shimmer in your shine

by zenelly

Summary

A roadtrip at the end of his senior year of college might have been kind of a last minute decision, but Leorio isn't about to let himself, or any of the others regret it. Assuming that they don't kill each other in the first couple of days, that is.

Leorio can barely even hum along. His throat is too full with unnamed and unacknowledged feelings, and he knows he’s avoiding thinking about it too much right now. If he drops one hand from the wheel, laying it down in the passenger seat where it’s just close enough to touch Kurapika’s thigh on the outside of the blanket, well.

That’s no one’s business but his.

Notes

this was basically born out of my girlfriend and I watching HxH together and both of us realizing that what we really, really wanted was to put the main four in a car together and just WATCH what happens.

okay, so under all technicalities, I have parts of this done, so i’m just. gonna try and get it up when and where I can. There’s a lot to look forward to, though because of ENDLESS
SHENANIGANS. Rating subject to change. Title from "Make You Better" by the Decemberists

See the end of the work for more notes.
The idea is planted on a sunny afternoon, one where the last vestiges of winter are melting in the sunlight as Leorio turns his face towards the wind. He has his briefcase clutched in one hand, a hot cup of coffee precariously balanced between the other and his chest, his shoulder pressing his phone against his ear. There are students walking along the sidewalk that he dodges as he makes his way to the quad. He is only half paying attention to anything that isn’t the conversation he’s having, which is sort of inconvenient and dangerous, but frankly, Leorio really doesn’t care at the moment.

Mostly because he’s talking to someone who might be able to get him into the medical program that he wants to join.

“Yes, thank you so much, Doctor,” Leorio says, trying his best to not stammer and rearranging his arms so he can change the position of his neck before it sticks like this. He succeeds. His briefcase becomes a casualty, though, tumbling down to hit the pavement with a loud clatter.

Leorio bites back a few swear words as the woman on the other side of the phone keeps talking in his ear. Something about finishing up some paperwork and sending it to her department so they can get the ball rolling there. Leorio makes affirmative noises as he kneels, picking up the briefcase. He garners no small number of odd looks, he’s sure, but he’s focused enough on his conversation that he doesn’t care.

Besides, college students are busy and headblind. They looked because of the noise more than any real sense of curiosity.

“Well, in that case, Mr. Paladiknight, we hope to hear back from you soon. Congratulations,” the woman on the other end of the line says briskly. And before Leorio has much of a chance to do anything other than grab the handle of his briefcase and stammer out a quick goodbye, there’s a click, and a dial tone in his ear.

Holy shit.

He puts down the phone. Tucks it into his briefcase, which he lays to the edge of the sidewalk and puts his coffee next to it as well. He takes a deep breath, tilting his head back to the sky.

Leorio whoops loudly, punching his fists up into the open air. He gets a few more weird looks for this, though they’re interspersed with amused ones, and one guy walking by offers up a hand for Leorio to high-five. He does, with vigor, missing just enough to make it a bit awkward but still satisfying. The man, a complete and utter stranger, only laughs it off as he walks past. Leorio doesn’t care. He doesn’t care at all.

He just got accepted to med school.

_Fuck_ yes.

Now he has to do all the paperwork and get ready and make sure that his grades stay up and-

Oh god.

His phone buzzes in his briefcase, and Leorio pauses his momentary freak-out to crouch and dig it back up. It’s a short message from Kurapika, nothing more than “Where are you?”

Leorio starts tapping out a return message when another comes through.
“We were supposed to start studying half an hour ago.”

And another immediately after that.

“I swear, if I find you lusting after some girls again, I’m leaving you to handle your finals all by yourself.”

He snorts, offended. Lusting. How crude. Accurate, because Leorio’s intentions with the incident in question were definitely more prurient than anything else, but crude. “had a phone intvw. omw rn,” he sends in response. Leorio grabs his briefcase and coffee and stands up. Despite all the stuff he now has to do (which is so much stuff, oh god), he feels oddly….

Light.

Because now medical school is a possibility. An actual, true possibility.

Leorio swallows down his giddiness, though a smile keeps curling his lips. Though, to be fair, he’s sure that he’s not actually all that good at hiding his ebullient joy anyway. He makes his way into the library, shouldering open the door and gratefully feeling the warmth shake off the last of the winter chill still clinging to his clothes.

He raises a hand to the woman behind the desk, and she gives him a smile. He’s a familiar sight here, after four years of grueling work and the weekly-turned-daily study sessions that he holds with Kurapika up in the third floor study carousel. “You’re late,” she chides, and Leorio ducks his head just a little bit, playing at being more sheepish than he is.

“How mad was he?”

She laughs as she scans a book from the return bin, her eyes sparkling with mirth. “He honestly came back down a few minutes after your usual meeting time to see if you were hiding somewhere. You should get up there before he starts taking the library apart board by board.”

Leorio snorts, grins. “Kurapika would never. He loves this place too much.”

“Be that as it may, you should hurry. He hates being kept waiting.”

That much is true. Leorio waves goodbye and jogs up the steps to the third floor. He makes his way through the stacks, the low murmur of conversations and turning pages and the vents quiet and distant in comparison to his steps. Leorio inhales in front of the door to the room that he and Kurapika have unofficially claimed as their own, smells the vanillin and wood of old books mixed with the coffee he still has in hand. And then he pushes the door open.

He’s greeted with the familiar sight of papers and books covering the entirety of the table in the center of the room, half-organized and half a mess, and a slender man leaning over it all, making a note in the margin of a sheet of paper. He looks up once he’s done with his note, one eyebrow quirked. He straightens, crosses his arms.

“One day, I will get you to text me in proper english.” Kurapika flips his hair out of his face, a graceful fan of golden strands giving way to evaluating grey eyes. He’s slightly more disheveled than usual, his hair mussed instead of smooth, and there are slight circles under his eyes, barely visible in the weak fluorescent light of the library. He sits down with no small amount of grace despite his obvious malese, however.

Leorio chuckles under his breath, setting his briefcase on a clear spot on the table. “That’s a bit of a long shot. It’s faster to text you the way I do.”
“It’s sloppy,” Kurapika mutters, but his gaze only narrows before he leans back in his chair. Leorio knows without having to see that he’s crossed his legs under the desk. Kurapika is, as much as the other hates to admit it, a creature of habit. Especially when he’s playing at being casual. Sometimes, Kurapika displays his interest almost too obviously, though Leorio’s not so good at figuring out the difference between true disinterest and not sometimes. “So. A phone interview.”

“Yep.” Leorio pops the ‘p’ sound, just to watch Kurapika’s eyebrow twitch.

“How did it go?”

He sighs, just to let the atmosphere tighten, nerves firing. Then he grins, giving Kurapika a thumbs up. “I got accepted! I just have financial aid bullshit to figure out, but I’m good to go, otherwise.”

At that, the serious line of Kurapika’s mouth bows into a soft smile. Lines of tension that Leorio hadn’t realized he was carrying disappear from Kurapika’s shoulders. “Good,” he says warmly. “You should start hearing back from all of the scholarship committees soon, too. It looks like it’s all coming together nicely.”

Leorio sets his briefcase down on the floor, sitting down in the free chair as Kurapika turns his attention back to the work he was doing before Leorio came in. “Yeah, that much is true. Oh god, I have so much more paperwork to do now,” he groans, slumping over on the table. Kurapika sighs irately and moves the pile of papers under Leorio’s right hand so they aren’t placed quite so precariously near the edge of the table. “What the fuck was I even thinking?”

“That you wanted to get into medical school, obviously.”

He snorts, fixing Kurapika with one eye half-closed. “Bad idea. Zero out of ten, do not recommend. I would have more fun jerking off.”

“First off, that’s disgusting. Second, Leorio, have you ever considered giving yourself a little bit of a break?” Kurapika asks with something that might be amusement but is more likely closer to frustration. Leorio is interrupting his studies without reason now, after all, and Kurapika has never, in the years that Leorio has known him, ever let himself get anything less than a perfect score on anything. Even feverish, Kurapika shows up to his classes. Leorio wishes it was an exaggeration, but last time Kurapika showed up for his exams, he was running a high fever; he collapsed for three days afterwards, but he still completed his tests. “I mean, you haven’t really given yourself any real time off. Ever.”

With a faint scowl, Leorio opens his mouth. Closes it.

A break. He really, really hasn’t ever had one, it’s true. Leorio has been completely focused on his goal of getting into medical school, and that hasn’t left him with any leisure time that wasn’t painstakingly carved out of a few evenings he’s made for himself. Most of those have still been filled with homework or sleep. Much more the former than the latter, much to Leorio’s continued dismay. Even his holidays were busy, either interning or studying. He shakes himself out of his thoughtful reverie, noticing that it’s been too long since Kurapika asked him the question to really continue the conversation naturally. Oh well.

“What do people even do on breaks?” he asks, only half serious. “I have no idea. It can’t be sleep. I can sleep when I’m dead, right?”

Kurapika’s mouth twitches into a smile. “I’ve heard,” Kurapika says, tucking a stray piece of blond
hair behind his ear before he scratches down a note, “that sometimes, people use vacation time for leisure. Like reading or playing video games. Or travelling. Trips are very popular for those mysterious people who can afford to take vacations.”

Leorio lets out a breath. It rattles a few of the papers spread in front of his face. “Trips, huh? Sounds nice.”

“Doesn’t it just.” Kurapika sighs, leans back, stretches, and Leorio follows the line of his body with his eyes. Up Kurapika’s slender shoulders to the curve of his arms. The almost delicate angle of his wrists. He swallows. Returns his attention to Kurapika’s face. “Can you imagine? Just getting in your car and… going? Anywhere? Sounds nice right about now.”

It does. It does sound really nice. But Leorio passes it off as complete conjecture. It’s only March, and after all, he has a test on Friday, and three papers to complete, finals to study for, and now medical school papers to start putting in. He definitely doesn’t have time for trips or vacations. Or really, anything that isn’t studying, sleeping, and eating. But somewhere in the back of his mind, it stays.

*Just get in your car and… go.*

“Huh,” Leorio says. He leans over, grabs his work, and puts the thought down as completely out of the question.
“I don’t want Gon to cry. And Leorio’s hopeless in pretty much any way that counts, so I should probably stick around to make sure he’s not ruining everything.”

Leorio scoffs. “I’m not hopeless.”

He’s met with three equally disbelieving stares.

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, everyone,” he mutters.

So I’m going to try and get a chapter up every month! I can't promise it'll always happen, but I am! Going to try!! Really hard! Anyways, Happy New Year's, to everyone! I hope you all stay safe and be good to each other <3

Chapter title is from "Cecilia and the Satellite" by Andrew McMahon In the Wilderness

The remainder of March and April disappear under the haze of juggling the weather, the spring colds that half the campus has come down with that clog up the student infirmary, and all of the work Leorio has to get done, which includes, but is not limited to:

Finishing up his capstone project that will qualify him for graduation.

Completing the last tests and finals for each of his six classes and two labs.

Remembering to apply for financial aid for his medical school (that he thankfully qualifies for, because if he didn’t, Leorio probably would just lay down and cry.)

Keeping an eye on his cousin, Gon, and making sure that he still goes to school and at least tries to study. While Mito has been incredibly considerate, letting Leorio stay with her and Gon as he attends college, she is a busy woman. Leorio tries to pick up the extra slack where he can.

Checking on Kurapika so he doesn’t work himself sick again. Once was bad enough; there’s no need for a repeat performance.

Sleep.

Eat.

The last two of those are unfortunately optional. They are the first to be sacrificed when everything else hits the fan.

“I’m about this close to tearing out my hair, I swear I am.”
“Don’t do that,” Kurapika sighs. “You’ll look even more ridiculous than usual.”

Leorio scowls at him, but he takes his hands out of his hair anyway. He sighs heavily, leans back in his chair. Kurapika is folded delicately into the corner of Leorio’s couch, bare feet tucked up under his legs. The ceiling fan wafts air around Mito’s living room idly, not really doing too much to disperse the late spring heat. Leorio is surrounded by books; they both are, actually, since Kurapika is trying to help Leorio pick out which college textbooks he can sell back and which ones he should probably keep.

At this point, though, Leorio’s already ready to throw in the towel. “I want this all to be over. I want to be packed and I want to be moved in, and starting school already. None of this summer break stuff.”

“You could actually try to take some time off, since you finally have it. Shouldn’t you enjoy it?” Kurapika picks up one book, flipping through the pages. Leorio watches him, upside down, for a moment. The pressure on his head is unpleasant, but Leorio really doesn’t want to exert the effort it would take to get him vertical again.

“All this vacation talk coming from the poster child of "works too hard" is really hilarious, let me tell you.”

Kurapika snorts, amused. He looks at Leorio over the edge of his book, grey eyes crinkled in the corners from his smile. “You have to deal with Gon all summer. Shouldn’t that keep you busy?”

“Yeah,” Leorio sighs. “Yeah, he’s pretty rambunctious. But, Gon doesn’t have anyone other than me to bother, and I don’t have the energy to keep up with him. He’s like the Energizer bunny with a couple of extra packs strapped to him.”

Kurapika makes a commiserating noise, picking up another book and turning it over. “Gon doesn’t really know many people his age, does he?”

“I wouldn’t really say that,” Leorio says, sitting back up. “He knows a lot of people. He’s even friends with a lot of people, but he’s not close to them, really? There are … two people I can think of right now that he’d call his friends, and neither of them live nearby. That’s more the problem than anything else.”

