killua’s look remained intent; questioning? Then he seemed to come to a decision. He pushed off of the side of the bath, pulled the stopper and then, slowly, stood up. Gon watched, barely breathing, very much aware that too sudden a move would spook Killua—or worse. He was like the street dogs and cats that Gon sometimes fed: the thread of trust spinning between them still frail as spider-silk, ready to snap at the slightest hint of threat.

Killua stepped out of the draining water and then simply stood there, naked and shivering. There
were only a few candles in the bathroom, but their light was enough for Gon to see the entirety of Killua’s affliction. The dark lines and hooked thorns radiated outward from his heart, like rays of a cruel sun. But beneath them was the beautiful body Gon had imagined for so long: slender and strong, lines of muscle like silken cords. He couldn’t stop himself looking farther down (no erection, but also no thorns.)

Then Killua shut his eyes. “I can’t do this,” he said, reaching blindly for a towel.

Instead, Gon caught his hand. “Do what, Killua?”

“Let you look at me.”

“Then I won’t look at you.” There was a long, fraught silence, but Killua didn’t pull away. Taking courage from that, Gon said, “How long has it been since somebody held you?”

Killua opened his eyes, looked at Gon. “I don’t know. I don’t think anybody ever did, once I could walk.”

“Not even Alluka?”

“When she was very little. But later, they didn’t like us to be together. They said I encouraged her.”

_I hope the Zoldycks are rotting in hell!_ Gon told himself. “Come with me,” he said.

“Where?”

Gon just shook his head, and tugged Killua’s hand until the other young man followed him out of the bathroom, into the bedroom. The candles extinguished behind them, leaving the room in near-darkness, with only the first faint brush of dawn through the windows to navigate by. For Gon, though, that was plenty. He led Killua to the bed, and without letting go of his hand, he pulled the covers down. They were made of a thick, silky fabric, no doubt something specially made to withstand the thorns. Killua shot him a questioning glance.

“Go on, get in. You can’t tell me that you’re not exhausted.”
“Let me just put on some—”

“No,” Gon said firmly. “You don’t have to cover yourself for me.”

Sighing, Killua let go of Gon’s hand and crawled between the sheets. Gon pulled the covers up to his shoulders, and then he shucked his own tunic and leggings, and crawled in beside him, the sheet between him and the worst of the thorns.

“You can’t do this, Gon. I’ll rip you to shreds!”

Gon’s only answer was to snuggle close to Killua, and carefully wrap an arm around him.

“Gon,” Killua sighed, obviously exasperated.

“Hush, Killua. You aren’t hurting me, and I’m not leaving you.” Gon kissed the nape of his neck to punctuate this.

Killua sighed again, but this time it was with acceptance. For a time Gon drifted between sleeping and waking, and so he wasn’t certain at first whether Killua had actually spoken to him, or he’d dreamed it. You.

“What?” he asked sleepily.

“You,” Killua repeated, and this time Gon knew that he hadn’t imagined it, or the significance of this repetition of his own answer to Killua’s similar question. “You asked who I fell in love with,” Killua said, twining his fingers through Gon’s and then clasping them tightly. “I fell in love with you. I am in love with you.”

Gon had thought that the unspoken words didn’t matter, that he knew how he felt even if Killua couldn’t bring himself to say it. That knowing it was enough. He had been wrong. It did matter. It mattered more than anything.
“I’m glad,” he said into the whisper of white hair at the back of Killua’s neck, before he kissed him there again. His words weren’t adequate; they didn’t come close to expressing the unmitigated joy he felt in that moment. He wanted to paint that feeling for Killua; he would paint it, soon. But right now, in this little sanctuary, his first love cradled against him, all he really wanted was what he had.

Killua

I feel him fall asleep in increments, as if he doesn’t quite want to give in to it. Inevitably, though, his breathing deepens and steadies against my neck, as his heart beats a slow, solid rhythm at my back. He is so warm, and the green, growing scent of him is in every breath I take—but I still can’t quite believe that he’s real. That he has chosen to be here like this, with me. I wish I had something—anything—to offer him other than grief. I wish I believed, as he does, that there is a way to happily ever after for us.

There isn’t. I’ve lived with the wretched, creeping reminder of my own mortality for too long not to know that. But I’m also tired. Tired of fighting fate. So very tired of loneliness.

I’m nowhere near sleep, and so I reach over him for the poetry book he set on the bedside table when he first came into the room. I wonder what he had planned to read to me—if he had planned anything specific at all.

He had. The book falls open to a page marked with a dried flower: the flower I pressed beside another poem on the day we spoke in the cemetery. It’s the same flower, but a different poem, and of course I know it, but it’s been a long time since I read it, and I read it now with his eyes in the first rosy streaks of dawn.

Believe me, if all those endearing young charms,
Which I gaze on so fondly to-day,
Were to change by to-morrow, and fleet in my arms,
Live fairy-gifts fading away,
Thou wouldst still be adored, as this moment thou art,
Let thy loveliness fade as it will,
And around the dear ruin each wish of my heart
Would entwine itself verdantly still.
It is not while beauty and youth are thine own,
And thy cheeks unprofaned by a tear,
That the fervor and faith of a soul may be known,
To which time will but make thee more dear!
No, the heart that has truly loved never forgets,
But as truly loves on to the close,
As the sunflower turns on her god when he sets
The same look which she turned when he rose! *

Oh, Gon.

I would say that he would be the death of me, but I think maybe he will hold the only piece of me that’s ever really lived. And so, if he wants this—if, however inexplicably, he wants me—then I am his, for as long as I draw breath.

Chapter End Notes

* Poem by Thomas Moore, no title other than the first line. He wrote it for his wife, who had contracted a disfiguring disease and was afraid that he would stop loving her. (IRK??) <3
Chapter Summary

In which this fic earns its rating. :-)  

Chapter Notes

Yep, this is where the story strays into mature territory. Some might consider a few of the details explicit, but on the whole I do think this scene is more M than E, it's love rather than lust driven, so?

Anyway, a little more you should know. The chapter begins with some frank discussion (not action!) about desire and sex and what it means to both chrs. It's a pretty important discussion, so unless that is a huge squick I'd suggest not skipping it. As for the action, so to speak, I've marked it off with three stars at the beginning and end: *** Again, I would never want anyone to read descriptions of sex if it makes them uncomfortable, but also again I'd be remiss if I didn't tell you that there's also some very important discussion and relationship development that takes place in amongst it all. Not quite sure what to do about that, because this is not the kind of story where sex between the mcs can be easily compartmentalized and posted as an extra. They're working through this part of their relationship together, just like all the rest.

But if you find after skipping those parts that you're totally confused, let me know and I'll try to paraphrase the relationship development!

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Gon awakened to warm slants of light through unfamiliar mullioned windows, and a pair of sleepy blue eyes watching him. He blinked for a moment in disbelief, and then the whole of the past night came back to him. Killua had kissed him. Killua loved him. Perhaps the most astonishing of all, Killua hadn’t sneaked away while he was asleep; he hadn’t let his demons take Gon from him. Gon couldn’t suppress a smile of delight at this. He reached out, brushed back Killua’s silky hair, and kissed him.

“Good morning,” he said when they finally broke apart.

“I’m pretty sure it’s afternoon,” Killua said.
“Who cares? I’m pretending it’s morning, so you can’t leave this bed.”

“Ever?” Killua smiled, his voice soft and his cheeks pink.

“Never ever,” Gon said, running his fingers through Killua’s hair, combing it back from his face. So close to the other young man, he could see the faintest dusting of golden freckles across his nose and cheeks.

“That might not be entirely practical,” Killua said, though he leaned into the touch, his dark lashes fluttering toward his cheeks, lids slitted like a cat’s.

“I don’t care. Besides, isn’t this whole place just one big impracticality anyway?”

Killua laughed. “You have a point. But I am a bit hungry.”

“Doesn’t your breakfast get automatically delivered, like mine?”

“Usually. But I think everyone’s keeping away right now.”

“Do you have a bell?”

“Sort of. It’s a big one, built into the walls, with a bell-pull.”

“Good. We can call them.”

Killua’s flush deepened. “It’s in the other room.”

“So?”
“So, I’m not exactly dressed to be wandering around at the moment.”

“You aren’t dressed at all, Killua,” Gon laughed. “But who cares? I’m the only one here, and I’ve seen all of you already.”

“Not quite all of me,” Killua murmured, his eyes flickering away from Gon’s. “At least, not like it is now.”

“What do you—ah!” Now it was Gon’s turn to blush. “Okay, I got it. But it’s normal—you know that, right? Especially when you first wake up.”

“Maybe it is, but it’s still embarrassing.”

Killua’s blazing cheeks sent Gon’s heart pounding. “If it makes you feel any better,” he said, stroking his finger down one of them, “I’m hard, too.”

Killua’s eyes flew back to him. “You are?”

Gon kissed the soft, white head, laughing. “Of course I am! How couldn’t I be when you just kissed me like that? Not to mention the whole in-bed-naked thing.”

Killua groaned, and pulled the covers over his head. Gon, however, wasn’t about to let him hide from this. He pried Killua’s fingers from the sheets and blankets, and then peeled them back. The thorns and vines were still there, but in the daylight they lost much of their menace. Gon traced a meandering path among them down Killua’s chest and then lower, fingers light and gentle. He stopped where the dusting of silver hair began, eyes and fingers both questioning. He watched desire and fear battle in Killua’s eyes; and then, almost imperceptibly, Killua nodded.

***

Gon shoved the bedclothes off of his own body, fighting the urge to cover himself when he felt Killua’s gaze settle on his erection, eyes widening. He had swum in the sea with other boys enough times to know that he was well-endowed, but he had never witnessed anyone’s reaction to the fact beyond their wise-cracks. Nor had anyone ever seen him aroused, and this was more than a knee-jerk morning reaction; this was pure blazing want, and the difference showed. Then again, the same seemed to be true of Killua, and fair was fair.
Shaking off the instinct to hide himself, he pushed the covers off of Killua too, the fabric running smoothly over the thorns. He could tell that Killua was fighting himself hard not to snatch them back, but he wound his trembling fingers in the bedsheets instead and let Gon look. For a long time they studied each other in shy silence. Gon wondered what Killua was thinking; if he was even close to feeling as overwhelmed by Gon’s nakedness as Gon was by his. Yes, he’d seen Killua naked the previous night. But that scene had been very different from this, their mutual desire on show.

“Have you ever…?” Killua said at last, and then trailed off.

But Gon understood perfectly. “No.” He met Killua’s frightened eyes. “I’ve never even kissed anyone before you, so believe me, no one’s ever seen me like this! You’re…” He stopped, considered his words, gathered his courage and then spoke them: “You’re my first everything.”

“And you’re mine,” Killua said, reaching for his hand. “But gods, Gon—do you know how difficult that is to believe?”

“What? That I’ve never been to bed with anyone?”

“Yes.”

“Why is that hard to believe?” Gon asked, threading their fingers together, lifting Killua’s hand to his lips to kiss its lined back.

“Because you’re so beautiful. And I don’t just mean the way you look. Everything about you is beautiful. It’s as if… I don’t know. When you look at me, it feels like sunlight.”

“I’m glad that you think so,” Gon said, smiling tentatively. “You’re the only person I’ve ever wanted to think so.”

“You never wanted someone to think that you’re beautiful?” Killua asked, his eyes puzzled.

Gon shook his head. “Where I come from, that’s dangerous.”
“Dangerous?” Killua repeated.