The door slams open. There’s the jingle of keys, the thuds of boots being pulled off, and then the slap of bare feet against hardwood floor.

“Leorio, I’m home! What’s for-” Gon rounds the corner into the living room and comes to a halt, a smile growing across his tan face. “Oh! Kurapika’s over! Hi, Kurapika!”

“Hello, Gon,” Kurapika says warmly, and Gon pads over quickly to give him a hug. It ends up more of a snuggle than anything else, with Gon pressing himself all along Kurapika’s free side until he’s half nudged-up under Kurapika’s arm and his head resting against Kurapika’s shoulder, but it doesn’t really seem like either of them mind. Kurapika just moves with him to allow the intrusion of space.

Gon grins up at him, cheek smushed against his shoulder. “What are you doing over here?”

“I’m helping Leorio try and organize his stuff before he has to move.” Kurapika’s gaze darts to the side quickly, but he returns it to Gon after only a moment’s pause. Dryly, he continues with, "Also, I’m trying to avoid thinking about what I’m even doing this summer.”

“What are you doing this summer?” Leorio asks, curious. “You haven’t said anything about what you’re doing after graduation.”
Kurapika sighs, laying his head on one folded arm. Idly, his fingers stroke through Gon’s short hair. “Honestly, I have no idea what I’m going to do. There’s so much to consider, really. Am I getting a summer job? Should I just move? Should I stick around here until the end of the semester? Should I go back and stay with Melody for a while? I just. The price of living isn’t cheap, but I don’t quite have a plan.”

“Are you going to get an apartment for the summer?”

Kurapika’s mouth presses into a thin line. “Maybe. I just don’t know, really. I haven’t thought about it too much, aside from moving my stuff out of my dorm room. I don’t have an internship this summer, so I should probably move closer to my grad school, but I’m going to be moving into dorms there anyway. It feels just. Really superfluous.”

Gon mouths the word after Kurapika, his nose wrinkling, before he shakes his head. “Why don’t you just move your stuff in here for the summer? Mito has a spare room, and it’s not like she’s even going to be here this summer.”

Kurapika raises an eyebrow. “Mito’s not?”

“No, she’s going on a trip with Grandma. Something about touring Europe? Or a cruise. I don’t remember. Doesn’t matter, it’ll be fine.”

Leorio waves a hand, turning around to better see the both of them without having to twist his spine into odd positions. “It’s several things all put together. But the long and the short of it is that Mito isn’t going to be home for a couple of months. She’s finally saved up enough, and I have this summer free, so I can watch over Gon.”

Gon frowns. “I’m sixteen, not a kid. I could look over myself.”

“Says the kid who almost flooded the house last week when he didn’t do his laundry properly.”

“That was a back-up in the line! You can’t blame me for that!”

“It wasn’t a back-up, you overstuffed the machine and broke the pipe leading back to the drain while you were jamming your clothes in there!”

“It was an accident!” Gon insists.

“I’m not saying it wasn’t! I’m am saying that it means you can’t be trusted on your own. And don’t offer people’s houses out without clearing it with Mito first, brat.”

“Hmph!” Gon crosses his arms and sticks his nose in the air, looking away from Leorio huffily. Without changing expression, he squishes himself against Kurapika again, pointedly not paying Leorio any attention. Kurapika and Leorio exchange amused glances over his head.

The door opens again, and Mito’s familiar voice calls out, letting everyone know that she’s home. Gon hops out of his sulk and off the couch immediately, running over to hug her as though he is still the small boy of twelve that he was when Leorio first moved in and not sixteen and filling out. He’s taller than Mito now, but he acts like he’s only waist high.

“Hello, boys,” Mito says around Gon’s shoulder. “How have you been?”

“Good, for the most part. Gon’s being a brat.” Leorio makes a face at Mito, laughing slightly as Gon whips around to pout at him.
Kurapika waves a hand, uncurling himself from the corner of the couch. “They’re both exaggerating, really. As I’m sure you know well, they’re both brats. It’s a wonder you put up with them as much as you do, Mito.”

With that, Mito laughs, easy as always, and Leorio feels a warmth spread underneath his sternum. It’s still remarkable to him, sometimes, that she would offer to take him in, even for as relatively short a period of time as it is. Four years is still a while, after all, especially for as distant a relative as she is to him.

As Gon lets Mito go, Kurapika stands up, brushing off invisible dust lightly. “Well, now that you’re here, Miss Mito, I should probably get going. I wouldn’t want to interrupt any plans you have.”

“Kurapika, you’re more than welcome to stick around for dinner,” Mito says, moving into the kitchen. “If you don’t, I’m sure Gon will cry for days.”

(Gon, still in the entrance, nods vehemently. Leorio isn’t quite fast enough to muffle his laughter, or dodge Kurapika’s reluctantly amused gaze.)

“Well.” Kurapika sighs, looking up at Leorio. Leorio can see the tilt of a shy kind of pleasure in his mouth, something small and embarrassed, and that too makes him warm, as taking care of people always does. “I don’t want Gon to cry. And Leorio’s hopeless in pretty much any way that counts, so I should probably stick around to make sure he’s not ruining everything.”

Leorio scoffs. “I’m not hopeless.”

He’s met with three equally disbelieving stares.

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, everyone,” he mutters.

Dinner is a cheerful affair, though everything sort of simmers out once Mito turns to the inevitable discussion of post-college plans. Panic, claustrophobic and choking, claw up Leorio’s throat as he tries to deflect. He’s going to be a doctor. Come hell or high water, he’s already put himself in enough debt doing this, he might as well get the most of it. Leorio frowns down at the table. He’s twenty-three. Shit like this seemed so far away a year ago. Even a few months ago. But now….

Now he’s almost there. He’s doing well and he’s going to be a doctor. How terrifying.

“Ahhh, I don’t know,” Kurapika says, and that pulls Leorio out of his reverie. He looks up in time to watch Kurapika tuck a strand of hair behind the delicate shell of his ear. “I hadn’t really thought about where I’m going for this summer. I mean, grad school is already lined up in the fall, but it turns out they don’t need me until September, so I’m not sure what I’m doing.”

“Well, if you don’t have anywhere else to go, you could always stay here. I’m sure Gon and Leorio would like the company, and we certainly have enough room,” Mito says.

Kurapika blinks at her, eyes wide. It’s not often that Leorio gets to see Kurapika visibly floored, so he looks his fill. The flush begins slowly, coming on in fits and starts as Kurapika begins to stammer, “M-Mito, that really isn’t… that’s not necessary. I can just rent an apartment. Or something.”

She frowns. “For three months? There isn’t a place around that’ll let you off with anything less than a six-month lease period. You’re better off just moving in here for a while.”

“I really couldn’t,” Kurapika begins, but Mito absolutely won’t hear it.
It’s doubly a lost battle when Gon leans over and rubs his face into Kurapika’s shoulder, grinning up at him though he is at least of a height with Kurapika, even seated. “C’mon, I’ll be so lonesome without you! And Leorio already told you to move in.”

“Oh he did, did he?” Mito asks archly, and Leorio can feel himself getting red.

"Gon suggested it first," he grumbles."

Kurapika blinks, looks between all three of them, and then sighs, though there’s a smile lurking in his expression. “I’ll… I’ll think about it.”

Leorio grins widely, wider when he sees Mito and Gon both echo the smile just the same, and Kurapika shakes his head at all of them.

Later, after dinner is over and Kurapika has finally made his excuses to escape, Leorio leans his head back on the couch cushion. His laptop is resting on the coffee table in front of him, ignored in favor of his existential angst. Gon’s curled up in the armchair near him, tapping alternatively at his phone and a handheld game system. A frown creases his brow. Leorio notices this only as a way to distract himself from his own thoughts, which essentially boil down to one thing:

Summer.

A summer in which he’s not doing anything, because his school, like Kurapika’s and Gon’s, isn’t starting until September either, and he gave himself that kind of time off. …

Why?

Why did he do that to himself? He’s sure he had a reason, but the time off is foreign and almost frightening.

Leorio lets out a heavy groan. He could get a job for the summer. That’d be fine, really. Except for the awful sense of boredom and the monotony and okay Leorio’s probably not going to get a job just to ditch it again when school starts up. The only upside to that would be money. And Leorio always, always is in need of more money.

There’s the faint sound of a step behind him, and Mito, coming around the corner, taps Leorio gently on the shoulder.

“Oh, Leorio? Ging sent a letter. I can’t tell what he’s saying, since his handwriting is so awful, but have it anyway. Part of it’s for you.” Mito shakes her head, but passes him an envelope before moving into the kitchen with a fading mutter. Leorio doesn’t honestly pay attention. He takes the card out of the envelope and opens it, catching something as it slips out.

Ging’s handwriting is atrocious. The letter is almost completely illegible, and Leorio looks it over multiple times to try and figure it out only to come up blank. Aside from “Graduation” and “Congrats” and “Present,” Leorio really can’t read anything.

Well, at least he got the salient parts.

With a shrug, he looks at the piece of paper that had almost fallen out of the card. Whatever, so Ging sent him a present. Probably like, twenty bucks or something.

He blinks.

Well.
That. Is a check. For a much larger number than he thought it would be.

So he might not have to get a job this summer.

(Jesus, that is a lot of zeros.)

He could. Do almost anything with this. Holy shit. It doesn’t really surprise Leorio that this is Ging’s graduation present. The man always throws money at his problems like it’ll fix everything. (He very carefully does not look at Gon.)

But the amount. Christ, he couldn’t spend this all in one place if he tried.

He could try. He has three months before he has to start school again. Leorio could relax and take things really easy with this.

Or.

He finds his thoughts circling back to a certain spring day once more.

Leorio licks his lips.

“Hey, Gon? How would you like to go on a roadtrip?”

Gon’s head pops up and he wiggles around in the armchair he’s claimed as his own, knees tossed awkwardly over one arm of the chair. Leorio, fondly, thinks he’s getting too large for it. Gon probably won’t be able to sit like that for much longer. Eyes bright with interest, he says, “That would be awesome! Where would we go?”

“I have no idea, honestly. Haven’t really thought too much about it.” Or at all. Leorio scratches the back of his head. It’s really sudden. But he has the car, he has the gas, and now he has the money. It can’t be too hard to just go ahead and drive wherever they want to go.

Gon taps his fingers on the back of the chair, his arm tossed up high over his head. “Could we go all the way to California? That’s a roadtrip!”

“Hahaha, no, no way, that’s. Fuck, that’s a long way away from here. I was thinking just like, up and down the coast or something. Maybe around the mountains a little bit.”

A light in Gon’s eyes dims for a moment, his smile gentling into a softer expression. He says, trying to not be glum and failing miserably, “Oh, okay. I mean, that’s really cool! A roadtrip sounds nice. We can go anywhere, Leorio. I don’t really care.”

Leorio looks at him, mouth twisted in a scowl. Bullshit. Bull-fucking-shit. Gon wouldn’t have brought it up if he didn’t care. Theoretically, they could probably make it all the way to California, but that trip… That’s all the way across the country. There’s no fucking way. Leorio had only really been thinking like, going down to fucking DC and then back up again. Or something.

Honestly, he really hadn’t thought very much about it at all.

Crap.

If they’re gonna do this, they need to have a plan.

“I mean. Maybe?” Leorio ventures cautiously. “We might be able to do that? We’ll have to run some numbers and figure out where we’re staying. Though if it’s just the two of us, I suppose we’ll camp in the car.”
“Two of us? Isn’t Kurapika coming too?”

Leorio stares at Gon.

Gon just stares back, his head cocked curiously to the side. After a long moment of silence, the corner of Gon’s mouth lifts in a smile. “You didn’t think you were going without him, did you? I’m not going if it’s just you.”

Scowling, Leorio bites out, “Oh, and why not?”

“I don’t want to die, Leorio! I can’t drive and you’re stubborn and awful and unbearable when you get too stressed and Kurapika’s the only one who you can fuss over enough to calm you back down!”

“I don’t fuss!”

“You fuss all the time!” Gon exclaims, waving his arms wildly. “That’s all you do!”

Leorio clicks his tongue, but. He can’t really deny it. He worries and prods over people a lot, and Gon only has so much patience. “I don’t even know if he’d want to come along,” he grumbles finally.

Gon points at him. Leorio wishes they were slightly closer together so he could shove Gon’s arm down, but he’s not willing to get up and do it himself. “Ask him. Tomorrow. Or… Or I’ll eat all of your cereal!”

“That’s such a terrible threat.”

“Fine, then I’ll put your laundry up on the roof. The clean stuff.”

“Shit, fine, fine, no need to get nasty.” Leorio looks down at the check in his hands again, turns it forwards and backwards. A trip. With him, Gon, and Kurapika. That... really sounds nice, actually.

A few minutes of silence pass, and then Gon, quietly, in a voice Leorio hardly recognizes, asks, ”Are you sure we can’t go to California?”

Leorio looks at him. Gon isn't smiling, his hazel eyes sad and focused on his phone. Leorio can't quite make out what's on the screen, but it looks like a series of messages, all of them from Gon. His mouth presses into a thin line, and Leorio shakes his head. "Sorry, kid. We'll see, but I'm not going to make you any promises I know I can't keep."

Gon is quiet for a beat, two, three.

Then he nods. Slow but short. "Okay. Sorry. I'm gonna. Go to bed now. G'night, Leorio."