“Killua,” Gon sighed, leaning back on the pillows and turning on his side, so that they were eye-to-eye, “the Idrisi docks are basically a meat market. My boss at the cafe hired me because of the way people looked at me: it pulled in customers. All day, every day, I had to feel them staring. Or worse. Some of them would touch me, usually in places that no one has any right touching anyone without permission. A lot of them offered me money to—” He stopped, turning his eyes away from Killua’s in shame. “So no, I didn’t want them to see me that way. I didn’t want them to see me at all.”

“Does it hurt you when I call you beautiful? When I look at you and want you?” Killua asked after several moments’ thought.

Gon smiled. “Gods, no! I want you to look at me and want me. I want you to think that I’m beautiful. Killua, you aren’t anything like them, and it’s only weird to know that you think of me that way because—well, because I didn’t think that it was possible. I mean, for someone to look at me and see more than something pretty and disposable.”

“I…actually, I think I understand,” Killua said, reaching out to run a finger along Gon’s lips. “I mean, not all of it. I never had to choose between selling my body and starving. But I was never a person. I was a title and heap of money and some lucky coloring, and I was definitely for sale. If the curse hadn’t happened, my parents would have married me off to the daughter of the highest bidder. It’s quite likely I would never have met her before our wedding day. It would have been—”

“Hell,” Gon finished softly, gazing at Killua as Killua’s fingers ran from his lips to his throat. No touch had ever felt so perfect or peaceful: so right. At the same time, desire for the man beside him was twisting up from his guts, flowing into his limbs like a tree’s springtime sap, sweet and merciless and maddening. He wasn’t just hard anymore, he was aching, and one look told him that Killua was, too.

“Killua,” he said, his voice sounding low and husky, not his own, “can I touch you?”

“You can do anything you want with me,” he whispered.

“So there’s nowhere you don’t want me to…?”

“No.”
Gon trailed his fingers down Killua’s chest again, but this time he didn’t stop. He let his hand roam lower, stroking the downy hair on Killua’s lower belly, the unmarked skin that ran from his hipbone to the swirl of silver hair between his legs. There, he paused.

“Are you sure?”

Killua’s eyes were intent and unblinking. There was no fear in them anymore, only longing. “More sure than I’ve ever been of anything,” he said.

“If you change your mind, just tell me to stop, and I’ll stop.”

“Noted,” Killua said, curving his body toward Gon’s hand, “and I love you even more for saying so. But I don’t think that there’s anything on earth that could make me want you to stop touching me right now.”

Watching Killua carefully for any sign of discomfort, Gon took hold of his shaft, running his hand upward along the velvety skin to the tip, which was leaking clear fluid. He thumbed the thin skin just under the back of the head, and then moved up to his slit, stroking along it. Killua gasped, his eyes opening wide, and then drifting shut as Gon began to caress him with more purpose. Gon prayed that he was doing this right; that what he did furtively on his own would feel good to Killua, too.

It seemed that he had no reason to worry. Emotions flickered across Killua’s face like light on water, but pain and shame were nowhere among them. He was all flushed cheeks and lush parted lips, delicate fingers warm as he ran them over Gon’s arms and shoulders. Gasps gave way to moans, to pleas and ragged whispers of Gon’s name until, abruptly, Killua wrapped one hand around Gon’s, stilling the movement.

Gon was immediately stricken. “What did I do wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong,” Killua said, his voice low and taut with longing. “It’s just that I’m close… I mean, I’m not going to be able to stop it if you do that much longer, and maybe you don’t want me to—”

“I do want you to, Killua,” Gon interrupted firmly. “I really want you to.” He didn’t wait for a reply before he removed both of their hands from Killua’s cock, climbed between his legs and took it into his mouth. He had no idea what he was doing, but somehow, he seemed to be doing it anyway. Killua moved underneath him, whimpering, the need to get closer clearly battling with his fear of
hurting Gon.

But Gon continued to stroke the path from his hips to his shaft gently with the pads of his thumbs as he worked him with his tongue. Killua tasted like seawater, the silky slip of his skin on Gon’s tongue like nothing Gon had ever even imagined. It stirred a madness in him. He never wanted this to end.

The next moment, though, Killua let out a cry, and then he was spilling into Gon’s mouth. Gon took it in, first because he didn’t know what else to do, but then greedily, swallowing and then licking for more. He sucked Killua lightly until the spasms of pleasure finally subsided and then, reluctantly, he let him go, moving up the bed again to look into his face.

He’d pictured sleepy-eyed bliss, flushed cheeks, maybe a little embarrassment. Instead, Killua was crying, tears streaming silently down his face.

Gon froze. Oh, gods, what have I done? As if he’d heard the words, Killua grasped Gon’s hands, tenderly kissed each of his fingers and then cradled them to his cheek.

“Are you okay, Killua?” Gon asked.

Killua smiled through his tears. “Yes, I’m okay.” Killua leaned forward, kissed Gon’s lips with the same quiet reverence with which he’d kissed his fingers. “That was perfect.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because I didn’t think that I would ever feel anything like it.”

“You’ve never had an orgasm?” Gon asked, appalled.

Killua laughed through his tears. “Of course I’ve had orgasms! But never with anyone else, and so it always just felt like a means to an end. What we just did, though…the orgasm really didn’t matter. All that mattered was the way it felt for you to want to touch me like that.” His eyes were wet and shy when he met Gon’s. “I hope that it felt okay to you, too.”

Gon kissed him again, his heart warm and heavy. “It felt more than okay, Killua. So much more than
okay. It felt like…feels like…like I finally fit somewhere.”

Killua’s lips quirked into a smile. “In an enchanted madhouse on top of a mountain?”

Gon flicked his cheek. “You know what I mean!”

“Yes,” he said, running his hands down Gon’s chest, sending desire crashing through him like a sea storm. “I know exactly what you mean. It feels like we’ve stepped into a story that was written just for us.”

“Or a painting that was only missing the figures.”

“Mmm.” Killua stroked Gon’s belly, making him shiver as his arousal wound tighter. “I want to make you to feel like I did.”

Gon was quite certain that he wanted that too. But: “Only if you’ll like it, too. You don’t owe me anything.”

Killua shook his head incredulously. “Gon, don’t you realize that I’ve wanted to do this since the moment I laid eyes on you?”

That jolted Gon out of his dreamy haze. “You have?”

“I have.”

“But that first night, you were so mad at me!”

“No, I wasn’t,” Killua sighed. “I was angry at the situation, and at myself for the way I’d treated your aunt. But mostly I was furious with myself for wanting you when you weren’t what I was supposed to want.”

Gon considered this, walking his fingers up Killua’s arm, between the thorns. “And now?” he asked, when he reached his shoulder. He ran his fingers along Killua’s collarbone. “Are you still mad at
“Only for waiting this long to tell you how I felt.”

“I think,” Gon said slowly, tilting Killua’s chin so that they were looking at each other, “that it had to be this way. We had to get to know each other. Learn to trust each other.”

“Do you trust me now?” Killua asked.

“Implicitly,” Gon said.

“Then lie back,” Killua said, kissing his cheeks, his eyelids, smoothing his hair, “and let me show you what it feels like to love you.”

* *

They never made it out of bed that day. They talked and laughed, made love and drowsed until the windows filled once again with twilight and the stars began to flicker to life.

“We’re going to have to get up sometime,” Killua said, as Gon traced patterns on his back with his tongue. A day had been plenty of time for him to learn how to maneuver among the thorns, and he couldn’t get enough of the taste of Killua’s skin. Ripe strawberries dusted with salt.

“Why?” Gon asked with dreamy languor.

“Because everyone will worry.”

Gon smiled, kissed Killua between his shoulder blades. “They aren’t worried.”

“You can’t know that.”
“I might not have any other experience with this kind of thing,” he said, moving a hand to Killua’s chest and thumbing across one nipple, then the other, eliciting a soft moan, “but I don’t think anybody in this house has any question about how we’ve spent our day.”

Gon could feel the heat rise on Killua’s skin, even if he couldn’t see it. “Oh, gods. You think they know?”

Gon had to laugh. “Killua, how could they not know?”

“And I’m supposed to go out there and look them in the eye? I mean, my little sister—”

“Wants you to be happy,” Gon reiterated. “Besides, she’s smart and intuitive. She knew how we felt before we did—or at least before we would admit it.”

Killua groaned. “So Alluka knows that we’ve spent the day having sex? You’re right, we aren’t leaving this room. Ever again.”

“Ahhh, Killua!” Gon said with another teasing kiss. “It isn’t something to be ashamed of.”

“So you’d be just fine with Komugi knowing I sucked your cock? Three times?”

That gave Gon pause. After a moment he said, “I wouldn’t want her to know the details. But I wouldn’t mind her knowing that we slept together. I’d want her to know how I feel about you, and I’d be proud for her to know that you feel the same way about me.”

Killua turned over just as the first candles stuttered to life. His eyes were the color of a midnight sky, and so soft that Gon wanted to clutch him to his chest and never let go. “You,” he said in his sandpaper voice.

“What about me?”

“You can’t possibly be real.”
“I’m real, Killua. If you don’t believe me, ask whoever has to wash these sheets tomorrow.”

“Gon!” Killua choked, and Gon laughed, kissed him.

“And it better be real, because I haven’t even come close to having enough of you.”

Killua crushed his lips to Gon’s, and Gon was lost in the peculiar sensation of sinking and rising at once, of needing Killua in a way that transcended any kind of desire he’d ever felt before. Killua’s mouth was a solace even as it stirred a hot flicker of want deep within him. His tongue on his neck was something from a fever dream, the thumbs teasing his nipples sending shocks straight to his groin.

“Once more,” Gon gasped. “We can do this once more and then we have to get out of this room, just for a little…ohhh!”

His protests evaporated as Killua took him into his mouth. *Or maybe,* he thought before he lost himself entirely to that silky, wet heat, *we really should just stay here forever.*

***

*

It was full dark when they awakened again, curled into the eye of the storm of tumbled bedding. There was no putting off the inevitable any longer; if nothing else, Gon’s stomach was pinched with hunger. They got up, bathed, dressed, and finally went downstairs.

Gon had been right. While Kurapika, Canary and Alluka were delighted to see them come downstairs together, hands intertwined, nobody seemed particularly surprised. No one asked where they’d been all day either, although when Killua invited them to come to dinner, they all accepted the invitation just a little too eagerly.

It was a joyful gathering, even if the halflings couldn’t share the food. It was the first time since he’d arrived that Gon had seen all of the castle’s inhabitants together and at ease. Killua was free with the wine, his cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling. Gon had never heard him laugh so much, or cough so little, and he wondered if maybe the curse *was* lifting. Illumi had said nothing about how long it would take to do so, after all.

The only moment of awkwardness came when dinner was finished. The five of them made their way
to the entrance hall, and Kurapika, trained by so many years of habit, told Killua that he would go ahead to his rooms and run the bath.

“That won’t be necessary tonight. I’ve bathed already.”

“Oh…ah…of course,” Kurapika stumbled.

Killua added sheepishly, “I—I also don’t think I’ll be returning to my rooms tonight. I mean, if that’s alright with—” He glanced at Gon and then away, blushing furiously.

“It’s more than alright, Killua,” Gon said, wrapping his arms around Killua’s waist and kissing his cheek. Alluka giggled and Canary smiled, but it wasn’t lost on Gon that Kurapika didn’t. Of course he didn’t, with his own beloved so close and so impossibly distant.