"Night, Gon," he echoes, but Gon clearly doesn't hear him as he makes his slow, slow way up the stairs to his room. Leorio stares after him for long moments, then pulls up a map on his laptop and starts trying to figure out what the hell he's even doing and where the hell they think they're going. And he still has to think of a way to ask Kurapika to come. Shit, at this rate, it might just be easier to blow all this money in like, a fucking casino or something. Leorio shakes his head and gets to work.

Leorio has been in Kurapika’s dorm room for four hours and hasn’t figured out a graceful way to ask Kurapika to come along yet. He watches Kurapika fold his clothes (a task Leorio has been strictly forbidden from helping with), and nominally, Leorio is supposed to be putting his books in boxes.
He’s not really working that quickly, though. The room is quiet aside from the surrussus of fabric and the occasional thump of book against book.

And still Leorio says nothing.

After all, what if Kurapika says no?

If Kurapika says no, it probably isn’t too big of a deal. Leorio and Gon will just drive around, have fun, eat some food, probably get into a couple of fights, get hopelessly lost, and end up calling Kurapika for help anyway. So really, he’s just trying to head off the trouble at the pass by asking him now.

Fuck it, no one is going to say that Leorio is a coward.

(He is a coward. Very much so. But damn it, no one's going to say it, even if the voice is only in Leorio's head.)

Leorio sighs, sitting back on his heels. “Hey, so remember when I said you could stay at Mito’s house over the summer?”

Kurapika’s hands still. Grey eyes dart over, and he raises an eyebrow at Leorio. “Yes. I do. What about it?”

Hoo boy, he is not making this any easier. Leorio’s heart thunders in his chest, nervous for the asking. “I uh. Well. Um. Well, Gon and I are going on a roadtrip.”

“Oh, so I’m going to have the house to myself. How wonderful,” he says, but Kurapika looks a little sad, even though his mouth is tilted in a smile. He carefully brushes his hair back from where it falls in his face, tucking it behind his ear. “I’ll make sure to keep it in good shape for you.”

Leorio draws a deep breath.

“Come with me,” he blurts out.

Kurapika blinks. A pretty red blush crawls across his face a second later, spreading from his cheeks outwards. It almost matches the red tear-drop earring dangling near his jaw. Almost. “Wh-What in the world are you talking about?”

“Come on the roadtrip with me. I was just planning on taking Gon, but.” But this might be the last time I get to see you , he doesn’t say. “We’re kind of hopeless without you. Do you want to see Gon bored and trapped in a moving car? Don’t subject me to that alone, Kurapika,” Leorio finishes instead, pleading.

Kurapika looks at him, considering, his lips slightly parted, as though he is lost in thought and hasn’t bothered closing them. The flush is retreating in fits and starts and then Kurapika just says, “Okay.”

It’s Leorio’s turn to blink. He grins, slowly at first and then widely enough that his face starts hurting. “Okay? You’ll come along?”

“Well someone responsible needs to make sure you and Gon don’t end up staying the night at a serial killer’s place.”

Leorio scoffs. “We wouldn’t do that.”

Kurapika raises an eyebrow, flatly unimpressed.
After a long moment of silence, Leorio thinks about it. Slowly winces. “Well, not on purpose, anyway.”

“That’s hardly reassuring, Leorio.”

But that seems to be all Kurapika needs, and he resumes packing with renewed enthusiasm, already talking about plans and paths they can take, and of course they need to stop at the Smithsonian if they’re headed down that direction, though they’ll have to figure out where to park to take the metro in, and has Leorio started planning out the cost of hotel rooms? Because Kurapika is not, repeat not, about to sleep in the cramped front seat of Leorio’s little sedan, not with Leorio and Gon, who both snore, they shouldn’t try to deny it.

Leorio looks down at the books in his hands and grins.
Chapter Summary

But he stands there, almost expectantly, looking up at Leorio. After a beat, two, three, Leorio looks around. Nope, nothing’s changed. He’s still standing here, exhausted and sweaty in the muggy May evening. Everything’s put up. Hm. Leorio starts patting himself down, trying to pinpoint what it is that Kurapika is staring at. “What, did I forget something?”

Chapter Notes

So I kind of have an organized (ish not really) tag for this fic on my tumblr! It's here, in case anyone's curious. The tag "siysfic" can be used for anyone, like if you guys have comments or something you want to share on tumblr? That or "siys" because either one works for me.

Chapter Title from "Just Let Go" by Mae.

“Gon, is that everything?” Leorio yells through the open door and up the stairs. There’s a slight pause before Gon responds with something affirmative, and Leorio lets out a quiet, pleased sigh. That’s all of the packing, then. The car’s all loaded up. There’s still a little space in the back of his hatchback, since they all packed pretty light, and that means that Leorio can finally wind down and get ready for bed.

The front door closes, and Leorio turns around to greet Kurapika. “You all loaded up?”

Kurapika nods. “Yes. I’m just going to go take the car out to fill it up, if that’s alright? That way we don’t have to stop in the morning.”

“Good plan.” Leorio pulls out his wallet and grabs a twenty out of it, glad that gas prices have dropped recently. “Here, take this, and be careful.”

“It’s just the gas station,” Kurapika says. “I’ll be fine.”

But he stands there, almost expectantly, looking up at Leorio. After a beat, two, three, Leorio looks around. Nope, nothing’s changed. He’s still standing here, exhausted and sweaty in the muggy May evening. Everything’s put up. Hm. Leorio starts patting himself down, trying to pinpoint what it is that Kurapika is staring at. “What, did I forget something?”

Kurapika raises a hand to his mouth, smothering a laugh. “I need the keys to your car. Unless you want me to try hotwiring it, which I could always give a shot.”

“Don’t do that. Paladin’s a good car. She never did anything to you,” Leorio grumbles, embarrassed. He digs the keys out and tosses them to Kurapika, who catches them one-handed.
“I’ll be right back. Go to sleep, Leorio. You’re taking first shift, remember.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

And Kurapika closes the door behind him, turns on the engine, and drives away.

Leorio lets out a long sigh. Nerves twist up his stomach, cluttering the space in his ribcage, and he breathes them out, breathes through them. It’s just a trip. A trip with his favorite (and only) cousin and one of his closest friends. It should be just fine. Nothing to worry about. (He’s worrying anyway, but Leorio figures Kurapika will forgive him for that. After all, he worries too.)

With a shake of his head, Leorio enters the house and begins climbing the stairs. He’s so ready for bed.

There’s a knock on the door.

For a brief moment, Leorio strongly considers ignoring it. But he takes one step back, two, and then he’s groaning, “Coming, coming,” as he turns back around and goes to the entrance. He opens the door, looking out onto the dimly illuminated porch.

And at the unfamiliar young man standing there.

“Yo!” the kid says, lifting one hand in greeting.

Leorio blinks. He takes in the kid, a boy, probably no older than Gon, soft-looking white hair fluffed out around his face in a completely ridiculous halo. Despite the warmth, he’s dressed in a long sleeved turtleneck with a white shirt on top. He comes up to Leorio’s chin, long pale legs sticking out of his shorts, and he doesn’t seem uncomfortable with the temperature.

Leorio doesn’t recognize him at all.

“Hi,” he says, confused. “What can I help you with?”

The kid blinks, quirks an eyebrow. “Oh, you? Not much, honestly. Hang on.” He cups his hands around his mouth and before Leorio can stop him, bellows, “GON!!” at the top of his lungs.

There is silence. Leorio digs a finger in his ear, easing the ache from the volume of the brat’s shout. Then, from upstairs, there’s a loud thud, a series of smaller thuds that grow louder as Gon presumably races downstairs. Gon slams into view on the balcony of the steps, his eyes wide and disbeliefing. He stops there, chest heaving for breath. Which is strange. Gon runs everywhere all the time. He shouldn’t be out of breath just from running downstairs…

“Killua?” he breathes, and Leorio’s eyebrow shoots up even further than it already was at the tone of disbelief.

Huh.

The kid waves. “Hey, Gon.”

“Killua!” Gon shouts, launching himself forward. Leorio barely gets out of the way in time before Gon has slammed into Killua, the force of their impact spinning the two around. The brat, Killua, manages to hold his ground surprisingly well; Gon isn’t a delicate person, in manner or action. Still spinning, likely because Gon is bouncing on the balls of his feet a little bit now, they break apart just enough to stare at each other, grin wide, still holding each other close. “Killua, you! You’re here! Why are you here? I didn’t- I don’t-?”
“I know! I’m glad I remembered your address.” Killua makes a face, his hands curled around Gon’s biceps. He doesn’t move his gaze from Gon’s face, drinking him in like a flower in the sunlight. “Hope it’s alright if I visit for a bit. You said anytime, after all.”

There’s something there. Something in the way Killua’s eyes dart to the side quickly that makes Leorio mentally sit up and take notice. Gon brushes whatever it is aside, though, dragging Killua into a tight hug again. “I did, I did. I meant it. I just. I thought-. I thought you were never going to-. I just. I wasn’t expecting it. I’m happy that you’re here. We can! Oh, oh, we can hang out all the time now! How long are you staying?”

Leorio frowns. “Hey, wait just a sec, Gon, Mito isn’t here, and you were going on the trip with me, remember?”

Gon’s smile transforms quickly into a pout. “Oh yeah….”

Killua looks between them, brows furrowing. “What trip?”

“Leorio, Kurapika, and me are going on a roadtrip!” Gon lights up, hazel eyes widening as an idea clearly comes to him, and Leorio is already stifling a sigh when Gon whips around. “Can Killua come too?”

“No, Killua can’t.”

Gon blinks, clearly not expecting that answer. “Why not?”

“Because he’s a stranger, for one. I’m not about to just let some kid I don’t know come on a roadtrip with us. And before you ask, no, you can’t stay here. We’ve talked about that already, and I’m even less likely to let him stay in our house.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Killua adds, though he doesn’t seem like he’s about to interject in the conversation any other way. He’s just slouching, hands tucked into his pockets and a heavy-lidded, careful look in his eyes. Leorio squints suspiciously at him.

Gnawing on his lip, Gon props his hands on his hips. “Please can Killua come along?”

“Can’t Killua just go home?” Leorio asks dryly.

Gon’s nose wrinkles, and he shakes his head, adamant. “No! Duh! Killua lives in California. And he came all the way here to see me.”

“So that’s why he wanted to go to California,” Leorio thinks, a few pieces falling together. He chews on the inside of his cheek, looking back and forth between Gon and Killua. Really, thinking about it, he does kind of know who this is already. If he’s remembering right, Gon met Killua at summer camp a few years ago and they’ve been talking ever since. He didn’t know the kid lived in California, though.

Wait.

California.

Leorio sputters, rounding on Killua with a pointed finger. “We’re in Massachusetts! How the hell did you even get here?”

Killua quirks one eyebrow, grins, and holds out his thumb, miming the common sign for hitchhiking.
God, Leorio can feel his blood pressure increasing. “Don’t you know how dangerous that is?”

“Of course I do,” Killua laughs, shoving his hand back into his pocket and slouching back. “I’m not an idiot, after all. I took the Greyhound.”

“That’s dangerous too. Shouldn’t you be in school, anyway? Gon only just got let out himself,” Leorio says suspiciously, and Killua just shrugs.

“I’m homeschooled.”

“That explains so much,” he mutters.

Gon bites his lip. “I mean, if we have to, we can always stay here while you and Kurapika go on the trip instead,” he offers. “I’ll be super responsible.”

Leorio just slants him this look. “What did I literally just say about you not being allowed to be on your own?”

“I won’t be on my own! Killua will be here with me.” Gon looks at his friend with bright eyes and a brighter smile, and Leorio looks up at the ceiling despairingly. This battle was lost around the time the kid hopped on the bus a few days ago and Leorio knows it.

“Do you ever listen? No, no, it’s fine. Get whatever you need to organized and we’ll fit it in. Hope you packed light,” he tells Killua.

“I always do.” But all of Killua’s calm evaporates as he faces Gon and practically vibrates. Killua and Gon high-five and immediately scurry off upstairs, their voices bouncing excitedly around the walls.

Leorio prays for his sanity.

Then he prays for Kurapika to not kill him when he finds out.

“And you said yes?” Kurapika asks disbelievingly.

Leorio throws his hands up in the air, then immediately puts them back where he’s trying to wedge Killua’s bag into the one last free spot in his car. “What else was I supposed to say? Go home? I can’t tell a kid who traveled across the country to visit his friend to just turn around, too bad, and leave!”

“Well, you could have; you just didn’t.”

“That would have been cruel,” Leorio grumbles.

Kurapika regards him, then covers his mouth with his hand, a gesture Leorio has long since learned means he’s hiding amusement. Leorio squints. That doesn’t get him much more than the addition of shaking shoulders.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing. Just.” Kurapika breathes out, settling his laughter. “You’re a much nicer person than you pretend to be.”

“I’m perfectly nice.”
“Your bedside manner is awful, don’t pretend otherwise. It’s not fair to the poor souls who are going to end up being your patients.”

“Fuck off, Kurapika.” Leorio shoves one last time, then steps back. He eyes the stack of luggage critically. That should hold. Well enough, anyway. “Anything else?”

Kurapika hums behind him. There’s the faint noise of a step on the pavement, the particular grind-tap of rubber against concrete, and Leorio can feel the proximity between him and Kurapika as almost a tangible pressure against his skin. “No, I think that’s everything, barring a couple of blankets. Maybe some pillows. Go ahead and close it up.”