There was a poignant sadness to his demeanor when he said, “Very well. Just ring if you need anything.” He turned then and let himself out the front door, before Killua could reply.

“Come, Alluka,” Canary said when he was gone. “We should be off to bed as well.”

Alluka was looking curiously from Gon to Killua and back again. At last she grinned and said, “Okay. But just because you two finally figured out that you’re mad for each other doesn’t mean that you can stop playing with me!”

Killua was still spluttering, Alluka giggling as Canary steered her firmly toward the front door. When they were finally alone again, Gon turned to Killua. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, “but why would you want to come to my rooms? Yours are so much nicer.”

“My rooms are full of unhappiness,” Killua said. “I don’t ever want to go back to them. But if you’d rather I didn’t come to yours—”

“No!” Gon said emphatically. “I want you to come with me. I was just surprised that you wanted to.”

“Gon,” Killua said, cupping his cheek with one hand and running a thumb gently over his
cheekbone, “all I want is to be with you. We may not have forever, but we do have right now, and I plan to spend every second of it with you.”

Gon had no words with which to answer that, and so he leaned in and kissed Killua again. Killua’s reluctance with intimacy had burned away over the course of the day, and he kissed Gon back with abandon, his hands running over Gon’s body and leaving little shocks in their wake. Gon was already hard again, and he wondered briefly if there would ever be a time when his body wouldn’t respond like that to Killua’s touch. Frankly, he doubted it.

Killua pulled back suddenly. “You don’t have to stop,” Gon protested.

“I do,” he answered, “at least long enough to get to your rooms. Anyone could come back in here anytime.”

“Right. Got it.” Gon grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward the staircase.

* 

After that, their days slipped into an easy rhythm. They would waken naked and entangled, no matter how careful they were to lay bedclothes in between Killua’s thorns and Gon’s skin before they went to sleep. Somehow, their unconscious bodies had found a way to work this so that Gon never suffered more than superficial scratches.

Breakfast was always waiting for them in the sitting room when they finally tore themselves out of bed, as fresh and hot as if it had just arrived a moment before they opened the door, although their pattern of rising was at best unpredictable. Nobody ever ventured into the bedroom when they were within, or even knocked on the door, and that was just as well. Their hunger for each other didn’t lessen as the days passed; if anything, it took ever stronger hold of them.

They spent whole mornings drowsing in the warm sunlight that spilled through Gon’s windows, breathing each other in, speaking in soft, silent touches. Other days they roamed the grounds, sometimes drawing or reading to each other, sometimes playing with Alluka and Nanika. Sometimes they swam in the stream’s freezing pools, just to make their subsequent embraces all the warmer.

It was close to perfect; so much closer to perfect than Gon had ever imagined his life could be that he was angry at himself for acknowledging the shadow that stalked the periphery of their happiness. But even if they no longer spoke of it, he couldn’t ignore the slow creep of dark lines across Killua’s
face, his thinning hair, or the pitifully sparse foliage clinging to the halflings’ limbs. When they visited the library, ripe chestnuts and acorns and walnuts crunched underfoot, each cracking shell a painful reminder of time advancing, the magic weakening.

Soon it became impossible to ignore the garden’s turning foliage, the wind sweeping drifts of golden leaves and fallen rose petals before it. Gon and Killua spent less and less time outdoors, partly because Killua found it hard to watch these changes, partly because he was slowly growing weaker. Sharing Gon’s days and nights as he now did, it was impossible for him to hide the extent of his affliction. Several times a night he would wake up coughing, or shaking from nightmares. Gon would hold him until the fits passed, and Killua finally fell asleep again in his arms. But Gon would lie awake for a long time afterward, unable to stop thinking of the blood-stained handkerchiefs Killua couldn’t hide well enough, the thorns prickling out on his once-smooth hands and neck, or to ignore the encroaching chill of autumn in the castle’s rooms and hallways.

On the morning they woke to find the grass blue-dusted with frost, Killua refused to go outside anymore. It was also around this time that they started sharing dreams, and the idyl of the rose garden with its healthy Killua was gone. When Gon dreamed of the gardens now they were bleak and empty under a cold grey sky, the rose bushes dying, leaves yellow and spotted with blight, blossoms faded and drooping. There was more, too, but it was always a jumble of confused images: dingy lifeless rooms, a search for something he could neither name nor find, the sound of distant weeping. The nightmares were bad enough for Gon, but for Killua they were close to unbearable. He would wake from them crying and shaking and very nearly inconsolable. Gon would hold him until he calmed and then read to him, sometimes poetry, sometimes novels, but he knew that Killua wasn’t really listening.

His look grew ever more distant as the days passed, his smiles rarer. The tangle of fine lines now covered more than half of his face, and he breathed with a constant rattle. He consumed cup after cup of the pale green tea that Gon had drunk the day after he attacked the barrier, but Gon could see in his eyes how little it helped, how much pain he was in.

When Killua was awake Gon didn’t leave his side, no matter how Killua urged him to. When he dozed, though, Gon fled to the library, ransacking it for anything that might give him an idea as to why the curse remained intact. Because, although Killua rarely had the strength anymore to make love, he still drank in Gon’s kisses, and Gon gave them freely, desperately praying that each one would be the right one.

Based on the evidence of all the fairy tales he read and re-read, and all of the scholarly articles analyzing them, the curse should have long since crumbled to dust. Gon loved Killua with every particle of his being, and he knew that Killua loved him just as deeply: it was true, and it was mutual. As for pure, they had both been virgins when they first kissed; in fact, Gon wasn’t entirely certain that they weren’t still, given how the thorns limited intimacy.
As much as Gon raged against it, though, their kisses remained kisses. Gorgeous, perfect kisses, but nothing more.

“What are we doing wrong?” he wailed to Senritsu in the library one afternoon, when frustration finally got the better of him.

“I do not think that you are doing anything wrong,” she said gently.

“Well obviously we are,” Gon grumbled, shoving a stack of books aside to prop his elbows on the table, his chin on his hands, “because Killua keeps getting sicker, and it’s turning to autumn, you’re all still trees.”

“There is such a thing as trying too hard,” she said, brushing a leafy limb across Gon’s shoulders.

“Trying too hard at kissing?” Gon shoved his fingers into his hair and pulled in exasperation. “Is that even possible?”

“I do not know,” Senritsu said with a touch of sadness. “I have never had a lover. But it seems to me that your very desperation may be muddying the waters.”

“We weren’t desperate the first time we kissed,” Gon pointed out. “Not in the way you mean, anyway.”

“You were also under the influence of magical wine. And I don’t believe that Killua had yet made his feelings for you known.”

“He didn’t say it, no, but he still loved me. And besides, we kissed plenty of times after he said it, and we weren’t desperate, so why didn’t those ones work?”

“I wish that I knew the answer to that.”

Gon bowed his head. “I can’t lose him,” he said.
“Gon, my child,” she said, sweet voice unspooling from her few lingering leaves, “there are some fights you cannot win—particularly the ones involving Fate.”

“But this has nothing to do with fate, and everything to do with Killua’s bastard of a brother and his black magic!”

“That does not mean that Fate doesn’t hold any cards.”

“So fate brought us together just to tear us apart again? Why?”

Senritsu thought for a time, her yellow leaves whispering together. At last, she said, “Often the most precious and beautiful things are the most ephemeral.”

“So this is his reward for three hundred years of pain and grief and loneliness?” Gon cried, anguished. “A few weeks of love, where we couldn’t even be real lovers?”

The tree-woman sighed. “Is that how you see what you share with Killua? As something incomplete?”

Yes! Gon wanted to scream, but he hesitated, because despite his rage he knew that it wasn’t quite true. They couldn’t do all the things that other lovers could, but did that make what they’d given each other any less precious? No. They might not have a long life together ahead of them, but did he regret the time they’d had? No. Would he change loving Killua even to spare himself the pain of losing him?

“Never.”

He wasn’t aware that he’d spoken the word aloud until he heard Senritsu’s “mmm” of approval. “I may never have had a lover, but I’ve borne witness to the world’s greatest love stories—” she swept her branches toward the tiers of shelves “—and I believe that qualifies me to say that the happiness that you and Killua have given each other is more than many people will ever know. Certainly more than he ever would have known if the curse had never been. His life would still have been a misery, but without a glimmer of happiness to mitigate it. Yours, I doubt would have been much better. So perhaps you will find a way to undo Illumi’s magic; perhaps you will not. But do not discount the gift that Fate has given you, and for the love of the gods, don’t waste the time you still have wishing that there were more of it!”
Gon had to fight down a sharp retort. But this wasn’t Senritsu’s fault. It was no one’s but Illumi’s, and no one but Illumi deserved to feel Gon’s anger for it. He sighed, nodded to Senritsu, and left the library behind, finally accepting that it held no answers.
Killua was awake when Gon returned to their room. Gon made himself smile despite his dejection, gathered Killua into his arms and kissed his lips, trying not to think about how insubstantial his body felt. Like driftwood, solid to look at but light as air.

“Were you in the library again?” Killua asked him.

“Again?” Gon asked, startled. He had thought he’d covered his tracks well. “How do you know that’s where I go?”

“The walls have ears here,” Killua said, his blue eyes as incisive as ever, despite his frailty. “And eyes. And probably noses and tongues. But you have to know that there isn’t anything there that will help with a curse. Don’t you think I’ve looked?”

“It was worth a try,” Gon said, curving his body around Killua’s.

“Gon,” Killua sighed, tucking his head into the crook of Gon’s neck. “You’re going to drive yourself mad like this.”
Gon was composing himself to answer when the door burst open. Alluka flew into the room, Nanika at her shoulder and Canary on her heels. “Gon!” she cried.

“Alluka, wait!” Canary said, their voices overlapping. The child fell still at the side of the bed, her spindly hands clutched in the blankets. She looked back at Canary pleadingly, and Canary gave her a stern look in return. Alluka turned her gaze downward.

Gon tensed around Killua, although he didn’t let him go. “What’s going on?”

Canary met his eyes with clear difficulty. “Nanika has received a message from your family,” she said, her voice stilted and strange.

“What is it?” Gon asked, trying to shove away the wash of dread Canary’s words dragged with them.

“I… ” Canary said, and then paused. “I don’t know what it means, nor does Alluka, but your sister…something is not right—”

“Just let her show you, Gon!” Alluka burst out, but Gon was already reaching his hands out to Nanika.

Nanika flew to him, her eyes wide and, he thought, desperate. It had grown marginally easier to hold her gaze in the way necessary to receive her messages, but this time he recoiled, the flow of her thoughts too quick and scattered for him to focus on.

“Nanika, please slow down?” he said, looking away and leaning against the bed-frame for support in his sudden dizziness.

Nanika clutched her hands together, shut her eyes and then opened them. Once again, Gon reached out and felt her wispy touch, looked into the pits of her eyes. At first he wasn’t certain what he was looking at: a dim room, constellations of tiny colored lights stringing between monitors showing various readouts. Gradually, though, Nanika’s thoughts stilled, and he could see a bed in the midst of it all. Komugi lay on it like a stranded sea-creature, lines and wires snaking from her thin body, her eyes closed. Mito sat by her, holding one of her hands, her forehead resting on the mattress.

Gon pulled away, reeling. “Komugi’s sick!”
“Is that what those things with the lights mean?” Alluka asked, her voice small and miserable.

“Yes,” Gon said grimly. “Did Nanika see how this started?”

“No. She went to see her today and she was like this.”