They head inside as soon as the car is all locked up. The house’s lights are mostly off, save for one in the living room, and one lighting the stairs, and Kurapika turns them off behind him and Leorio as they move upstairs to Leorio’s room.

“I’m taking a shower now,” Kurapika says, flicking on the bathroom light. “Don’t wait up for me.”

Leorio makes an affirmative sound, and Kurapika closes the door behind him. Leorio’s eyes adjust slowly to the sudden darkness, trying to process the faint ambient light from the windows that is his only source of illumination. He reaches out, feeling the smooth surface of the wall under his hand. Blinking a couple of times seems to help him adjust, and he begins walking towards his room again, mindful of any obstacles in his way.

Once in his room, Leorio changes into his pajamas and flops onto his bed. He grabs one of the books resting beside his bed, exchanging it for his glasses, and reads through it idly while he waits for Kurapika to get done in the shower. Sure, Kurapika may have told him to not wait, but Leorio doesn’t want him to accidentally get hurt while trying to find his way around Leorio’s room in the dark.

(Plus, Leorio’s thoughts are circling, double-checking all the things they have, the things they need to grab in the morning, how early they need to be on the road—)

“Ah screw this,” Leorio mutters, after about fifteen minutes of him rereading the same paragraph over and over again and retaining precisely none of it. “I need a drink of water.”

He puts down his book and makes his way out of his room when something catches his eye.

There, a thin stream of light, noticeable in the dark hallway, coming from underneath Gon’s door. Leorio hesitate outside the door, listening intently. There is the soft murmur of voices, indistinct and sleepy. Killua and Gon. He can’t hear their precise words, just the laughing tone of Gon’s voice. Leorio smiles. It’s always good to hear his cousin laugh.

Mind, he still doesn’t know why Killua is here, but if he makes Gon happy, then there’s no harm to it.

And to come all the way from California…

Well, it saves Leorio a lot of gas now that he knows he doesn’t have to make the trip out there. And having a friend he can clown around with will make Gon a lot easier to distract on long stretches of road.

“Stop spying on them, Leorio.”

Leorio flinches, guilty, and turns around.
Kurapika has emerged from the shower, the smell of clean, wet skin wafting from him in gently billowing clouds of fragrant steam. His hair is slicked back and dark with water, a few of the shorter hairs from his bangs escaping to wisp around his forehead and heat-flushed cheeks. He looks up at Leorio, towel wrapped around his shoulders, shorts slung low around his hips, and one eyebrow raised. His mouth is tilted in a teasing smile. “Are you going to take a shower, or are you just going to stand out here all night like a weirdo?”

“Pfe! I’m not a weirdo! I was just. Making sure they were okay,” Leorio whispers hotly.

Kurapika rolls his eyes and makes a shoo-ing motion. “If you’re not showering, then go to bed. You don’t need to spy on Gon and his friend.”

Leorio grumbles. “I was just going to get some water.”

“Then get it or go to bed.”

“Hmph.” But Leorio does what Kurapika says, calling over his shoulder, “I’ll take a shower in the morning.”

After that, it’s a simple matter for both of them to get ready for bed. Leorio stretches out on his mattress while Kurapika fusses around the bedding they have laid out on the floor for the night, and while he’s laying down, his mind refuses to stop turning, even when Kurapika turns off the lights.

He closes his eyes tightly.

_Come on, brain, just shut up for three minutes_, he thinks. Restlessly, he turns on his side, looks over to where Kurapika, still and quiet, lays.

“Are you excited?” he asks, soft and uncertain. There is a large stretch of silence, the only sound the hum of the overhead fan, and Leorio closes his eyes when no answer seems to be coming. Kurapika’s probably asleep anyway, so it doesn’t really matter. It must just be Leorio, with his nerves coiled tightly underneath his breastbone, clawing in a heavy weight up his sternum, who cannot sleep.

There’s the soft shift of sheets.

“I think so, yes.”

Leorio opens his eyes again, and in the vague, half-blue moonlight that filters in sparsely between his blinds, he can barely make out the outline of Kurapika’s pale face. His eyes are nothing more than glints of reflected light, but Leorio can tell that they’re looking right at each other, unblinking in the darkness. Something about the words relaxes him, Leorio letting out a sigh as his muscles untense.

“Go to sleep, Leorio,” Kurapika whispers. “We’re going to be fine.”

Alright, that he thinks he can do. “Goodnight.”

And Leorio closes his eyes and goes to sleep in his bed for the last time before their trip begins. It’ll be alright.
All Was Still Breathing

Chapter Summary

The heat of the day is beginning to set in, lending the air that particular white shine that makes Leorio grateful he’s wearing sunglasses while driving. Cars zip by on the part of the highway visible from the window of the diner.

Chapter Notes

Still holding strong to the monthly updates! I hope you guys like endless shenanigans, because that’s what the next few chapters are all about. Chapter title from "Ancient Mars" by The Zolas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kurapika,” Leorio whispers. “Kurapika, wake up.”

Kurapika groans as he rolls over and stares muzzily at Leorio, his grey eyes unfocused. He mutters an indistinct query, batting Leorio’s hand away from his shoulder. Leorio hovers for a moment, then shakes him gently, two fingertips to Kurapika’s shoulder as he crouches beside him in the darkness of Leorio’s bedroom.

Leorio swallows, gnawing on the inside of his cheek. “Kurapika, I don’t think I remembered to get everything. What do I even need to pack?”

Kurapika lets out a long, long sigh, and pushes himself up. With gentle fingertips, he massages one of his temples. “Leorio, it’s,” and here he checks, glancing over Leorio’s shoulder, “two in the morning.”

“Yeah, I know! Come on, we’re coming down to the last wire here.”

“I was planning on sleeping for the next four hours until we left, you idiot.” Kurapika rolls over towards the wall, trying to get comfortable on the inadequately cushioned floor. Leorio stares hard at his back. After a moment, Kurapika adds, “Which is, by the way, something you should be doing too.”

“You can sleep in the car, it’s no problem.”

“Leorio, you’re taking first shift, unless you’ve forgotten that.”

“Fuck, right, right, sorry, I just-.” Leorio sits down hard on the bed, rubbing his face with his hands. His stubble rasps against his palms. His mind is circling endlessly, and that’s what woke him up in the first place. Waking up already panicking is not a feeling Leorio (or anyone, he assumes) particularly enjoys. Even if he knows that they do have everything they need. Even if he knows that there’s nothing to worry about because Kurapika already made a list and they double checked it when they loaded things into his car last night. Leorio knows he’s panicking over nothing.
That clearly hasn’t stopped him yet.

There’s a sigh from somewhere in Kurapika’s general vicinity, and then a warm hand on Leorio’s knee, sliding up to his elbow (which is currently braced on his knee while Leorio has his mini-meltdown), and then up his arm to curl around his hand. Leorio leans into it. He opens his eyes to meet Kurapika’s calm grey gaze. They hold there for a moment, breathing together. Kurapika’s body heat radiates against his thighs and calves, aware and tingling, and Leorio is... a little bit distracted by the sudden realization that Kurapika is sitting between his knees. Just a bit. Not like it’s weird or sexual, but Leorio is still a guy in his twenties, and anyone between his thighs is gonna give him a bit of a pause. Leorio makes certain that his gaze never strays from the dark forms of Kurapika’s eyes and mouth. Mostly eyes. Definitely those.

“Calm down, Leorio,” Kurapika orders kindly. “I promise, we have everything we need. There’s nothing for you to worry about just yet. All you need to do is go back to sleep, and I will make sure to wake you up when we need to go.”

Leorio opens his mouth to protest. “Kurapika, I can-”

A single finger laid across his lips shuts him up.

“I don’t doubt that you can drive just fine, Leorio,” Kurapika says. His hands are very warm. His finger is also warm against Leorio’s mouth. Leorio really sort of wants to lean in and rest against him and breathe Kurapika in as he falls asleep, because warm sounds like the best thing in the world right now.

It’s possible that Leorio is actually very tired, now that he lets himself think about it.

Kurapika, finally, lets his hand drop down to cup around the outside of Leorio’s other hand. Focusing on him keeps getting harder, Leorio’s eyelids heavy and unresponsive, even as orange-hot anxious energy crawls around his body. All he can feel now is his own breath, and the gentle pressure of Kurapika’s hands against his own, surrounding him. It should make him claustrophobic. Instead, Leorio’s shoulders loosen, and he breathes in, out, consciously forcing his muscles to relax as he does. He lingers like that for a moment.

“Lay down and go to sleep, Leorio,” Kurapika murmurs softly, pushing at him gently.

And then he pulls away, slowly, in increments. Kurapika lets his hands fall away with Leorio’s. Slowly, Leorio meets Kurapika’s eyes, the dark of the room not hiding Kurapika’s searching gaze.

They remain there, breathing in tandem, for a few heartbeats. With a quiet exhalation, Leorio pulls himself fully onto the mattress and stretches out. Kurapika waits until he’s got the covers pulled up around him before he nods and returns to his own pile of blankets.

“Go to sleep,” Kurapika says again as he lies down.

This time, Leorio listens.

The sun is hovering close to the horizon the next time Leorio wakes up, golden-pink light flooding his room. Someone shakes him again, gentle but insistent, and Leorio grumbles. He’s awake, god damn it, he’s awake, so whoever this is should stop bothering him already. He’s. He’s fine. Totally…. Totally awake. That’s him. Awake and ready.

“Le-o-ri-o, wake up! We need to get on the road already.”
Shit.

Leorio scrambles up, flailing and getting hopelessly wrapped up in his sheets as he does. Kurapika, hovering over him, doesn’t laugh, but his eyes are dancing with mirth for more than a few seconds before he starts trying to help Leorio get untangled.

“You’re hopeless,” Kurapika sighs fondly.

“I don’t try to be,” Leorio says, or at least tries to. It’s muffled as hell because of the blankets wrapped around his mouth. The coverings part finally, and Leorio rubs his face, banishing the lingering touch on his skin.

Kurapika waits for him to finish, then lifts an eyebrow. “Ready to go?”

Leorio grumbles. “Let me shave and get dressed. Are Gon and Killua up?”

“I stopped in with them before trying to get you. And don’t worry, I’ll make breakfast for everyone.”

“Ugh, I hadn’t even thought about that. Thanks, Kurapika.”

“Just get ready to go, Leorio.”

Leorio makes his way into the bathroom, hops into the shower. His nerves are zinging now that he’s fully gained consciousness, heart pounding certain and hard under his sternum. Even his mind is too restless to allow him any kind of quality contemplation, and it’s with a billion things distracting him that Leorio washes, rinses, and shaves his face, eventually making his way downstairs.

True to his word, Kurapika has made breakfast. Gon and Killua sit side by side in varying stages of wakefulness. Gon, at least, looks up when Leorio enters and takes a seat. Killua doesn’t do much other than stare at his pancakes and chew. Breakfast is short and mostly silent, no one quite up for energetic conversation except for Gon, already chattering about the trip, and it’s only a matter of minutes before Leorio is locking the door to Mito’s house, sitting behind the wheel to his car, gripping the steering wheel.

Leorio inhales.

He looks at Kurapika, delicately curled into the passenger seat of his car, then through the rearview mirror at Gon and Killua. The kids, surprisingly enough, are drooping, Gon leaning against Killua and bonelessly pointing things out about their house and the surrounding area before they’ve even gotten started, things that he couldn’t show him before because it was dark. Leorio lets out a deep breath, looks forward, then back again, and puts the car in reverse.


For the most part, the drive during the morning goes by quickly. Leorio navigates them through the city and highways with ease of long practice. Gon and Killua are both asleep in the backseat by the time Leorio’s even gotten out of Cambridge, snoring lightly, and Leorio smiles at them in the rearview mirror. Knowing that they’re sleeping in the backseat, Leorio drives more carefully and smoothly than he usually does, taking the car down the coast for a little before swinging further inland, heading around New York City.

Kurapika looks at him curiously as he takes an exit for the detour, and Leorio shrugs. “I just… want to see places I haven’t before, you know? So… I was just thinking we could, like. Go. As far as we could, at least for today. And then we can stop and do things tomorrow and kind of alternate like
that, or something.”

Kurapika laughs, shakes his head. “Alright. But we should probably stop in New York at least once. For Killua, if nothing else.”

“Eh, we’ll hit it on our way back up.” Leorio looks in the rear view mirror at the boy, and finds a pair of blue eyes staring back. Looking back down at the road, he speaks just a bit louder to be heard. “Oh, you finally wake up?”

Killua’s mouth pulls to the side, but he gestures wordlessly at his other side. Leorio hazards another quick glance. Gon is still out from the looks of it, lying mostly on top of Killua. His mouth is open, and, knowing his cousin, he’s probably drooling, but Killua only holds up a finger to his mouth and glares at Leorio to be quiet. Leorio muffles a snicker.

“Aw, that’s just adorable,” he says, saccharine sweet and enjoying the vicious look he gets from Killua.

“Don’t harassing them, Leorio,” Kurapika chides softly. “I’m sure they were up late talking, and car rides are always very tiring.”

“Yeah, yeah, at least they don’t have to drive.”

“Any time you need to pull over and let me drive, you can. I’m feeling fine.”

Leorio shakes his head. “No, no, I’m doing alright. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t be stubborn, old man,” Killua pipes up from the backseat. “I don’t wanna die today, and your driving is making me sick enough.”