“She’s never been healthy,” Gon said. “But they have money now, don’t they? They can afford the best doctors, they should be able to help her, shouldn’t they?” Then his frantic mind seized on something else. He turned to Killua. “Unless this is magic. Do you think your brother—”

“No,” Canary said firmly. “I spoke with Nanika too. If there had been black magic—any magic—involved, she would have felt it.”

Gon dropped his head into his hands, far from relieved. If Komugi was sick enough to warrant all of that machinery, it might as well be black magic. “What am I going to do? Mito can’t lose Komugi, too!”

Killua laid his hands on Gon’s shoulders. “You’re going to go back to them,” he said, his scratchy voice resolute, “with a medicine that will save your sister.”

Gon shook his head. “Go back to them? Isn’t that impossible?”

Killua sighed. “It’s impossible for you to go back and stay. But you are allowed a dispensation—only one. The same one Mito used. You can have a day and a night, sundown to sundown, to go where you like. But that’s all. If you don’t return before the sun sets tomorrow—”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll die along with everyone I love.”

Killua gave him a long look, and there was an element of surmise in it that Gon didn’t like at all. “No,” he said at last. “I will.”

Gon gazed at him, stunned. “But you told Mito—”
“Yes, and I told her the truth. If she hadn’t returned or sent someone in her place, you would all have died as I’m now dying. But I would suffer this curse a thousand times before I would inflict it on you or anyone you love, and this is one of the few things left over which I have power.”

Gon’s stomach was a roil of dread. “I don’t understand.”

“I told you that I have a little bit of magic still,” Killua said, his voice so tired, his eyes shadowed and lids drooping but the blue still swarming with love. “This seems as good a way to use it as any.”

“Killua?” Gon’s voice shook.

Killua reached out and took his hand, holding it carefully so that the fine thorns on the backs of his own fingers didn’t catch Gon’s skin. “I’m reversing the terms of the dispensation. If you fail to return by sundown tomorrow, the curse will complete itself, but you and those you love will remain untouched.”

“Killua, no!” Gon cried, but at the same moment a pulse ran through Killua’s hand and into his own, a tingle like electricity accompanied by a faint flicker of blue light. “Oh, Killua,” Gon said, pressing Killua’s bird-bone hands to his lips as tears filled his eyes. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I love you,” Killua said, “and I want you to be happy.”

“I’ll come back,” Gon said fiercely. “I’ll be here by sunset tomorrow if I have to walk through hell to do it!”

“Mmm,” Killua said, his eyes drifting shut. “So much easier just to let Leorio drive you, though. Kurapika will make the medicine for your sister. And ask Canary about the chests for your family…” With that, he fell asleep.

* *

By late afternoon, Gon was ready. He’d packed his duffle bag with a change of clothes, the medicines that Kurapika had given him for Komugi, and four wooden chests full of all sorts of valuables, which Canary had shown him in room near the gallery.
“Do you have rooms full of these?” Gon asked in astonishment as he opened the smallest of them, made of dark wood and ornately carved with roses. It was full of jewelry, all clearly very old and very valuable.

“Valuables?” Canary asked somewhat absently. “Yes, I suppose, though Killua has sold much of it off. But he packed these chests a couple of months ago. Well, the first three anyway. The fourth Alluka packed this morning, specially for Komugi.”

“Why?” Gon asked, not allowing her to avert her eyes.

Canary ran a hand through her leafy hair, the yellow now laced with brittle brown, coming away with a handful of it. She shook it off in distaste. “In case you needed to leave quickly.”

“Why would I need to leave quickly?”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing now?” Canary asked, with an expression that suggested an arched eyebrow.

Gon sighed. “Okay, fine, but…I don’t like it. That he planned that. That this is happening.”

“I don’t like it either, Gon. But we are where we are. Now, help me get these downstairs. Leorio will be waiting.”

Gon nodded. Though none were particularly large, the chests were heavy enough that he had to make a separate trip for each of them. When he came to the main stairway with the last one he found Killua waiting for him, leaning on Kurapika. Silently, Kurapika reached for the chest and Gon handed it over, and then pulled Killua’s arm over his shoulders. He wore a soft quilted jacket against the chill that had invaded the castle’s rooms, but even so, Gon could feel the bite of the thorns through its padding. His heart wrenched, his guts twisted with foreboding.

“Killua, maybe there’s another way—” he began.

“No,” Killua interrupted, his voice soft but firm. “You have to go to your family. They need you.”
“You need me, too.”

“Right now, they need you more.”

“I’ll come back to you Killua,” Gon said, his voice wavering despite how he tried to keep it steady. “I won’t let anything happen to you or your family.”

“I know,” Killua said, smoothing the furrows in Gon’s forehead with his fingers. “But promise me that while you’re with your own family, you’ll be with them. Not worrying about me.”

Gon nodded; it felt like less of a lie than a spoken agreement.

“Come,” Killua said, and slowly they descended the stairs. It was a month or more since Killua had left the house, but he didn’t hesitate to follow Gon out the front door, down the drive to the open gates, beyond which the car stood waiting. Leorio stood speaking softly with Kurapika just inside the barrier.

When Gon and Killua approached, the tree man and the human embraced, holding on as if for dear life, and then Kurapika disengaged, turned away. “Godspeed, Gon,” he said and then hurried back toward the castle without a backward glance. Leorio sighed, and retreated to the car.

Alluka stepped forward then and flung her arms around Gon’s waist. “Hug Komugi for me,” she said.

“I will,” Gon told her, bending down to kiss her leafy head. She tightened her grip on him for a moment and then pulled away, wiping sticky tears.

“May the gods watch over you,” Canary said, nodding to him gracefully. He nodded back, wondering why all of these goodbyes felt so final. Did they know something that he didn’t? But then Canary, too had turned away, and Gon was left with Killua.

For a long, silent moment they only looked at each other. Five months had passed, more or less, since Gon had arrived at this place full of righteous anger, ready to make his point and then go back home. Now the thought of leaving was enough to tear his heart to shreds.
He turned to look through the open gate. In the world beyond the castle’s slowly fading summer, the mountain winter had drained to its dregs. Snowdrops lifted their heads to the patches of sunlight that pierced the forest’s thick branches, and the canopy was alive with birdsong. To Gon, though, it looked as bleak as midwinter.

“I’m afraid to leave you,” he said, clutching Killua’s hands.

“You have to help Komugi.”

“Leorio could do that.”

“Gon. She needs you. But also, you’ll be glad to see them, and they’ll be glad to see you.” Killua’s eyes were warm and his voice gentle, but he couldn’t quite hide the pain in either.

“Promise me that you’ll take care of yourself while I’m gone.”

“Of course I will.”

*But will you? Can you? Who will read you to sleep? Who will hold you when you wake up crying?*

“Gon, I can see you worrying. But it’s only one night. You’ll be back here before you realize, and wishing you weren’t.”

“Never,” Gon said, and pulled Killua’s head down and kissed him. Killua kissed back hungrily; desperately? A final kiss, one to hold onto when there would be no more? *Don’t think that!*

But he couldn’t not think it.

Too soon, Killua was pulling away. “You’ve got to go. Sunset is the only time that this will work.”

Gon nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Then he turned, picked up his bag, and stepped through
the barrier.

**Killua**

*I manage to smile until the car is out of sight, but when the silence has settled again, the tears come. He doesn’t deserve them; a truer man never walked this earth, and I know that he would rather die than break his promise to return to me.*

*Why, then, am I so certain that I will never see him again?*

Chapter End Notes

I hope that this is coherent, cause I'm not! Under the influence of two antibiotics and a tetanus shot...

(The tl;dr version: I foster kitties for a local shelter, and rn I have a momma who had 8 kittens last Friday. The day after she was not very well and I had to take her temps and she did NOT appreciate that and sank her teeth into my arm. And it got infected, so here we are! But it is getting better, I just feel rotten from the meds, including brain fog.)

All this does make me hope Gon has his tetanus shot up to date given all those thorns! ;-)

)
Chapter Summary

Gon goes home and gets some Mito wisdom.

Chapter Notes

Long weekend so I decided to give you a long chapter as a holiday present! :-) (Plus I'm feeling a lot better! Thanks for all the good wishes!)

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This time, Gon was aware of every minute of the drive from the castle back to the city, though he still couldn’t have re-traced the journey out of the mountains if his life depended on it.

“Did you drug me and Mito when you drove us before?” he asked Leorio when they passed through the first village, about an hour into the trip: a village Gon had no recollection of seeing before.

Leorio grew in his estimation when he didn’t prevaricate, but simply said, “Yes. Sort of. It was magic, and I didn’t make it, but I did open the bottle and let you breathe it in. In my defense, I did it under duress.”

“Killua made you?”

Leorio snorted. “Killua would never think of it. Kurapika did.”

“Why?”

“Because he didn’t trust Mito not to come back with a mob and pitchforks.” Leorio glanced over at Gon, who’d insisted on riding in the front seat with him. “Which, given how things turned out, I’d say was justified.”
“I’m not a mob,” Gon pointed out, “and the most dangerous thing I brought with me was a pencil sharpener.”

“Sure, but Kurapika didn’t know what Mito might try. And for the record, you kind of proved his point when you showed up instead of your aunt.”

Gon laughed. “Why? What did he think I was going to do?”

“Kill Killua,” Leorio said, deadly serious.

“What?” Gon asked, turning to him in shock.

“Well, you certainly had the motivation.”

“Shit,” Gon muttered, wondering if they’d all been equally afraid.

“Killua may be living in a magical time-frame,” Leorio continued, “but he’s still mortal—and a fragile mortal at that.”

Of course Gon knew this; he held the evidence in his arms every day, listened to them play out as labored breaths and nightmare ramblings in the dark. And yet, hearing the words spoken shook him to his core. Even before they’d met—really, from the time his aunt had come home with her outlandish story—Killua had seemed invincible, larger than life. But he hadn’t been, any more than Gon was himself. Less so, if anything, because he’d been ill. If it had come to a fight that first night, Gon might have hurt him badly. Worse. He shuddered at the thought.

“So you can see why Kurapika worried,” Leorio said dryly, clearly having read Gon’s expression.

“Well, yeah. If Killua dies, so does Kurapika.”

Leorio peered at him over his small round glasses, disappointment clear in his kind, dark eyes. “Really, Gon? Do you honestly think it’s his own skin Kurapika is worried about saving?”
“To be honest, I don’t have any idea what goes on in Kurapika’s head.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” Leorio said bitterly. “But I do know this: he loves Killua fiercely. They all do. Each of those Halflings would give their life for him—so I hope to hell you know what you’re doing, because if you hurt him, they’ll kill you.”

“Hurt him?” Gon cried, furious. “What have I done that could possibly make you think he means anything other than the whole world to me? Even when I thought I hated him, I wouldn’t have hurt him. Well, not unless he attacked me.”

“Sorry,” Leorio said after a moment, shoulders slumping. “You’re right. You’ve acted honorably toward us all even in the worst of circumstances, and I know that you love him. I just…” He waved a hand in the air. “It’s so damned hard.”

“I know,” Gon sighed. Because he did know, and now he was banking on the fact that Leorio felt for Kurapika even half of what he himself felt for Killua. He’d been mulling over the plan since he realized that he really was going home, and that Leorio would be driving him there. Now he had to put it into action, but carefully; Leorio was highly-strung, no doubt quick with suspicion.

So he allowed a few minutes’ silence, and then he asked casually, “So how long have you been here?”