Leorio making a ticking noise with his tongue, shooting a glare at the brat. “My driving is just fine, thank you very much. And if you need to throw up, let me know. I like this car being clean.”

“Shit, really? You can’t tell by looking at it. This thing’s a trash-heap.”

“HEYYY-”

“G’morning,” Gon yawns, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes in the sleep-heavy, uncoordinated way that the recently awoken have. He looks around, seemingly unconcerned by the argument brewing between Leorio and Killua. “Where are we?”

“About an hour outside New York City,” Leorio answers. “We’re going around it for now.”

Gon mumbles something in acknowledgement. There is silence for a few moments, Killua having chosen, apparently, to subside into silence now that Gon’s awake.

Then a terrible, loud rumble.

Leorio looks at where he is on the road, alarmed, searching the fleeing pavement. It doesn’t seem to have been anything he hit. He’s not on the rumble strips, so it wasn’t that. What the hell?

“Dude, how hungry are you?” Killua asks, admiringly.

Leorio flicks his gaze back, and Gon, sure enough, is rubbing the back of his head, flushing darkly, other hand curled across his stomach. “Really, really hungry. Leorio, when are we getting food?”

“Now, apparently,” Leorio laughs, starts looking for an exit. “If you wait any longer, I’m afraid you
They pull over for lunch at a little restaurant at the side of the road, something family owned and small that serves possibly the best burgers that Leorio thinks he’s ever had. Gon and Killua are rambunctious now that they’re both awake, jostling each other in the booth, arms touching from elbow to shoulder. Leorio watches them, curious. He hasn’t seen Gon smile this much, or this widely, in a while.

He’s glad. Honestly.

Something vibrates against his hip. Beside him, Kurapika, blond hair tucked behind the shell of one ear, pulls out his phone and looks at the screen, an unreadable twist to his mouth. “Noon already?”

Leorio makes an affirmative noise around his mouthful of food, swallowing before he speaks. “Yep. We’re making pretty good time, I think.”

“Mm, yeah. It seems like it.” Kurapika smiles a bit, edging out of the seat. “I’ll be right back.”

Leorio watches him disappear into the bathroom. When he looks back, he’s met with matching grins from the boys. They keep elbowing each other and laughing, but their eyes are definitely on him, and Leorio scowls, squinting suspiciously. “What’re you looking at?”

“Oh, nothing,” Gon says sweetly.

“Nothing at all,” Killua adds, mouth curved up deviously. They look at each other and laugh.

Leorio has no clue what they’re talking about. He shakes his head, ignoring them in favor of looking out the window.

The heat of the day is beginning to set in, lending the air that particular white shine that makes Leorio grateful he’s wearing sunglasses while driving. Cars zip by on the part of the highway visible from the window of the diner. The sun, bright above them, beams in through the glass panes, warming the air and side of the seat that Leorio’s sitting on. His button-up shirt is getting a bit stifling, honestly. And the tie might have been a bit much. But Leorio’s getting ready to be a doctor, damn it. He needs the wardrobe to match.

(Though really, he’s on vacation right now. Surely that calls for like, shorts or something. Not that he owns any, that is.)

“Are we ready to go?”

Leorio twitches, looks up at Kurapika, standing beside their booth. Their table is pretty much empty, and the check’s ready to be paid at the counter, so Leorio nods, scooting out of the seat. “Yeah, sorry. I zoned out.”

“Need me to take over?” Kurapika tilts his head up to meet Leorio’s eyes, his tongue darting out to wet his lips as he takes one last drink from his glass.

Leorio jerks his gaze back up. “No, I’m still good. Let’s go. Come on, Gon, Killua.”

“Already outside, old man! Keep up!”

Whenever Leorio doesn’t have to drive for very long, which is more often than not, given where he lives, he always forgets how fucking dull it gets after about the sixth hour.
The road is only interesting for so long, honestly, and it’s not like he can stare out at the scenery. Or play games, like Killua and Gon are, curled up together over a Gameboy. Or read, like Kurapika. He can’t do jack shit except drift here, mind wandering. Topics like school and his scholarships aren’t interesting enough to stave off something like road weariness. There’s nothing new about them anyway.

“Urgh, I need music,” Leorio grumbles, rubbing his face roughly.

There is movement in the rearview mirror. Leorio flicks his attention there long enough to register Killua leaning forward before his crown of white hair pops between the front seats. Killua asks, “Does this decrepit old piece of crap have auxiliary input or is it stuck in the Stone Age like you?”

Leorio scowls at him via the mirror, but Killua spots the cord coming out of the tape deck easily, and he leans forward, reaching insistently.

“Pass me that, will you?” he asks Kurapika, because he knows, clearly, that asking Leorio would get him fucking nowhere. Little brat.

“No, don’t-,” but Kurapika is already holding the converter out to Killua. Leorio resigns himself to some god awful pop music or something. (Not that all pop music is bad, necessarily. But Leorio doubts that Killua’s taste and his own match up. At least not in a way that will let Leorio drive without wanting to kill someone. He wants something good and entertaining, and all of his usual radio stations faded out four hours ago, at least.)

But the first song is something electronic and catchy, a pulsing bass below chipper treble, and Leorio slowly relaxes. The road stretches in front of him, tan and dusty, falling away to the beat of the music. This… isn’t so bad. Killua and Gon both dance around a little bit in the back seat, and sure, that jostles the car, but fuck, Leorio’s going about seventy-five on the highway. It’s not doing too much, really, and their energy is infectious.

The song fades out.

Several things then happen in rapid succession.

First, the new song begins. This would not be remarkable in any way except that it begins with a chorus suddenly screaming “Shut the fuck! Up!”, loud drums, and then scream-singing words that Leorio can’t even begin to make out. It is also several, several levels louder than the previous song.

Second, Leorio flinches reflexively from the sudden, unexpected noise, and the car jerks to the side. He rights it a moment later, no harm done. His heart is pounding, and his nerves are a little shot, but aside from a sudden jerk, nothing is wrong.

Third, the noise and the subsequent unexpected motion sends Gon tumbling half onto the floorboard of Leorio’s back seat.

Fourth, because of Leorio’s flinch, the car jerks, and Killua’s phone flies out of his hand, and the cable disconnects. The phone slides home underneath Kurapika’s seat, who is sitting directly in front of Killua.

Silence reigns in the car for several moments. The only sound is Leorio’s car driving on the highway, wind and asphalt a muted roar around them.

“What. The fuck. Was that?” Leorio asks. His hands hurt. Looking at them, Leorio realizes that he’s gripping the steering wheel a bit hard, knuckles white and tendons aching from the stress put on them. Consciously, he forces himself to relax, straightening up. Good fucking god, his heart rate is
not slowing down appreciably.

Killua says, “Music, duh.”

Kurapika smothers his laugh in the palm of one of his hands. “Okay, Killua, no metal. It wears on Leorio’s nerves.”

“What a wuss. And besides, that wasn’t even metal, that was—”

“Fucking terrible?” Leorio suggests dryly. “Gon, buckle your seatbelt. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Shut up, old man! It was fucking pop punk!” Killua protests, leaning down to fish his phone out from under Kurapika’s seat. Gon pouts, but does as he’s told, even though props his bare feet up on the center console between Leorio and Kurapika’s seats, a quiet rebellion.

Leorio snorts. That’s the end of the conversation, though, and the end of Leorio needing music, at least for now. Silence will do him just fine. He can keep the company of his own thoughts.

The sun is just beginning to set on Leorio’s right, hovering about a handspan above the horizon and lending the road a faintly red-gold tint through his sunglasses. He’s only tired in the vague ache behind his eyes, but Kurapika is reading calmly in the seat beside him, one knee cocked up, and Gon and Killua are laughing over something on one of their phones in the backseat, and Leorio’s heart is somewhere in his throat.

Contentment, and something else, warm and large and foreign, settles in him, and Leorio keeps driving. As he does, a sign flashes by in his peripheral vision.

Philadelphia, 47 mi.

Chapter End Notes

Honorable mentions for the songs Killua plays here are "Endless Fantasy" by Anamanaguchi and "Make Them Believe" by Chunk! No, Captain Chunk!
Chapter Summary

Kurapika lets out an aggrieved breath. “We’re not talking about this, Gon.”

But of course they’re not so easily swayed, and it’s not surprising at all for Killua to turn to them, curious. “How did you guys meet?”

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, essentially, the latter half of February and all of March have completely kicked my ass in a multitude of ways, so I’m going to keep trying to get at least April’s chapter also done, but I might have to beg off during May and June because I'm travelling a lot during those months and I think an extended break from posting might be a good thing. It all depends on how much writing I get done in April. Hopefully, we're just looking at June for me being off. But.

I’m sorry guys, but working a full time engineering job and managing the household makes it hard sometimes to prioritize anything that isn't strictly "necessary." I'll keep doing my best. Thank you for all your continued support. I can't even explain how important and lovely all the comments and kudos are.

Chapter title is from "Fire Escape" by Foster the People ((All the songs mentioned as song titles are definitely part of a playlist I have for this fic whoops))

Leorio’s eyes ache.

Actually, most of him aches. Sitting in the car for such long stretches of time has his legs feeling oddly heavy and cramped and, okay, man, he really just needs to get out of this car. They’ve been on the road for a while now, and the signs for Philadelphia have been listing lower and lower mileages as they get closer. A break sounds terribly welcome. A long break.

Leorio, gnawing on his lip, keeps track of the exit signs as they pass by.

Philadelphia City Limits

Huh. Well, that’s somewhere to stop. Now he just has to find somewhere to stop, because really, hotel and food and sleep sound fucking wonderful right now, and while he and Kurapika had kind of figured out what they sort of wanted to do, they didn’t really sit down and work it all out down to each individual detail. So the choice of hotel is still up to Leorio. He waits until he finds a couple of signs for some hotels, and signals to exit.

Behind him, Killua perks up as they pull off the highway, looking around them curiously. “Is it dinnertime?”
“Actually, I was going to just find a hotel and we could figure out food afterwards.”

Killua’s gaze jerks over to Leorio, suddenly intense and focused. “We’re stopping? Now?”

Leorio shrugs. “Yeah, Philly’s as good a place as any. There’s stuff we can do here tomorrow, so it won’t all be driving, you know?”

“There’s still plenty of time to keep going. Shouldn’t we be, like, getting as far away from your place as possible? I thought the whole point of this was to get away from home.”

Kurapika stretches as much as he can in the confined quarters of the car, groaning quietly as he does. “I’m ready to just get out of the car, honestly,” he admits, rubbing his forehead. “I’m starting to get a bit motion sick.”

“I’m bored,” Gon says, like it’s a revelation. Like it’s the worst thing in the entire world. He helps out this impression by flopping over onto Killua dramatically. Interestingly enough, Leorio notes, Killua doesn’t react except to tense up, mouth pressed into a thin line and jaw tight as he silently watches Leorio, his gaze a physical pressure against the side of Leorio’s head.

“Do we have to stop now?” he asks.

Leorio pulls into the parking lot of a hotel, puts the car in park. “There’s not really a good reason to keep going right now. Alright, everyone out. Let’s go check in.”

He stretches as he pulls himself out of the car, and honestly, Leorio feels like an old man right now, muscles tight and sore just from sitting in one place for most of the day. He breathes in, the lingering warmth of the air coating the back of his throat. A breeze picks up, catching all of the sweat-damp crevices of Leorio’s body, and he exhales, long and hard.

Gon bounces around excitedly, clearly glad to be stretching his legs after sitting for so long. He’s chattering to Kurapika, something about the dream he had been having earlier, and Kurapika is nodding along, smiling faintly. Beside him, Killua holds his phone in a white-knuckled grip. His expression as he looks down at the screen is unreadable. He stands there for a long time, a still, unmoving tableau, lit up gilt and golden by the sunset. His phone illuminates his face in pale blue, draining his expression of all depth of color. He is tense, mouth tight.

Killua pockets his phone without a word. The skin on the back of Leorio’s neck prickles, a premonition, dread threading around his lungs.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go,” Killua says, quietly enough that Leorio isn’t quite sure if he was meant to hear.

Leorio frowns, but the feeling is already disintegrating as Killua’s face lights up with a grin and he tackles Gon, looping an arm around his shoulders. Kurapika looks back at him, eyebrows furrowed, quizzical. And Leorio takes a deep breath in and shakes his head. It was probably nothing. Just unease based on the curiously blank look on Killua’s face there for a second.

Leorio shakes it off as they enter the hotel. After all, he worries a lot about small things all the time. Gon and Kurapika both have called him a worrywart more times than Leorio can count. It’s definitely nothing. And besides, Killua is just fine now, laughing and joking around with Gon easily.

It’s nothing.

He hopes.
“Hi, I’d like to get a room for a couple of nights please?”

“Four-thirteen… four-thirteen…. Here we are!” Leorio fumbles the keycard given to him out of its protective sleeve, sliding it through the slot. A click signals the door unlocking, and Leorio shoulders it open. He scoots into the dimly lit room enough to get out of the other’s ways, holding the door open with one foot as they move past him.

It’s a fairly plain hotel room, as far as they go. Two beds are arranged with their headboards against one wall, a small space between them and a television against the other wall for easy viewing. A simple closet and bathroom open next to the door to the hallway. The decor is wood and tan, to offset the elaborately patterned carpet, Leorio assumes as he lets the door fall shut behind him now that everyone’s inside and pushes his suitcase against the wall.