“Five years, give or take,” Leorio answered with a shrug.

“And when did you meet Kurapika?”

“Not long after that.”

Gon considered his next words carefully: an awful lot hinged on them. “Do you know what he looked like when he was human?”

“No,” Leorio sighed. “He doesn’t like to talk about it.” He shot a glance at Gon. “Wait, why? Do you?”
“Sure,” Gon answered with studied indifference. “I’ve seen a portrait.”

“What?” Leorio cried. “He said there were no pictures!”

Gon smiled. “And you believed him?”

“Why would he lie?” Leorio snapped.

“Maybe he wants to be sure you love him for who he is.”

“He’s a goddamned tree!” Leorio growled. “Of course I love him for who he is!” Leorio glowered at the road ahead of them for a few moments. Finally, he asked, “Okay, what’s he hiding? Believe me, however bad it is, it won’t change how I feel.”

Gon had to suppress a smile when he thought of the delicately beautiful blond man in one of the household portraits. And the other one, infinitely more interesting, in which some sharp-eyed artist had chosen him as a model for the main figure in a group of angels fainting in the passion of their worship of some god or other.

“Interesting you think it’s something bad,” he said.

“Well, wouldn’t you, given the shit that goes on in that place?”

“You have a point.” Gon was beginning to enjoy this, despite everything. Leorio didn’t want to ask; he also clearly wasn’t going to be able to hold out.

“Are you saying it isn’t something bad?” he finally burst out in a rush.

Gon grinned. “Not unless you have a thing against gorgeous petite blonds.”

Leorio shot a narrow look at Gon. “How gorgeous are we talking?”
Gon considered him. “How long is this drive?”

“How about three hours. Why?”

“Because,” Gon said, “I’m could draw him for you.”

Leorio’s look narrowed further. “‘Could’?”

“I don’t work for free,” Gon said, “and while you might enjoy sightseeing in Idrisi, I kind of think that you’d rather spend the time helping to break this goddamned curse. I can’t exactly do it, so I think you should spend the time looking for every piece of information you can find about Illumi Zoldyck and where he might be hiding. I’ll show you your boyfriend in exchange. Sound fair?”

Leorio sighed. “I knew you were trouble the minute I set eyes on you.”

“Congratulations,” Gon said, pulling out his sketchbook and pens, “you were right. But you can’t tell me you haven’t thought of Illumi before.”

“Of course I’ve thought of him before,” Leorio muttered. He tapped a cigarette out of a crumpled pack in the cup holder, and then offered one to Gon.

“Are you kidding?” Gon said. “Those things will kill you!”

“So will Illumi if he finds out you’re looking for him.” Leorio lit the cigarette, opening the window to blow out the smoke.

“How do you know that?”

Leorio gave him a baleful look. “I doubt the would-be heir would be happy to know that Killua has found the love of his life.”
“I don’t see how that matters,” Gon said grimly, staring hard at his drawing, “since it hasn’t broken the curse so far.”

Silence spooled out between them. Then Gon said, “Besides, Illumi might be dead.”

“Oh, he’s alive,” Leorio sighed, surprising Gon into meeting his eyes.

“How do you know that?”

“Do you really think that I haven’t tried everything to break the curse, too?”

Gon sighed. “But you haven’t found him yet.”

“No, and I stopped looking.”

“Why?”

“First of all, because if he is alive, he’s stayed hidden for three hundred years. I don’t think a country doctor is going to be the one to smoke him out. Second—” he held up a hand to silence Gon, who was opening his mouth to protest “—he obviously isn’t the kind of person to let something go. This whole mess was always a personal vendetta. He wanted to hurt Killua as badly as he could, and he won’t want to miss the last act.”

“You think he’ll come back to the castle? When Killua’s…” He couldn’t make himself think it, never mind say it.

“It wouldn’t surprise me. Like I said, he wants to see Killua suffer, and he probably means to take the place back when… if…” He shook his head, trailing off.

Gon plunged on: “But if we find him first, maybe we can make him undo what he did.”

“What makes you think he would ever do that?”
“Killua could offer to turn it all over to him. The estate. The money.”

“I think this has gone far beyond that.”

“There must be something that he wants, besides just making his brother miserable.”

“Maybe? But either way, I’ve already turned over all the stones I could find, Gon.”

“Have you looked in Idrisi?”

“No… it’s so big.”

“Yep. Port city. Great place to hide. People willing to look for people hiding, for the right sum.”

“Do I look like I have the right sum?” Leorio asked, gesturing to his threadbare jacket.

“Do you know what’s in those chests in the back of the car?”

Leorio groaned.

“Thought so. Take what you need, and use it to find that bastard!”

Leorio sighed again. “You are obnoxiously persistent.”

Gon raised his eyebrows. “Says the guy in love with a half-tree.” He pretended to focus on shading around Kurapika’s eyes, but he could see Leorio looking at the drawing, and the soft longing in his eyes when he did.

“Point taken,” Leorio said at last.
“So, deal?”

“Fine. I’ll try. But don’t get your hopes up, and for the love of the gods, don’t say *anything* about this to Kurapika!”

Gon nodded to the older man.

Leorio only shook his head, muttering, “I am an idiot.”

*#

The rest of the drive passed mostly in silence, Gon moving to the backseat when the daylight faded so that he could continue to work on his drawing by the car’s interior lights without distracting Leorio. When the lights of the city came into view, however, he put away his pencils and shut the sketchbook, too nervous to concentrate.

He’d forgotten in his haste to leave the castle and his worry for Komugi that his family no longer lived in the Belsonso, and he almost corrected Leorio when he turned off of the highway that led into the city. Then he remembered, and kept his silence as they headed west along the coast. They passed through several sleepy fishing villages before they left civilization entirely behind. On one side of the narrow strip of road dunes rose high, covered with tall, sparse grasses and wind-warped trees. On the other, pale sand stretched silver in the moonlight to the reaching sea. It was beautiful, and of course Mito would have taken her family as far from the mire of the city as possible; but why, Gon wondered, hadn’t she gone back to the island?

The answer came to him almost as quickly as the question: it would have been too much like leaving him behind. Mito had kept faith that he would return to them—and she had been right.

Leorio turned off the lonely road at last, following a sandy driveway through high, rugged, half-desert plant growth toward a small blue house set on a spit of rocky land at the edge of the sea. Most of the windows were dark, but one still glowed with warm yellow light, and there was a lamp on over the front door. Leorio pulled up in front of the house and the door opened. A woman stood silhouetted against the golden light, frozen—no doubt with fear at what the reappearance of this car might mean.

Quickly, Gon tore the portrait of Kurapika from the sketchbook and handed it to Leorio, along with a
handful of gold coins from one of the chests. “Find Illumi. For Kurapika, if nothing else.”

Leorio nodded, gazing at the picture. Gon opened the car door and stepped out. For a moment, Mito remained still. And then, with a cry, she flung herself forward and wrapped Gon in her arms.

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Leorio stayed only long enough to help Gon unload the trunks into the house, and then he left, saying to Gon as he went, “Be ready to go at two tomorrow.”

“Is that enough time?” Gon asked.

“That gives us more than five hours until sunset—and me enough time to dig properly.”

They nodded to each other, and then he was gone, and Mito was pulling him into a comfortable sitting room with large windows facing the sea, asking him what seemed a hundred questions at once.

“Mito,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders, “I promise that I’ll tell you everything, but first, where is Komugi?”

Mito blanched. “I’ll take you to her. But Gon, she’s sick—”

“I know. That’s why I’m here. I have medicine for her.”

Mito’s eyes were sad, shadowed. “That’s kind of you, but Dr. Blythe has tried everything, and they are the best in the field.”

Gon smiled at her gently, taking Kurapika’s bottles from his messenger bag. “I’ll bet Dr. Blythe hasn’t tried magic,” he said.

Mito’s eyes widened. “Gon?”
“Trust me. Take me to Mugi, and can you bring a glass of water?”

Mito hurried to the kitchen and filled a glass, then led Gon down a corridor hung with watercolor seascapes, to a door that stood slightly ajar. She pushed it open, and Gon found himself looking into the room that Nanika had showed him—had it really been that same day?

He stepped inside. It was warm and close with the smell of illness and medicine, the whirring and beeping of machinery. A young woman with wild, dark-pink hair and nurse’s scrubs sat at a desk, writing notes in a chart. She smiled at Mito and then looked questioningly at Gon.

“Machi, this is my nephew, Gon. He’s been away, but he came to see Komugi.”

“Oh,” the nurse said, “of course.”

“Would you mind giving us a moment?”

The nurse inclined her head and left the room, shutting the door softly behind her. Gon approached the bed where Komugi lay unmoving, her breathing shallow. “What happened to her?” he asked Mito.

Mito stood beside him, shook her head. “One infection too many. Her lungs were already damaged, and now they’re so badly scarred that she can’t breathe on her own anymore. She needs a double transplant, but donors are almost impossible to find at her age, never mind two.”

Gon bit his lip and stroked Komugi’s hair, praying that Kurapika’s magical tinctures would be enough to save her. “Does she wake up?”

“Sometimes.”

“Can we try to do it now? Because to be honest, I don’t know if this stuff will work through an IV.” Gon touched the line from the hanging bag of fluid that snaked into Komugi’s arm.
“We can. But Gon, what exactly is ‘this stuff’? You said magic…” She gave him a skeptical look.

Gon met her eyes squarely. “And I meant it. The whole place, Killua’s castle, is swimming in magic.”

Mito frowned at him. “Killua? Is that the name of the owner?”

“Yes.”

“And you trust him—trust whatever he gave you?”

“I would trust him with my life.”

“I see,” Mito said, clearly unhappy. “It appears you have a lot to tell me. But Komugi first.” She turned again to Gon. “Why don’t you wake her. It will make her so happy that you’re home.”

And it will break her heart when she learns that I’m not staying. But that didn’t matter right now. Gon sat down on the chair beside the bed and took one of Komugi’s hands. It felt like Killua’s: a form filled with air, not truly occupied.

“Mugi,” he said, squeezing her hand gently and stroking her face, “wake up.”

Her forehead creased. She murmured something, and then settled back into sleep.

“Please, Komugi. I’ve come a long way, and I’ve brought something that will make you feel better, but you have to wake up.” He shook her shoulder.

This time, she whispered, “Gon?”

“That’s right. I’m here.” He smiled at her as her eyes opened, although she couldn’t see it.
She turned toward the sound of his voice, her eyebrows drawing together. “It’s really you?” she asked, her voice as ruined as Killua’s.

“It’s really me. Nanika told me that you were sick, so I came to bring you medicine.”

“Nanika’s here?”

“No. Just me. Mito’s going to help you sit up—” he glanced at Mito, who went to the other side of the bed and put an arm behind Komugi’s shoulders, lifting her to a sitting position as Gon took the small, stoppered glass bottles out of his bag and poured their contents into the water. For a moment they swirled with iridescent color, and then the water was clear again.

Gon said, “I’m going to hold the glass for you. Make sure you drink all of it.”

Komugi nodded, and Gon put the glass to her lips. At first she sipped it weakly, but once she’d swallowed half the glass she sat up and held it by herself, drinking down the liquid greedily. She handed the empty glass to Gon and then pressed her hands to her cheeks, to which the color was rapidly returning. She drew a deep breath tentatively, and then another, less so. After a few more, she pulled away the oxygen tubes and laughed.

“Mito!” she cried. “It stopped hurting!”

“That’s wonderful Komugi,” Mito said, “but maybe you should keep the oxygen going until Machi checks you.”

Komugi shook her head. “She can check me, but I’m okay.” Still looking dubious, Mito went to call the nurse. Komugi turned to Gon. “What was that stuff?”

“Medicine from the castle,” he said.

She thought about this. “Why doesn’t it cure your friend?”

Gon stared at her. “You know about him?”
“Of course. Nanika shows him to me.”

“She… you mean, you can see what she shows you?”

“Yes,” Komugi said, her expression thoughtful. “I don’t know if it’s the same way that other people see, but I have pictures of it all in my head when I hold her hands.” She smiled slyly. “I’ve seen you kiss him. Is he your boyfriend?”

Gon blushed. *Thanks, Nanika!* “Ahh… yeah, he is. His name is Killua.”

She frowned. “So why don’t you help him? I know he’s sick.”

Gon sighed. “Because what he has isn’t like what you have. Medicine can’t help him.”

Komugi looked ready to ask more, but Mito came back in then with the nurse, who asked Gon to step aside while she examined the little girl. Her initial look of puzzlement grew to one of wonder as she ran through increasingly complex tests, and Komugi met them all unfazed.

When she was finished, she said, “We’ll need to have Dr. Blythe examine her, and she’ll need to have proper tests at the hospital to make sure, but it seems she’s made a complete recovery. I just don’t understand how.” She gave Gon a pointed look.

He shrugged. “Let’s call it a miracle and accept it?”

Machi quirked an eyebrow at him. “I think I’ll wait for the doctor to sign off on it before I call it anything. And right now, Komugi should rest.”

“But I want to talk to Gon!” Komugi protested.

“Machi is right, Komugi,” Mito said. “You might be better, but you shouldn’t overdo anything, and Gon will be here tomorrow.” Mito shot him a look that told him quite clearly that he’d better be.
“Will you, Gon?” Komugi asked. “You’re not going back to Killua?”

“I’ll be here tomorrow,” Gon said. “Promise.”

But Komugi had heard the hesitation before he spoke. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“It’s late, Mugi, and it’s a long story. Can we leave it till morning?”

She sighed. “If you really promise to be here then.”

“I do,” he said. “Pinky promise.” Gon held out his pinky, and Komugi linked her own around it.

“Whoever breaks the promise—” she said.

“Has to swallow a thousand needles—” Gon added.

“Sealed with a kiss!” Komugi concluded, but instead of pressing her thumb to Gon’s, she wrapped her skinny arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. “I’m so glad you came back,” she said.

“I promised I would,” he said, hugging her tightly.

“Yes, but you love Killua. It wasn’t easy to leave him.”

Mito bristled and Gon sighed, wondering just how angry she would be when she heard all of it. “I do,” he said to Komugi, “and it wasn’t. But you needed me, and I love you too. Now try to sleep, sweet pea. I tell you all of it tomorrow.”

Komugi nodded, and lay back down.

“Gon,” Mito said, “let me speak with Machi, and then I’ll meet you in the sitting room. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen.”
Gon squeezed Komugi’s hand and then retreated, making his way back down the narrow hallway into the house’s main room. The sitting room and kitchen were all one big space, high-ceilinged with whitewashed beams. But although it could have held at least three of their old flat, he had grown so used to the scale of the castle that this house felt almost toy-like. It was strange, too, after the castle’s pristine cleanliness to see dust in the corners, to crunch sand underfoot, to look through windows smudged and crusted with dried salt from sea-spray.

Gon made his way to the kitchen area and opened the refrigerator. He was pulling out sandwich makings when Mito joined him.

“Sit,” she said, “I’ll make that.”

“You don’t have to—” Gon began.

She silenced him with a look. “After what you just did for Komugi? I think I can make you a sandwich, Gon Freecss. Now sit. I can imagine what kind of day you’ve had.” She indicated the table that stood between the kitchen and the sitting room. Gon hadn’t paid it much attention when he passed it, but now he saw that it was a beautiful piece, made of satiny sea-weathered wood. All of the furnishings were similar: simple, even understated, but of gorgeous quality. He sat down, running a hand along the grain of the wood, and a moment later Mito set two sandwiches and a glass of orange juice in front of him.

“Thank you,” he said, and bit into one of them as she sat down. He chewed, swallowed and then asked, “How is Abe?”

Mito sighed. “You’ll have seen her, of course. Through that…whatever she is, who visits Komugi.”

“Nanika. She’s a tree spirit.”

Mito waved a dismissive hand. “So you’ll know that she’s happier here. But there’s very little of her left. I don’t think she’ll see summer through. But I suppose she’s had a long life, and a good portion of it was happy.”

Gon nodded, and Mito let him eat in peace. When he was done, though, she said, “So you’ve fallen in love with the master, have you?”
Gon blushed, but he met her eyes. “I know how that must sound.”

“I think there’s a term for it,” Mito said dryly. “People who fall in love with their kidnappers.”

“Mito,” Gon sighed, “it isn’t like that. Not at all.”

“I met him, Gon,” she said wryly. “He threatened to tear off my limbs. Forgive me for not being overjoyed.”

“Okay. But you asked me once to hear your story before I asked questions. Will you listen to mine?”

She sighed, but she nodded. Gon drew a deep breath, and then he began to tell her about the past five months. To her credit, Mito listened without interrupting, even when he told her things that must stretch her credulity to the limits. He could also see her softening toward Killua as he spoke until, when his voice hitched as he told her about their parting that afternoon, she said, “Oh, sweet boy,” and wrapped him in her arms. He wept onto her shoulder as he hadn’t since he could still fit into her lap; since his hurts had still been within her ability to soothe.

At last he sat back, swiping at his tears with his hand and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Mito asked.

“For dumping all of that on you.”

“Gon, I’m your mother. Who’s better qualified to hear it?”

Gon sighed. “I just…I know that it must be hard for you to hear me say those things about Killua, after everything that’s happened. And…and he’s a man…”

Mito snorted. “Do you think I care about that?”
“Honestly? I have no idea. We’ve never talked about it.”

“No, we haven’t,” she said, her voice grave. “And I was terrified that we’d never have reason to.”

Gon paused, eyes flashing up to hers. “I don’t understand?”

She smiled sadly, shaking her head. “Do you think that I haven’t noticed that you’ve never brought anyone home? You’re almost nineteen and you’ve never talked about a crush. And okay, maybe most teenage boys wouldn’t tell their mothers things like that, but I wasn’t born yesterday. I’d have known if you were interested in someone, and you never were, and I was so afraid that your father had taken that from you along with everything else… and that maybe I’d helped.”

Gon tried to make sense of her words, the look on her face, the tears gathering in her eyes, but his beleaguered mind and heart failed him. “I’m sorry, Mito, but I still don’t understand.”

Mito choked out a sob, shaking her head. “Your mother skipped out before you ever knew her. Your father dumped you with me and Abe to go off and have adventures. And me, well, I’ve never even bothered to try at romance. Everyone around you has made a mess of that part of their lives. Isn’t that why you’ve been afraid to be with someone?”

“That’s what you thought?” Gon asked incredulously.

“Well isn’t it?” she demanded.

*Gods, what a mess we make of things when we don’t just speak our hearts!* “No,” he said with a bitter laugh. “Gods, no, Mito. I’ve been afraid to be with someone because I’ve never met anyone who wanted me for *me*. They wanted to buy me. To use me while it suited them and then dump me back on the streets.”

He looked up at his aunt. Her form blurred with tears he hadn’t realized he was shedding. “When you left for Kart Hadusht, and the café was closed, do you know how I fed Abe and Mugi?”

“Do I want to?”
He shook his head. “With money Bisky gave me to buy tighter pants, so I’d get bigger tips and she’d get a bigger cut of them.”

“Gods, Gon,” Mito said, her own tears flowing freely now. “Oh, sweetheart—why didn’t you tell me it was that bad?”

He shrugged. “Because there wasn’t a choice. We needed the money, and it was still better than letting someone fuck me for it.”

Mito didn’t reprimand him for the curse as she normally would have. In fact said nothing, probably because there was really nothing to say. Silence stretched and thinned between them. At last, she broke it.

“I’m so sorry, Gon,” she said, her voice small, defeated.

“You’re sorry?” he cried. “All of this is his fault!”

She shook her head with a sad half-smile. “No, it isn’t.”

“Ging left us!”

“True. But I haven’t exactly made a stunning success of motherhood either. I didn’t even know what Bisky was doing to you.”

“I made sure you wouldn’t.”

“And Komugi almost died—”

“But she didn’t.”

“And you’re afraid of love.”
“Not anymore.”

“Mmm, and that brings us back to the point.” Her gold-green eyes met his, and held them. “I can admit to being wrong, Gon. And if you love Killua that much, then I was probably wrong about him. But are you sure about him? Does he see you?”

“More clearly than anyone ever has, I think,” Gon answered softly.

Mito nodded. “Then you have my blessing.”

“Which is lovely, Mito, but he’s dying.” Gon dragged his hands down his face, weariness trailing in their wake. He leaned on the table. “What am I going to do?”

Mito’s look was pained. “I’m not sure that there’s anything you can do, other than keep loving him as long as he’s with you.”

“I can’t lose him,” Gon said, his voice low and rasping as Killua’s was after the hours of talking. “I don’t know how I’d live without him.” He shook his head. “And I don’t know why the curse isn’t broken, given that.”

Mito studied him for a long moment. “Tell me again exactly what this Illumi said about breaking it?”

Gon spoke the words he knew inside out: “True love’s kiss—true, pure, mutual love—will break the curse…should you ever manage to compel such a thing.”

“Charming family your Killua had,” she said wryly.

“Yeah,” Gon sighed.

“Well? Is there anything obvious that doesn’t fit the requirements?”

“No that I can see,” Gon answered. “It’s love, and it’s true, and it’s pure—I mean, we were pure before…” He glanced up at his aunt, then away, blushing. “Ah, anyway, it’s definitely mutual. So
why don’t the kisses work?”

“Maybe,” Mito said slowly, “you’re thinking of ‘pure’ the wrong way. Maybe it’s not about sex.”

Gon’s face burned, but he was too tired and desperate to be anything but direct. “Then what is it about?”

“I have no idea. It just seems to me that that’s the easiest of the three conditions to misinterpret. There are so many things that it can mean.”

Gon frowned. “Killua thinks that it means that it won’t work if he loves a man. Illumi knew that he preferred boys, and he didn’t approve.”

“But you don’t think that’s it,” Mito suggested.

Gon shrugged. “From what I’ve seen, that’s not how magic works. I mean, it’s not subtle. I don’t think it takes prejudices and implications into account. It’s too absolute for that kind of thing.” he paused, then said, “So if Illumi didn’t specifically say ‘it can’t be a man’ then I don’t think it can’t be a man.”

“Alright. So if magic is direct and absolute, you need to figure out what about the way you and Killua love each other isn’t direct and absolute.”

Gon bristled at that. “Nothing! I couldn’t love him more, and I know he feels the same.”

“I don’t doubt the strength of either of your love for the other,” Mito said patiently, “but if it comes down to rules and loopholes, then there must be something you’re missing.”

“Like?”

She paused, considering, and then she said, “Don’t be angry at this, Gon, but I think you need to consider whether the two of you loved each other wholeheartedly during those kisses.”
Gon shoved down the anger that did indeed spring to life at that and said, “I never stop loving him, especially not when we kiss!”

“But that’s not quite the same thing. Take your first kiss.”