Gon tosses his duffel bag on top of the bed nearest the window, Killua following him closely, and Kurapika is already spreading his accoutrements on the other. Standing between them, Leorio looks back and forth, curious. Out loud, he asks, “Two beds?”

Killua plugs a charger into the port built into the base of the bedside lamp, tapping idly at his phone. “Well yeah, what else did you think “two doubles” meant?”

“I thought it was, like two rooms,” Leorio admits. He supposes that means, uh. Killua and Gon have clearly claimed one, leaving the other for Kurapika. And him. God, it’s been a while since Leorio’s had to share a bed with someone. He’s sure that things won’t get awkward. Positive. Scared. It’ll be fine. Kurapika’s mature, he’s mature. They’re just two guys sharing a bed. It’s fine.

“No, no, just two beds. The beds themselves are called doubles, duh.” Killua scrunches up his nose, looking askance at Leorio. “Haven’t you ever been in a hotel before?”

“No when I’ve been paying, no. It’s a bit different on this side of it.”

Killua laughs, head tilted cockily up at Leorio as he moves into Leorio’s space. “Not really.”

“Look, not all of us are California brats like you, okay?”

“Boys.” Kurapika sighs, putting a calm hand on both Leorio and Killua’s shoulders. “If you don’t shut up and stop bickering right now, I’m going to put my foot so far up both of your asses that you’ll be tasting my shoes for weeks.”

There’s a pause.

“Damn,” Killua says admiringly.

Letting out a low whistle, Leorio shoves his hands in his pockets, petulant and sheepish. “Shit, Kurapika, there’s no need to be drastic.”

“You two have argued four times today. I’m not putting up with it for the next few weeks.”

Gon laughs, falling back onto the bed with a breathless huff. “They’re just trying to get along, Kurapika. And besides, you can’t talk. You and Leorio did nothing but argue for the first, like, three months you knew each other.”

“Oh really?” Killua asks, curious.

Turning away, his hand finally falling from Leorio’s shoulder, Kurapika scoffs. “That’s neither here
nor there. What do you all want for dinner? I was thinking that the Carino’s down the street looks pretty good.”

Leorio rubs the still-lingering spot of warmth. “Aw come on, we’re in Philly. We can find some cheesesteaks or something at least.”

“Yeah, when Leorio and Kurapika met, they got in so many fights,” Gon enthusiastically continues at Killua, disregarding the topic of food.

Kurapika lets out an aggrieved breath. “We’re not talking about this, Gon.”

But of course they’re not so easily swayed, and it’s not surprising at all for Killua to turn to them, curious. “How did you guys meet?”

Leorio and Kurapika trade glances. He wonders if Kurapika is thinking of the same thing he is; of the study room on the third floor of the college library with its window facing the street below; of the long table in it, covered in their books and papers; of the countless nights and afternoons spent in there, conversing and bitching about class in the same breath; of them becoming friends more from the application of stubbornness and the addition of Gon into their midst than anything else.

Of Leorio not being able to imagine life without Kurapika anymore.

“They both got territorial over the same study room,” Gon says simply. Like it can really be boiled down to just that. “And neither one of them was willing to give it up. So they argued all the time about that, about what they were getting degrees in, what they were getting for lunch that day, everything.”

Kurapika sighs. “Really, Gon, you’re making it sound like we just fought and nothing else. Leorio ended up being remarkably quiet while we were studying, so I just learned to deal with him while we were in there. He just kept trying to pry details of my life out of me while we weren’t, and I didn’t appreciate it.”

“You said that me becoming a doctor for the money was stupid!” Leorio interjects, finger leveled accusingly at Kurapika. “Stupid and shallow!”

“I never said that!”

“You did! I remember it clearly! You definitely did!”

Gon looks at Killua, gesturing wide at the two of them. “See? They fight a lot.”

“Huh. From the way you talked about them, I thought they’d be a lot more like—” and Killua does something with his hands, twining them together and waggling his eyebrows at Gon significantly, like that means something.

Gon laughs brightly, shakes his head, pulling his legs up to bodily flip himself off the bed in a single, smooth motion. “No, no. They bicker.”

“Like an old married couple.”

“We do not!” Leorio protests, his voice oddly doubled. He shoots a glance to the side, finds Kurapika blinking back at him with a startled look on his face, clearly having just said the exact same thing.

Killua and Gon both break into laughter.
Leorio waves his hand. “Whatever, come on. Just drop off your bags already and let’s go to dinner.”

“What do you want?”

“Food,” Gon says simply.

“So helpful. I still say cheesesteaks.”

“We can get those tomorrow while we’re walking around. Let’s just go to Carino’s. Or Outback or something. We passed one of those too.”

“What if we just went to an ice cream shop?” Killua asks, pressing his nose to the window of their hotel. “There’s a shop right down the street.”

“Ice cream for dinner?” Leorio says, ignoring Gon’s immediately enthusiastic cry of “Yes!” His mouth twists to the side. “That’s terrible.”

“I think you mean delicious.”

“You’re going to end up with cavities before you’re twenty.”

“Yes, most people do.”

“Hopeless. Absolutely hopeless. Let’s just get Italian food and call it good.”

“Can you really call a chain restaurant Italian food?”

Gon whines. “I would call it whatever it needed to hear if it got in my belly faster. Come on!”

Later, after food, they’re trudging back into the hotel when Gon stops at a sign on one of the walls behind the group, leaving them to walk past him. His hazel eyes dart as he reads it, and he cranes his neck down one of the hallways. There’s a soft ding from the doors in front of Leorio as they part, and he and the other two enter the elevator.

Leorio leans out, raps on the wall with his knuckles to get Gon’s attention. “Hey, Gon, come on, elevator’s here.”

“Okay! Did you know,” Gon says as he jogs over to join them, “that there’s a pool here?”

“Really? Do you want to get changed and-”

And before Leorio can even finish the sentence, Gon and Killua tear out of the opening elevator doors, thumping down the hotel hall in their haste to get to the room, yelling excitedly the whole time. Leaving Kurapika and Leorio staring after them.

“Well,” Kurapika says. “At least they’re enthusiastic.”

Leorio ticks his tongue behind his teeth, letting out a long sigh. “I’d be a bit more okay with that if they remembered that they don’t have room keys. All that noise for nothing.”

“Le- o-ri-o,” Gon whines from the door. “Come on, I wanna get in the pool!”

“Alright, alright.” Leorio shoos the boys away from the door, sliding in the keycard. He gets jostled out of the way again, but he allows it good-naturedly, gesturing Kurapika in ahead of him.
Leorio moves to crouch over his suitcase, digging through the various piles of shirts and pants to try and find something resembling a swimsuit. Button-up, button-up, slacks, a tie, a tie clip, a bow tie (just in case), another button-up, and a- hah! There it is. He pulls it out and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

“Oh.” Kurapika takes a few shirts out of his bag, setting them to the side as he rustles around a bit more. “I uh. I think I forgot to bring my swimsuit.”

“You could always just wear shorts down or something like that,” Killua offers, already pulling his sweater over his head. “And a shirt. I’m sure no one would notice.”

Gon grins, wide, wicked. “Or you could swim naked.”

Kurapika sighs, sitting back on his heels, and he shakes his head. “No! No and no. I’ll just stay up here. You won’t be down there for too long, anyway, and I can read while you’re not around making noise.”

There’s a few indistinct sounds from the boys, the typical slide and pull of fabric coming off and going back on. Leorio shrugs off his button-up, finally escaping its clutches. “Mm, if you’re sure.”

“I am. Have fun.”

The journey down to the pool is conducted in hurried movements, all of them cold because of the exposure to air conditioning, but the pool is, at least, thankfully deserted by the time they get there, which means no one is around to get them into trouble when Gon immediately goes flying in, cannonballing to the best of his efforts. Leorio, of course, wades in slowly, sighing at the cool touch of water.

Killua is just as bad as Gon, though he doesn’t make as big of a splash when he enters the water. They rough house as Leorio drifts, submerged up to his chin in the water only because his legs are folded underneath himself. His thoughts wander idly, turning over the rumbled memories of their day driving with the night before and what lays in front of them for tomorrow. They’ll probably do some sightseeing, if their plan actually holds steady. He’s not planning on driving too far tomorrow, since he’s paid for their second night already.

Increased laughter draws Leorio’s attention, and he looks over just in time to see Gon bodily tackle Killua into the water.

Gon is brown against Killua’s pale skin, a constant remnant of his time in the sun. Meanwhile, Leorio can pick out the veins beneath the surface of Killua’s skin, even from a distance. He doesn’t seem malnourished, and bruises or cuts would show up easily on such fair skin, and their lack lets Leorio put rest to a worried voice in the back of his head. Not completely. For at the moment, at least, he can’t see any physical signs of abuse.

Maybe Killua had honestly just gotten permission and left home to visit Gon?

But a lot of things don’t make much sense in that context.

There’s a lot about Killua being here that doesn’t make sense, if Leorio lets himself think about it.

Leorio dunks himself under the water, resolving to just not let it bother him unless something came up. He can handle it if something does, but if he just wonders and works himself into a frenzy, he’s going to be completely useless. He surfaces and floats discontentedly through the water, legs and arms half-curled to keep him from breaching the surface. Voices echo largely through the space, distorted by the water’s surface, the walls, creating an ambient hum that really, Leorio kind of wants
to escape from. It’s not particularly bad, but he’s heard enough background noise today that he doesn’t want any more.

He makes his slow, drifting way to the edge of the pool, propping his arms up on the cool tile. Idly, Leorio scans the walls of the room and. Pauses.

A sauna?

Sweet.

“Hey, Gon, Killua,” he calls over his shoulder. “If you need me, I’m going into the sauna.”

“Alright, old man, go sweat your age out.”

Leorio, hauling himself out of the pool, takes enough time to flip Killua off before he shambles over to the door in the wall.

“Dude, how much more of a dad can he be, like-” Leorio hears before he shuts the door and the oppressive, tight-dry heat of the air coats his throat and lungs. He takes the time to just stand in the doorway and roll his eyes before he sits down on one of the cedar ledges.

It’s quiet.

Leorio can hear himself breathe, can feel it in a way that he couldn’t before, and it settles the rumble of the roadstill rattling through his bones. It takes a long, long time for him to breathe easily. But. It’s nice. It’s so nice, to be still, to be out, to … not have anything more to do. Gon and Killua are already taken care of, and Kurapika knows how to look after himself right now, so all Leorio has to do, right now, is relax.

And now, he finally can.

He breathes in.

Out.

His mind wanders unfettered, crawling over their route, what they’re going to do, wondering how Mito is doing on her trip. Untold minutes pass by before the door creaks open, letting a cool blast of air into the room.

“Hey, Leorio?”

Leorio cracks an eye open. Gon leans around the doorframe, blinking up at him through the curtain of his hair, the black locks, for once, falling over his forehead and face. “Mm?”

“We’re going back up.”

“Alright.” Leorio lets his eyes close again. “I won’t be here too much longer. Have a room key?”

“No, but Kurapika’s in there. We’ll just knock.”

“Sounds good. Be safe,” Leorio says. Gon closes the door, and Leorio leans forward, grabbing the ladle. He tosses a few more drops of water on the stones before resettling himself against the damp wood. Breathe out, breathe in, and Leorio closes his eyes, letting himself drift there in the heat and moist air, settling like a blanket over him.
By the time Leorio drags himself out of the sauna, dips himself back in the pool for good measure, and makes his way back up to their hotel room, Killua and Gon have already taken up residence on one of the beds, curled together and sleeping like puppies. Leorio stares down at them, fond and envious in the same breath. Kurapika sits on the other mattress, book in hand and deeply interested in it by all appearances.

He turns away. Feeling eyes on him, Leorio looks up to meet Kurapika’s curious gaze, and Leorio grins sheepishly. “I wish I knew how they could sleep. They were asleep all day and here they are.”

“You’re just too wound up, Leorio. I’m sure you’ll get to sleep easily enough if you just lay down and try to relax.” Kurapika cocks an eyebrow at Leorio archly, a smile playing around his lips. “After all, you did drive all day. Weren’t we supposed to switch off?”

Leorio waves his hand, dismissing the statement. “I can handle it. Besides, it wasn’t that long. What, eight, ten hours? Something like that? I was fine.”

Kurapika shakes his head, hair golden and fine in the lamplight. He stands, setting his book down on the bedside table, and he makes his way over to stand next to Leorio, face tilted up. “ Either way about it, we’re here now, so here’s the real question. Do you want the bathroom first, or is okay if I go ahead and take a shower?”

Thinking about it for a second, Leorio shakes his head. “No, you go first.”

“Mmm, okay,” Kurapika says, reaching up to fuss around his left earlobe. “Here, can you put this by the bed for me?”

He blinks. “Yeah, sure.”

Kurapika holds out his hand and Leorio cups his own underneath it. His earring drops into his palm, a tiny impact, and Kurapika smiles at him before heading towards the bathroom, already pulling his long-sleeved shirt over his head in a flash of white fabric and pale skin. The bathroom door closes behind him.

Leorio closes his hand.

The earring’s metal cuff is still slightly warm from Kurapika’s skin.

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It is late.

It is late, and Leorio cannot sleep.

If this is what the rest of the road trip is going to be like, Leorio’s going to have to invest in sleeping medication, because this is bullshit.

Leorio stares up at the featureless ceiling of the hotel room and curses his mind that is bound and determined to just never let him rest. He closes his eyes and huffs as he shifts, hoping in vain that one of the positions he ends up in will just let him fucking sleep already. It’s... less than successful, unfortunately. He has to sleep. He can’t just not sleep and make Kurapika do all their driving tomorrow. Even though they’re not really going anywhere. Tomorrow’s just sight-seeing around Philadelphia.

Still, Leorio needs to sleep or he’s going to be unmanageable. He usually doesn’t have this kind of problem. But. There’s heat on his arm that he’s not used to, and every small shift has its resistance from the blankets around Kurapika. Leorio can’t stretch out; he’s already brushed against Kurapika
multiple times, each sending a jolt of nerves up his body and making it even harder to sleep. He can’t wake Kurapika up either. That’d just be rude.

This fucking sucks.

Leorio tries to just relax and ends up twitching again.

Beside him, Kurapika lets out a sigh. He rolls over with a huff, bracing himself up on one arm to stare at Leorio. In a low murmur, he says, “You keep fidgeting. What’s the matter?”

Shit. Leorio winces. So much for him being asleep. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you up.”

There’s some motion that Kurapika makes and Leorio misses in the dark. “Just talk to me. What’s wrong?”

Leorio gnaws on the inside of his cheek, trying to assemble the rabble of thoughts that is keeping him up. Finally, he says, “Isn’t this supposed to be like, life-altering?”

Kurapika tilts his head, hair falling in a pale, desaturated swath over the smooth curve of his exposed shoulder. “It’s only been a day, Leorio. We have a couple of weeks. Give it time. I mean, you’re not just going to turn around once you’ve decided that your life has changed, right?”

Letting out a rough sigh, Leorio folds his arms over his face. It doesn’t change the scenery, but it makes him feel better. “No, I guess not.”

There’s a soft touch at his shoulder, and Leorio shifts into it slightly. “Stop worrying about it. This is supposed to be fun, and here you are, giving yourself more wrinkles.”

“I don’t have wrinkles!”

“Honestly,” Kurapika sighs, and when Leorio lifts his arms to squint at him suspiciously, he looks quietly amused, “If you start looking any older, you’re going to start getting mistaken for Gon’s grandfather instead of his dad.”

“Wait, you’re not his dad?” Killua asks from across the room, voice sleepy and indistinct.

Leorio sputters. “For crissakes, no! I am not! I don’t look like his dad at all!”

“You really do.” Killua’s head pops up, white halo of hair easily visible in the dim hotel room, and he grins lopsidedly at Leorio’s offended expression, reaching out to turn on the bedside light. “I thought that’s who you were when you answered the door at first.

Gon decides at this moment to join in. He doesn’t bother moving at all. Not even a hand raised. “Nah, he’s not my dad. He’s my cousin.”

Killua turns this over in his head for a second, then says, simply, “Bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit! I wouldn’t lie.”

Killua snorts. “Oh no? You’ve never told a lie ever in your entire life.”

“Not once!” Gon says, too innocently. Killua lifts up a pillow and smacks him with it, prompting a yelp. Gon surges upright, grabbing his own pillow to throw at Killua. The two of them get into a rough pillow fight almost immediately, shouting and tussling wildly.

“I’m not even old enough to be his dad,” Leorio bemoans.
Killua, huffing as his pillow is wrested from him, says, “Come on, you’re what, thirty-five at least, right? Sure, it’s pushing it, but you could’ve gotten started early.”

Beside him, Kurapika covers his mouth with his hand, shoulders shaking. Leorio’s shaking too, but probably for completely different reasons, as a familiar indignation clamors up his throat. “I’m only twenty-three!”

All action in the room comes to a halt. Aside from Kurapika’s muffled, snorting laughter that he’s desperately attempting to hide, there’s no motion. Killua turns his head slowly to stare, wide-eyed at Leorio, gaze obviously flicking over his features.

Incredulously, he whispers, “Bullshit.”

Gon whoops, delighted, and smacks him with a pillow, and the fray begins anew. Leorio covers his eyes with his arms again, ignoring the mess of noise the two boys are making now and the soft shaking of the bed from Kurapika’s steadily-less-smothered laughter. “I thought you were both asleep.”

“Your existential angst wasn’t quiet,” Killua says, pausing in beating Gon with his pillow long enough to answer. Gon makes an affirmative noise, then squirms, trying to get out from where Killua now has him pinned. When did that even happen? Honestly, Leorio’s lost all hope of keeping up with them. He just doesn’t have the energy.

He lets out a sigh, and waves a hand at them. “Hey, hey, just because we were talking doesn’t mean you get to act all crazy now. Come on, go back to sleep.”

“Leorio,” Kurapika says, “you’re the one who woke them up.”

Gon and Killua chorus, “Yeah!” as Leorio rubs his forehead, exasperated. God damn it.

“I wasn’t being that loud,” Leorio grumbles.

There’s a pause. It’s Kurapika, finally, who breaks it. “You kind of were, actually.”

“Well, nevermind then. It’s late and we need to go to sleep, so! I dunno, just. Shut up! Shitty brats.”

“Don’t be mean to them!” Kurapika chides, though his mouth is turned up in a half-helpless smile. He’s given up holding himself up, apparently, and has retreated to relaxing across the sheets again, soft and warm-looking.

Leorio looks away, scoffing quietly. “Some of us need our beauty sleep!”

“You’ll be asleep until you die if you try that, old man. Sleep can’t heal a face like yours. Any relation to Rip Van Winkle, by any chance?” Killua asks casually.

It is a very red-faced Leorio that answers the door fifteen minutes later about a noise complaint. He apologizes profusely, but the hard-faced, tired hotel staffer does not seem particularly amused nor mollified. The not-quite-muffled giggling Leorio can hear from all three of the room’s other occupants does not do much to help him there, either. Leorio closes the door once he’s done practically throwing himself on the hotel staff’s good graces, looks at Kurapika, Killua, and Gon, each of them pink and breathless from laughter. They’re all shaking, trying to hold it back or get themselves under control. It’s not working, but. They’re making some kind of effort.

Leorio doesn’t try to stop his helpless grin, and he picks up the pillow he had dropped only seconds before answering the door and pelts it straight at Gon’s laughing face.
It’s a while before any of them settle down enough to sleep. But it’s good. It’s good in all the ways Leorio wasn’t expecting, the little huffs of helpless, scattered laughter as the lights are off, and that is what allows the heaviness behind Leorio’s eyes finally sweep up and take him to sleep.
Watching It Undo

Chapter Summary

Paranoia spikes and Leorio keeps a watchful eye on the curtain, wary of sudden shadows. Hopefully not an axe murderer. Please let that not be an axe murderer, Leorio thinks.

“Leorio?” Kurapika calls out.

(Leorio fumbles the soap.)

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Sorry for the wait, and doubly sorry for what I'm about to say too, because, uh, well, there's going to be another break after this one. Probably until September. Things are just hectic as shit IRL right now, and I don't want this fic to suffer for it.

Hotels are, by and large, a simple, positive experience. Every effort is made for the guests’ ease of use and comfort. No expense is typically spared in materials. The beds are luxurious, the carpets pleasant, the sheets soft and warm. Even the complimentary soap bars can usually get the stains out of almost anything (not that Leorio has ever had reason to know that, and there certainly wasn’t an incident with a soda last night that would make that kind of knowledge imperative to know). Generally speaking, hotels are made for the guests to feel perfectly at home, everything arranged to their whims and desires. Someone out there clearly spends a significant amount of time designing everything in a hotel to fit the guests’ needs.

Someone out there, Leorio thinks as he squints balefully at the shower, also believes that people don’t get any taller than five foot seven.

“This,” he announces to the room at large, empty except for himself, “is bullshit.”

More specifically, he says this at the shower head itself. Which is spraying water aimed approximately at his collarbones. It is, also, tilted up as high as it can go. If he wants to get his head under there and wash his hair, Leorio’s going to have to duck. Which is absolute bullshit. Horseshit, even.

“This is the most uncomfortable thing,” Leorio grumbles to himself. “How the fuck is a guy supposed to get a good goddamned shower if he can’t even stand up or move around without- ow, fuck!”

God damn it. Leorio suffers the indignity and bends over enough that he can soak his hair. Unlike his usual stance of head back, letting the water flow down his neck and back, he’s sputtering every couple of seconds, trying and failing to keep the water carefully out of his mouth and nose. Things which would be much easier if the shower head was, say, taller. As it actually should be.
There’s a quiet sound, just barely audible over the noise of water. Leorio pauses, pulls his head out of the spray long enough to hear the latch of the door catch and feel a gust of cool air around the edge of one of the curtains. Paranoia spikes and Leorio keeps a watchful eye on the curtain, wary of sudden shadows. Hopefully not an axe murderer. Please let that not be an axe murderer, Leorio thinks.

“Leorio?” Kurapika calls out.

(Leorio fumbles the soap.)

“I knocked, but I guess you didn’t hear me. Sorry for coming in, I know you’re taking a shower, but for some reason, the boys are absolutely insistent that I come in here while they get dressed, and I’m tired of arguing with them anymore.” He can hear the eye-roll Kurapika has to be doing right now. It helps get his wildly racing heartbeat under control. Not an axe murderer. Just someone almost as scary. “Honestly, I don’t know what they’re getting shy about now. It’s not like they have anything I haven’t seen. They changed in front of me yesterday.”

“It’s fine! It’s fine, s’cool. Whatever.” Leorio fetches the soap from the bottom of the tub before he tilts his head back again, biting back more swears as he forgets (again) that the shower head is right fucking there. Everyone else is so fucking lucky that Leorio’s the only reasonably tall person in their group. Fuck this. He has to squat. What fresh hell is this?

There is a pause from the other side of the shower curtain.

“Leorio,” Kurapika asks after a second, laughter curling around the edges of his voice, “are you too tall for the shower head?”

“Shut up,” Leorio grumbles, turning around to shove his head under the spray. Sure it gets in his mouth like this, but it’s better than hurting himself again.

“You monster,” Kurapika says almost fondly. Possibly fondly. It’s a bit muffled so it’s hard to tell.

“My genetics are not my fault.”

There’s more quiet laughter, just barely audible between the dull roar of water and Leorio scrubbing out the rest of his conditioner. He finishes up his shower quickly, but then runs into another problem.

He doesn’t have a towel within easy grasp.

God. Day two of the road trip and Leorio is already losing whatever tenuous grasp he had on his life. Assuming he even had one to begin with. He lets out a long, terrible sigh, pinches the bridge of his nose, and swallows the tattered remnants of his pride.

“Can you pass me a towel?”

Yeah, Kurapika is definitely laughing at him.

But he at least passes Leorio a towel, and this is definitely why Kurapika is his favorite.

Philadelphia is great. It is. It has to be.

Not that Leorio is actually paying too much attention to it. Sure, bunch of nice old brick buildings. Informative plaques everywhere. Tours and posters and enough tourist traps to be lost for several hours, as long as you’re in the right place and you don’t mind wandering through store after store
and museum after museum. Leorio and the others aren’t even the only group of people wandering around. He catches sight of at least four other families just milling around on the sidewalk, and where it should give him a sense of camaraderie -because hah, yeah, herding small children, Leorio’s so there right now- he’s just. Tired. Or something. Malcontent.

Something.

It’s been a long day. A long day of walking from place to place and smelling all the food and cars and trees and seeing the people and places and trying to keep the kids in line. A long day, where Gon spilled his drink all over the sidewalk and half all over himself, and Leorio couldn’t find Kurapika after lunch for a solid five minutes, and Killua has been weirdly tense, searching the crowd restlessly when Gon doesn’t have his immediate attention.

He sighs for what must be the hundredth time, hands buried deep in his pockets. Gon and Killua have raced ahead again, and while Kurapika is calling after them, warning them not to go too far, it’s clear that he doesn’t have any plans of blindly chasing after them. Probably a good decision. They’re quick and quickly inseparable and completely tireless. Leorio can’t even think about keeping up. What would even be the point?

Wow, okay, this is getting a bit maudlin for his tastes.

Time to reel it back in, Leorio. Jeez.

Beside him, Kurapika slows his steps to match Leorio’s pace. It’s companionable for a second, then awkward. He’s probably going to ask what crawled up Leorio’s ass and died, and really, Leorio doesn’t even know the words for the feelings crawling up his shoulders. They walk in relative silence for a few moments before Kurapika asks, “Leorio? What’s wrong?”

Yep. He makes a clicking noise with his tongue. “What makes it seem like anything’s wrong? I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re … subdued. I’m not complaining, since you’re finally quiet instead of yelling all the time, but.” Kurapika hums quietly under his breath, a hold while he gathers his thoughts. Leorio resists the urge to childishly shove his hands deeper into his pockets. “You know this is supposed to be a vacation, right? You don’t have to, oh I don’t know, find yourself or anything like that.”

Leorio’s mouth slants to the side, and he shrugs, stubborn. “I know. I know I don’t have to, but. I feel like I should. I don’t want to just spend all this time out and not… I don’t know. Have something to show for it, or something like that.”

Kurapika, out of the corner of Leorio’s eye, is looking up at him as they walk together, arms almost-not-quite brushing together. He makes that same considering noise again, focuses his attention further down the street at Gon and Killua, who are staring at something through a shop’s window. They talk to each other for a second, Gon waving animatedly about something. “You’re making yourself worry way too much about the wrong things, you know. Stop fussing, it’s a bad look on you.”