“Bad example. I was stupid and cut myself and Killua freaked out.”

“Yes, but by the logic of the curse, it should have broken before you cut yourself. Why didn’t it?”

“I really don’t know,” Gon sighed, “and believe me, I’ve thought about it a lot.”

“How do you think Killua was feeling when he kissed you that night?”

“He seemed happy. I’d never seen him so happy.”

“And no doubt he was. But it was his first kiss, with all of that pressure to break the curse piled on top of it. He was probably nervous, and worried, and maybe even afraid. He loved you, and I’m sure that he wanted to kiss you, but it also probably wasn’t the only thing in his heart when it happened. How could it have been?”

Gon considered this. It made a terrible kind of sense, and not just in Killua’s case. After all, had he ever kissed Killua without even a streak of hope that it would finally break the curse? Of worry that it wouldn’t? His heart sank.

“If that’s true,” he said, “how are we ever going to get it right? We’re only human, and there’s so much at stake. There isn’t much that I want from him when I kiss him other than to kiss him; but as long as this curse lasts, I’ll always be wanting to save his life, too.”

His aunt’s eyes were full of pity. “I don’t know, Gon. I don’t even know if I’m right about this. But I can see how much you love him, and that tells me that you know as much as anyone will ever know about how to save him. Now come—you need to sleep. It’s very late, and Komugi will want to spend as much time with you as she can tomorrow, and then you have a long journey home.”

The word rang in his heart; his eyes smarted with the deep and selfless love it must have taken Mito
to speak it. Gon wondered, as she led him to his room, if he would ever come close to achieving his mother’s depth of grace.
Chapter Summary

Gon and the fam! Yay for the Freecss women and their wisdom! ;-) 

Chapter Notes

It seems all wrong to be posting a Killua-less chapter on Killua's birthday. So how about this: I'll write a Killua drabble for whoever asks first! But give me a prompt!

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Mito didn’t tell Gon that the bedroom had been waiting for him, but it was more than obvious. The bed frame was made of driftwood arranged in a latticework, the bedding was his favorite hunter green. There was a desk set up for drawing, a comfortable chair by the window, pictures of the island on the walls and the few possessions he’d left behind were arranged on built-in bookshelves.

“The bathroom is across the hall,” Mito told him. “Everything you should need is in there. Do you want me to wake you in the morning?”

“Yes, please. As soon as Komugi wakes up.”

“Alright. Sleep well, love.”

“Thank you, Mito,” Gon said, bending to hug her. “I’m sorry that I can’t stay longer.”

“It’s alright, Gon. You’ve done so much for us. And I think…well, I think we will be meeting again before too long.”

His heart stuttered. “Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, “but that’s what I’m afraid of.”
Mito pushed him to arms’ length. “That’s not what I meant. Look, I have absolutely no reason to say this, except that my heart tells me it’s true: I meant that I think all of us will be meeting. And I will welcome Killua with open arms when we do.”

“I don’t think I deserve you, Mito,” Gon said tremulously.

“On the contrary. You deserve every good thing the world has to offer. Don’t lose faith that you can have them.”

Gon nodded, and Mito kissed his forehead, then retreated.

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He was back in the garden at the castle where he had previously spoken with dream-Killua. Now, though, everything was different. The sweet summer verdure was long gone, even the fading autumn version was a memory. Winter had claimed the castle grounds. The rose bushes’ few remaining leaves were dry and brown, their once-bright petals fallen, black with rot and covered with frost.

Gon threw back his head and cried, “Killua!”

There was no answer but the wind whistling through the bone-like branches, the sepulchral clatter of the last clinging leaves.

He turned toward the castle, as lightless and lifeless as the gardens. The front doors were open, swinging in the cold wind. He stepped inside. The once-cheery entrance hall was dark, the fireplace empty of all but ash. Traversing the corridors of the castle, Gon found them covered with dust and cobwebs and dry leaves that had blown in through broken windows. The candles were unlit stubs, the silence so hollow that Gon knew he was the only living thing there.

He came to the library doors, made himself push them open. Senritsu, Wing and Cheadle were bare, lifeless skeletons, their fallen leaves crumbled to dust. Rain had come in through the broken glass of the cupola, forming slimy greening puddles on the floor. Rows of priceless books were swollen with damp, their shelves bowed and warped beneath their weight.
Gon found the halflings slumped around the dining room table, still laid with plates of food long since rotted away. Their gaunt, barren forms were grey and leafless, and they showed no sign of life, no matter how he shook them and begged them to wake.

“Killua!” he cried again, wondering if he would find him in their rooms. Wondering if he could bear what he would find.

And then something brushed against his cheek, carried by a gust of wind from the broken windows. Gon caught it, stared at it: a single lavender rose petal, incongruous as a butterfly in this crypt of a house. He brushed his thumb over its velvety surface, thinking of the dream Killua had told him about, in which he’d crowned him with lavender roses; thinking of what these roses meant to them. And then he let it go. It tripped and whirled on the cold wind, and he followed it back out of the dining room.

There were more petals in the corridor, and more beyond that as he followed what was clearly a trail. It guided him out of the castle, along the paths of the frozen gardens, and all at once he knew where they were leading. With that realization, the ice began to close over his heart, too; but he followed the path onward toward its inevitable conclusion. What else was there to do?

The aspens were bare, their slender trunks reaching skyward like spent candle wicks. Gon could see the clearing before he even pushed into their midst, see the stones in the dry grass. He thought of the day that Killua had shown them to him, told them what they meant. The warmth of the sun that day, of their shoulders touching as they leaned together and told each other the tragedies of their lives, was a faint, fleeting breath; and then Gon was inside the cemetery, walking toward the new grave strewn with lavender roses.

He dropped to his knees, tears blurring the words carved into the ornate stone. He didn’t need to read them to know what they said. He didn’t need anyone to tell him that he had failed. He hadn’t loved enough, hadn’t loved correctly, and this grave would live where his heart had been for as long as he did. Which, all things considered, he hoped wouldn’t be very long.

“Ah,” a voice spoke then: melodious, even benevolent, except that it sent a shiver of dread down Gon’s spine. “At least one of you wishes within the bounds of reason.”

Gon raised his face from the frozen earth. A man stood behind Killua’s headstone, his long, pale hands resting on its corners, looking down at Gon with blank black eyes. He wore a grass-green jacket cut like the black one Killua had once worn, the bright color garish against the muted landscape. His long black hair whipped around his face like the tendrils of a creeping vine.

“Illumi,” Gon said.
“Correct,” the man answered with a pitiless smile.

“What did you do to him?” Gon demanded, getting to his feet.

Illumi’s eyes widened, a parody of innocence. “Me? Why, nothing at all. This was your doing, Gon Freecss: distracting him, appealing to his baser desires when he ought to have been looking for a natural love. He might have saved himself, if it hadn’t been for you.”

The words swam in Gon’s mind, black and oily but seductive in their way. Confusing, at the very least. Was this man right? Had Gon doomed his beloved? But no—Killua had loved him, too. Killua had chosen him. He shook his head, and the insidious words dispersed.

“Everything bad that’s happened here has happened because of you!” Gon snarled. “Don’t try to blame it on me, and never blame it on him!”

Illumi cocked his head, his insectile eyes curious. “The cur has teeth, I see.”

“I don’t know how you got into my head, but I do know that you’re not real, and Killua’s still alive, and you aren’t anywhere near as strong as you want me to think you are.”

Illumi cocked an eyebrow. “Oh? How do you know that?”

Gon scooped up a handful of rose petals. “Because you would never choose these. You’d choose blood red or black, but these? These are ours. And you aren’t strong enough to take them from us, even in a dream.”

Gon opened his hand and the wind took the rose petals, swirling them into a whirlwind that grew and thickened until it obliterated Illumi’s shrieking form—

—and then he was awake, gasping, shaking, his sheets soaked with sweat. For a few moments he
had no idea where he was; but then he heard the sound of surf breaking on a beach, smelled salt and old wood and wind-dried sheets and coffee and bacon, and the past day came rushing back. He looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was past nine. *So little time!*

Gon got up, headed to the bathroom, showered quickly (he had almost forgotten how a shower worked) and then dressed. His hair was still dripping water when he came into the sitting room. Mito, standing at the stove, threw him a tea towel and an exasperated look. Gon caught it sheepishly and swiped at his hair, just as Komugi hurled herself at him.

“Gon!” she cried, flinging her arms around him.

“Komugi,” he said, kneeling so that he could hug her properly. For a long time they just held each other, and then Gon gently pushed her away. “So you’re really better?”

“All better. Dr. Blythe came earlier and said so.”

“That’s not quite what they said,” Mito interjected. “She still needs to go to the hospital for tests, but they were happy enough with her recovery to leave it until tomorrow.” She didn’t say what they were all no doubt thinking: when Gon had returned to Killua.

Gon pushed that aside; this was his family’s time, and there was little enough of it. He studied Komugi. She certainly looked better than she ever had, with a healthy color and bright eyes. Looking into them, he asked, “Can you see at all? I mean, did the medicine do anything for your eyes?”

Komugi shook her head. “But it’s okay, Gon. I could never see. I don’t know how to miss it.”

“If you say so,” Gon said.

“Come say hi to Abe,” Komugi said, leading him toward a screened door that opened onto a wraparound porch. The heavier glass-paned door was open to let in the sea breeze. It still held the bite of winter, but also the freshness of spring. Pushing through it, Komugi led Gon to a porch swing, where Abe sat looking out to sea. It was bright turquoise in the morning light, scrolled with whitecaps.

“Abe, look,” Komugi said. “Gon’s come home.”
Abe turned, her milky eyes traveling over Gon’s face and body. “You’re different,” she said at last.

Gon smiled. At least she hadn’t called him Ging. “Am I?”

“Mmm. You’ve grown. And you’re sweet on someone.”

Gon flushed, scrubbing at the back of his head with one hand. “Ah…well…” He braced for interrogation, but Abe only cackled and went back to looking at the sea.

“Do you want to come in for breakfast, Abe?” Komugi asked, but their great-grandmother didn’t seem to have heard her.

Komugi sighed. “Come on,” she said to Gon, “maybe Mito can get her inside.”

Gon turned from the old woman with a touch of fond melancholy, brushing a hand gently over her white hair. He knew now what Mito had meant the night before. There wasn’t much left of her, and what there was, wasn’t tied to this place, or any on earth, Gon suspected.

Mito had set breakfast on the table when they came back in: eggs and bacon and coffee, toast and fresh berries and preserves and orange juice. Gon helped Komugi fill her plate, and then filled one of his own while Mito coaxed Abe inside. They didn’t speak of Gon’s months at the castle because Abe seemed to have forgotten that he had ever been gone, and she was contented; no one wanted to upset her or attempt to explain something so complicated.

After breakfast, though, Abe went to lie down, and then Mito asked, “What’s in those boxes you brought, Gon?”

“Oh.” He had completely forgotten about them. Now he wondered how his family would react to such audacious riches. “I’ll show you after we clean up.”

“Leave it,” Mito said. “We don’t have much time together, and I won’t let you spend it washing dishes.”
“Okay,” Gon agreed, hating the reminder of the fleeting nature of this visit. He brought the chests to the sitting room and set them in front of the couch, then he said to Mito and Komugi, “These are gifts from Killua. Go ahead: open them.”

Tentatively, Mito lifted the lid on the first of the chests. It was full of coins, currency that had fallen out of use at least two centuries ago. But the coins were gold, and their age would no doubt make them even more valuable. Mito blinked at them in disbelief. At last she said, “These must be worth a fortune. I…don’t know what to say.”

Gon smiled. “I don’t think you’re meant to say anything. You’re just supposed to accept them, and use them to be happy.”

Mito nodded dazedly. Gon guided Komugi’s hands to the next box. She opened it and felt inside, running her sensitive fingers over the soft fabrics within. “Are they clothes?” she asked.

“Yes,” Gon said. “Alluka chose them for you. They were hers, once. She loves pretty things, but she doesn’t get to wear them herself these days. She really wanted you to have them.”

Komugi nodded, tears in her eyes. “Tell her thank you. I love them.”

“I’ll tell her,” Gon said.

“Can I put one on?” Komugi’s eyes were bright.

“Sure, as far as I’m concerned? Mito?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” she said.

“Pick one, Gon,” Komugi said.

He lifted out dress after dress—carefully, because some of them seemed to be made of no more than gossamer—until he found one made of sea-green silk that matched Komugi’s eyes. “This one is perfect,” he said. Komugi grinned, and took it into her bedroom to change.
When she was gone, he turned to Mito. “The next one is for all of you. I’m not sure you’d wear any
of it but, if not, you can sell it.”

“I’m almost afraid to look,” Mito said. Gon just shrugged, and so Mito opened the small chest. It was
the one full of jewelry. She lifted out a ruby-studded pendant, her face paling. “Gods, Gon—how
rich is Killua?”

“Very,” Gon sighed, “for all the good it does him.”

She looked at the last box. “I’m not sure that I can face another one.”

Gon smiled. “I think you’ll find this one easy enough to face.”

“No gold or jewelry?”

“Nope. But it might be the most valuable box of all.”

Mito shot him a dubious glance, and then reached for the final box. It was made of plain, timeworn
wood. She lifted off the cover and then set it aside, gazing, puzzled, at the contents. It was full of
small brown paper envelopes, with inscriptions on the front of each in Killua’s fine copperplate.

“What are these?” she asked.

“Open one,” Gon said, “but be careful.”

Mito picked up an envelope and opened the flap, then tipped the contents into her palm: a dozen
small, pale brown, tear shaped seeds. “These are rose seeds,” she said, looking at Gon questioningly.

He nodded. “Killua collected seeds from all of the original rose bushes in the castle gardens. Those
gardens were famous, once. They had varieties of roses that didn’t grow anywhere else. Some of
these—no, most of them—are believed to be extinct. That is, if anyone ever knew they existed in the
first place.”
“Gon, I can’t accept these!” Mito said. “I don’t have the knowledge to grow them properly, and this is entirely the wrong place to try.”

“I don’t think you’ll be here forever,” Gon said. “Especially not with what’s in those other chests. And as for having the knowledge—I remember your gardens on the island, Mito. You are exactly the right person to bring these flowers back to life.”

Mito put the seeds back in the envelope, the lid back on the box ruminatively. “Well, I can’t very well send them back, I suppose. Though the gods know what I’m going to do with all of this gold.” She gave the boxes a contemplative look. “Then again, they’re in chests and we’re on the beach. Buried treasure?”

Gon laughed, and hugged her. “Thank you, Mito.”

“For what?” she asked.

“For accepting all this.”

She nodded, and Komugi came back into the room. The dress was perfect, hugging her slender frame and then fanning out into a wide, ankle-length skirt. The cut was modest, and Komugi was clearly still a child. As she spun and the skirt flared, though, Gon saw a flash of the woman she would become: beautiful and graceful, but also healthy and happy, and they owed all of that to Killua. He felt tears pressing at the backs of his eyes.

“Komugi,” Mito said, eyeing him, “why don’t you show Gon the beach while I clean up?”

Gon suspected that Mito wanted time alone to come to terms with what Killua’s gifts meant for the family’s future, as well as to jog him out of his own darker thoughts. And so he let Komugi take his hand again and lead him outside. As they reached the sand, soft and white and fine as sugar, Gon took a cue from Komugi’s bare feet and pulled off his own boots and socks, leaving them on the steps. Komugi took Gon’s hand again and angled toward the surf. The beach stretched out for miles, until it curved around a headland and disappeared into the misty distance. There was nobody else in sight, just gulls and sandpipers and some tiny birds he couldn’t name fluttering and twittering in the long, coarse dune grasses.

“How long have you lived here?” Gon asked.
“Three months...I think?” Komugi answered, digging her toes into the wet sand at the water’s edge. Gon couldn’t help thinking of Alluka burying her root-like toes in the soil.

“But the money from the ship came right after I left, didn’t it?” Komugi nodded. “So why didn’t Mito move out of the city right away?” Komugi just squeezed his hand, and Gon sighed. “Right. She thought I would come back.”

“She hoped you would. And she didn’t want you not to be able to find us.”

Gon sighed again, and they resumed walking. “I’m sorry, Komugi. Sorry you all waited like that, and that I wasn’t here when you got sick.”

“Well, if you had been,” Komugi said gravely, “then you wouldn’t have been able to save me.”

“We’d have found a way,” Gon said.

Komugi gave him a small smile. “No, we wouldn’t. I was dying. I know that; you don’t have to lie to me. And it’s okay, because you came back, and I didn’t die.”

“You seem remarkably calm about this,” Gon observed, “for a twelve year old.”

“Thirteen,” Komugi said.

Gon looked at her, startled. Her birthday—or the day they had chosen as her birthday, the day that Gon had brought her home—had been two months previous. “I—of course! I’m sorry, Mugi! I missed your birthday!”

She laughed softly. “It’s alright. So did I. I’d just gotten sick, then. I don’t even remember it.”

Gon shuddered. “Let’s talk about something else.”
Komugi gave him a sly smile. “Okay. You can tell me all about your boyfriend.”

Gon flushed. “Mugi!”

“What?” she asked innocently.

“Ah… I don’t know. It just sounds weird when you call him that.”

She shrugged. “He’s a boy, he’s your friend, and you kiss him. What else should I call him?”

“So you’ve been spying on us?”

“No. Nanika has, and I can’t help what she shows me.”

“Well Nanika shouldn’t be spying on us, either!”

She grinned. “Too late! But don’t worry. I don’t watch when you go to bed.”

“Gods, Mugi,” Gon groaned. Then, abruptly, his annoyance dissolved as he realized what she was saying—what he’d forgotten in the turmoil of curing Komugi. “Wait a minute—you meant that? When Nanika shows you things, you can actually see them?”

Komugi nodded. “I don’t know if it’s the same way as you see, but yes, I see images when she holds my hands. So I’ve seen you, finally.” She smiled. “I know you hate it when Bisky calls you ‘Bishie’. But she’s right. You’re very handsome.”

“Thank you,” Gon said with as much grace as he could muster. He wondered if he would ever be able to accept compliments on his looks without a tinge of the old bitterness, and fear.

“But Killua is handsomer,” she added.
Gon spluttered with laughter. “Not exactly polite, Mugi, but I’m also not going to argue that one!”

Her expression was thoughtful, her eyes cast up to the hazy sky, where the sun seemed to be trying to break through the mist. “He’s not just handsome though, is he?”

*No. He’s brighter and more beautiful than anyone on this earth.* “What do you mean?”

“I mean…well, I know that I haven’t seen many people at all, but I bet there aren’t many who look like him.”

“I sure haven’t ever seen one,” Gon agreed.

“He’s how I always imagined a prince in a fairy tale would look. Not quite real.”

*No, he doesn’t look real, and yet he is: warm and sweet and solid and mine, and gods, gods, I can’t live if he doesn’t!*

“What are you thinking, Gon?” Komugi asked in a gentle voice.

Gon stopped walking and sat down in the sand, just beyond the reach of the waves. “I’m afraid, Komugi,” he said, knowing that she would see through any prevarication.

“Because he’s sick?”

“Because he isn’t just sick. He’s cursed, and if we don’t find a way to break the curse, he’ll die. And if he dies, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Komugi took all of this in with remarkable equanimity; and then, not entirely surprisingly, she said, “I know.”

“You know? What—about the curse?”
She sat beside him. “I didn’t have the words for it until you said it, but yes, I knew that there was bad magic Killua’s castle. Nanika showed me. I’ve seen those tree people losing their leaves, and Killua getting sicker, and the thorns coming out of his skin. I just didn’t know why.”

“Do you want to?” Gon asked reluctantly.

“Yes,” she said, and so Gon told her a simplified version of what he’d told Mito the night before. When he was done, Komugi was silent for a long time. Then, finally, she said, “You know, when Nanika holds my hands, it’s not just her memories that I can see.”

“What do you mean?” Gon asked, looking over at her. Her eyes were fixed on the sea, her hair coming free of its plaits and drifting across her face.

“I can also see things that haven’t happened yet. Things that might happen, or will happen. I’m still not quite sure if they always come true, and sometimes they’re confusing, but…well, I knew that you would come back. I saw you weeks ago, coming into my room like you did last night, holding those bottles.”

Gon could feel his brow furrowing. “What else have you seen like that?”

“This house,” Komugi said. “A long time before Mito even went looking for one. And other things. Most of them don’t matter, but Gon—I’ve seen you and Killua, and he wasn’t sick. The thorns were gone, and he was happy—you both were—and you were somewhere with a lot of snow.”

For a moment Gon forgot to breathe. Then, feeling like his heart would fly out of his chest, he turned to Komugi. “When did you see that?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Not long after you left. A month, maybe? But that didn’t happen, right? Not yet?”

“No,” Gon said, sifting sand through his fingers. “It couldn’t have. We can’t leave the castle grounds, and it doesn’t snow there. Was there…was there more?”

Komugi smiled. “Yes. Only one, and I don’t want to scare you—”
“Too late. You just did.”

“No, it’s nothing bad, it’s just… I don’t know, a lot.”

“I’m not sure what would qualify as ‘a lot’ in my life anymore. And if it means that Killua survives this damned curse, then I want to hear it.”

“Okay,” she said, “well, you were both older. A lot older. Some of your hair was grey, and there were lines around Killua’s eyes. You were sitting on the steps of a green house, and there were gardens and trees all around, and there were three children with you. A boy a little younger than me, who looked a little like you, and two girls a few years younger than him, identical twins. They had eyes like Killua’s. The boy was pulling them in a wagon.” She turned to him and smiled, though there were tears in her eyes. “And Killua put his head on your shoulder while you watched them, and you put your arms around him, and you both smiled.”

Gon gave up trying to hold back his tears. Was it possible? Could they really find a way through this horror to a life as sweet and simple as the one Komugi had seen? He didn’t think that there was anything he wouldn’t give for that. He tipped his forehead to his drawn-up knees, and wept.

After a moment, he felt Komugi’s hand on his back, rubbing gentle circles. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I told you it was a lot.”

“I’m not afraid of it, Komugi. I’m only afraid of how much I want it.”

“Don’t be afraid of that,” she said. “It’s a gift to have someone you love that much, who loves you back.”

“But what if I lose him?”

Komugi sighed. “I can’t promise you that what I’ve seen will come true. I don’t understand anything about how these visions work. Just remember that some of the things I’ve seen have come true, and I’ve seen you together and healthy and out of that castle twice. I believe you’ll save him, and you have to believe it too. I know it’s hard, but believing it is the only thing that will.”

Gon wiped his eyes on his sleeve, and said, “Thank you, Komugi.” She put her arms around him and they sat like that for a long time, listening to the sea reach and retreat.
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