“But-” Leorio squints. Gon and Killua have shifted. Is Gon trying to get his attention?

It’s a bit late to wonder anything more about it, because Kurapika grabs his chin in a gentle grasp, literally pulling his attention away. They stop moving, people parting around them like disgruntled, grumbling water as Leorio watches the beginnings of sunset light half of Kurapika’s face in gold, half in saturated blue.
“No, stop. You’re going to overheat your brain if you keep thinking.” Kurapika takes his hand from Leorio’s chin and pats him twice on the cheek. Not quite a swat. Not quite a lingering touch. Leorio feels a smile tug at the corner of his mouth as his bad mood doesn’t evaporate, just… ameliorates.

Mock-offended, he murmurs, “Hey.”

Kurapika smiles at him sunnily. He reaches out to lay his hand on Leorio’s arm, consoling. “Remember, Leorio, simple thoughts for simple minds. You really can’t afford to hurt yourself by thinking too much, after all.”

“HEY.”

“HEY, GUYS, CAN WE GET DINNER NOW?” Gon bellows at them, hands cupped around his mouth. Beside him, Killua is practically doubled over trying to hold back his laughter. “I’M HUNGRY.”

Leorio trades a glance with Kurapika, and Leorio can’t stop the chuckles bubbling up at his cousin’s antics. “Come on,” he says, nudging Kurapika gently. “Let’s go before he starts attacking random passers-by.”

“Oh lord.”

They catch up easily, and Gon slips his arm around Leorio’s elbow, tugging gently. He comes up to Leorio’s shoulder now, almost of a height with Kurapika, but the motion is one he’s done since he was barely tall enough to reach Leorio’s forearm. Gon watches him with curious, intensely hazel eyes.

“Are you two done with your weird adult talk?” he asks.

Making a face, Leorio waves his free hand in the air. It doesn’t matter. Hopefully, Gon will just let it go. “You don’t have to say it like I’m a million years older than you.”

Killua snorts. “You look like it, so I think he does.”

“No one asked you, Killua,” Leorio grumbles.

“Let’s just find a restaurant so you all can stop bickering. Here. This place looks nice,” Kurapika says, and they follow him as he turns to go inside of what actually appears to just be the first restaurant he found, relative niceness of the place aside. Leorio narrows his eyes at Kurapika as he’s being dragged in by Gon, who blinks, innocent aside from the smile playing around his mouth. It’s the work of a few moments (and a few efficient servers) before they are led to a booth. Their conversations continue, turning from the admittedly sore point of Leorio’s age to some of Gon’s stories about his school, to more stories of Leorio and Kurapika.

Gon spares nothing. Not even the masking tape incident. The traitor.

The waiter comes by, manages to take their order despite the rowdiness of the table (mostly just Killua and Gon and definitely not Leorio trying to lunge halfway across the table to strangle-hold Killua), and slips away between Kurapika’s long suffering sighs. Their food appears, mysteriously, not long after. Leorio is finally distracted from his argument by the warm, steaming burger in front of him. And the sizzling platter of fajitas placed in front of Killua.

“Looks good,” Leorio says. It passes for sign of peace, right? He can be the adult.

Killua looks at his food, wrinkles his nose, and immediately starts making a pile of red peppers that
he picks out of the food. “Gross,” he mutters. “I can’t believe I forgot this bullshit.”

“Killua,” Leorio says, eyes narrowed.

“Mm?”

“Why are you picking out the peppers?”

“Because they taste like shit and I don’t want them on there?” Killua fixes Leorio with an obviously unimpressed look, one eyebrow raised disdainfully. “Anyone who likes them doesn’t actually have taste buds. Duh.”

“You do realize red peppers aren’t actually the grossest thing imaginable.”

Killua snorts, pointing his fork at Leorio. “Well, see, I’d agree with you, but you’re fucking wrong, so.”

“Why the hell did you ask for fajitas if you were just going to take the peppers out of them?” Leorio asks, batting Killua’s fork out of his face with his own utensil. Killua resists though, and it turns into a miniature battle between the two of them.

(Leorio’s a bit ashamed that he’s not winning this more quickly, honestly.)

Shrugging, Killua answers without any audible exertion in his voice. “I really wanted to see what passes for Mexican food this far north.”

“And?” Gon asks curiously.

They disengage. Killua eyes Leorio warily for a moment before nabbing a forkful of food and shoving it into his mouth. Killua looks up at the ceiling, chewing and considering for a few moments before he nods sagely. “It’s shit.”

“I can’t believe I willingly agreed to come along on this,” Kurapika says under his breath. Leaning across the table, Gon consolingly pats him on the arm.

Throwing his hands up in the air, Leorio says, “It’s not shit, it’s fine!”

“Look here, grandpa, I’m from fucking California, and I’m telling you right here, right now, this is shit. This is the saddest excuse for Mexican food I’ve ever had the misfortune to put in my mouth, and it’s all because we’re north of the Mason-Dixon line.”

Leorio sputters. “You can’t just say shit like that!”

Rolling his eyes exaggeratedly, Killua continues picking red peppers out of his food. He makes neat piles of them at the edge of his plate. As quickly as he puts them there, though, Gon steals them, popping them happily into his mouth. Killua stares. Then shoves Gon half-out of the booth. “No, no, only people with taste are allowed.”

“Look at your clothes,” Gon says, accusing, right before he gets tackled.

Kurapika sighs hard, leans against Leorio lightly. “That’s your cousin,” he says, pointing at Gon, busy rough-housing with Killua. “That’s your responsibility.”

“Not my barrel, not my monkeys,” Leorio says sagely, busying himself with his onion rings.
They pack up the next morning, enjoy the continental breakfast despite the fact that Leorio really isn’t a breakfast person (though apparently, this changes when the food is free and already cooked), and drive the short distance down to Washington D.C., where Kurapika picks the next hotel to stay in. Gon and Killua claim one bed again, leaving Leorio… sharing. With Kurapika. Again. No problem. He knows it’s not a problem.

At least this hotel’s shower head looks taller.

It takes a bit longer than Leorio is strictly proud of to figure out the subway system. And by figure out, he really means "get relentlessly yelled down by Kurapika and Killua because Leorio apparently doesn’t know what the shit he’s talking about,” but damn, can’t blame a guy for trying. And for the record, Gon was going along with him anyway.

Okay, that part’s a lie. Gon very cheerfully hurled him under the bus. Or the subway. Whichever.

Regardless, the four of them do manage to find the station and path they need to take, and Gon spends the entire ride with his nose pressed against the glass against Leorio’s warnings about sanitation and health hazards, Killua right beside him. Kurapika watches the crowd from where he’s pressed in a warm line against Leorio’s body, tense and wary and curious in equal measures.

As they enter the museum around midday, Kurapika’s phone goes off. He takes it out, mutes whatever notification it was, and lets out a quiet breath before turning to Leorio.

“Hey, I’ll be right back. Can you get my ticket?”

Leorio blinks. “Yeah, sure, no problem. Anything wrong?”

“Mm? No, nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Kurapika waves a hand over his shoulder as he moves off, and Leorio is quickly distracted from wondering any more about it, catching the boys by the shoulders as they begin to run off into the museum without getting their tickets first. Squabbling about it through the line at least passes the time quickly, though they do get a fair number of exasperated looks from the other guests to the Smithsonian.

Kurapika manages to rejoin them just as they exit the line, just as Killua spots something that makes a delighted, scandalized expression cross his face. As he grabs Gon’s arm, Killua points, his nose wrinkling. “Dude, that’s a dick.”

Gon laughs. Rolling his eyes, Leorio groans, “Oh my god, you’re sixteen. At least try to act more mature than that.”

“...hm, well. I’ve seen better looking ones,” Kurapika says after a moment’s examination. He smirks up at Leorio and Leorio’s horrified face, pats him on the arm, and begins herding the boys into the main hallways. “Alright, boys, what do you want to see first?”

“Jesus christ.”

“That can be arranged.”

“No, I was just. Look, let’s just fucking look at the dinosaurs, okay?”

“Leorio,” Kurapika says with a sigh, “we really don’t have the time it takes for you to wander off to a mirror, so why don’t we just stick together? You can worry about your makeup later.”

Killua’s smile has only gotten wider. “Holy shit, I’m kind of in love.”
He lets out a quiet grunt as Gon elbows him, a weird look on his face. The strange expression doesn’t clear up until Gon visibly gathers himself, until Killua loops his arm around Gon’s shoulders and tugs him towards the actual dinosaur exhibit (har har). Leorio raises an eyebrow, then looks at Kurapika, who returns his knowing look. Kurapika pats him on the arm.

“Come on. Worry about them later. Keep them out of trouble now.”

Alright,” Leorio says as they exit the museum, thankfully without a whole squadron of guards at their backs because somehow, the boys managed to actually kind of behave. Or at least were quiet enough in their misbehavior that it didn’t attract the attention of the authorities. “What should we do next? Another museum? One of the monuments?”

Gon’s stomach lets out a huge growl, and Leorio grins at him, amused. No surprise there.

“Food?” he asks, but before anyone agrees, or really even says anything at all, they’re interrupted by a smooth, deep voice.

“Is that Gon and Killua I see, or are my eyes deceiving me?” someone calls from behind them.

Gon, curious, turns around.

Killua does not. He stands straight, straighter, spine as stiff as iron, face draining of all color. He pastes on a cocky smirk as he turns, though. Strained. Unpleasant. Guarded.

Danger, danger, Leorio’s heartbeat tells him, and he forces himself to look past Killua, at the man approaching them with swaying hips and a broad smile on his pale face, hair like a flame above his head. His smile, already too wide, somehow, impossibly, widens even more as he comes to a stop and examines the two boys with no small amount of relish. Makeup, in the form of a pink star on one cheek and a teal teardrop on the other, is bright and garish and does not actually do anything to settle Leorio’s uneasiness whatsoever.

“My, how you’ve grown,” he says. Purrs. Something too low and throaty, something that gets Leorio’s hackles up immediately.

“Hi, Hisoka,” Gon says cheerfully. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, nothing, really. I was just…. In the area running a bit of an errand. You know how my job just takes me everywhere.”

“I’m sorry,” Leorio says tersely as he finally steps forward. He’s half-aware of Kurapika already moving closer to them as well, not quite blocking the stranger’s path to the two boys. Hisoka’s gaze, golden and half-lidded, flicks to them one at a time, focusing with an uncomfortable amount of interest. “Who are you?”

“Gon, you never mentioned me to your own family?” Hisoka lays a hand on his chest, dainty and dramatic, belying the obvious strength in his exposed, muscular arms. Leorio is intensely grateful that they’re in a crowd, taking comfort in the numbers that surround them. “I’m hurt. I was a counsellor for one of the camps these two boys went to! Imagine my surprise to find them both here.”

Killua snorts dryly. “Yeah, surprising.”

Hisoka’s smile adds just a hint of teeth. Pulls the smooth lines of the makeup on his face out of place.

Okay, yeah, Leorio really doesn’t like this guy.
“Yes,” he says with a purr. “After all, I had been informed that Killua was staying home all summer. Something to do with … family issues. I’m so glad you managed to convince them to let you go on a trip, Killua!”

Gon’s smile flattens. So does Killua’s amused little smirk.

Hisoka notices. Oh, Hisoka notices, and Leorio hears the beginnings of a throaty noise before Hisoka almost visibly pulls himself back under control and waves a hand. “But I should be on my way. Wouldn’t want to keep anyone waiting, and I am so busy after all.”

He takes a few steps away down the sidewalk, then comes to an abrupt halt.

“Oh, yes, before I forget,” Hisoka says lightly, like it’s an afterthought, and he turns around, smiling widely enough that his eyes curve but don’t completely close, and Leorio’s never been so offput by a simple expression. “Killua, remember to keep your phone charged! You know how much your family loves checking in on you. Don’t worry, though. I’ll make sure to let your brother know you’re alright when I talk to him next. Ta!”

And with that, the strange, tall man disappears around the corner, and Leorio feels like he can almost breathe again. He turns to Gon, scowling in the adrenaline aftermath.

“You didn’t mention that Hisoka was creepy.”

Gon shrugs, though there’s something odd about the set of his mouth, staring as he is at Killua. “He’s a bit weird, but it’s just Hisoka being Hisoka.”

“Killua? Are you alright?” Kurapika asks, stepping forward with one hand outstretched. Almost unseeing, Killua bats the touch away, takes a few steps further back. He locks eyes with Gon, and they both still. “… Killua, what was he saying about your family? Are you okay?”

It is with a growing sense of dread that Leorio trades glances with Kurapika, whose eyes mirror the same foreboding creeping over Leorio. They both look at Killua. Who has not answered. Who has barely moved. Who is engaged in some silent, terrible conversation with Gon, when he finally, finally looks away towards the ground.

“Killua?”

“We need to leave,” Killua says, voice sick and wan. His skin, already pale, has managed to lose even the flush of exertion, leaving him sheet-white and looking like he’s in danger of passing out. “Now. Before he calls my brother.”

Leorio is struck with an awful thought. He swallows. Hard. Carefully, he asks, though he already knows what the answer will be. “Killua. Killua, your family did said that you could be here, right? They do know where you are?”

Lips pressed tightly together, Killua does not answer. He does not look up. His hands are clenched tight. He does not look at leorio, and Leorio begins swearing.

“Killua,” Gon says, and Leorio thought he should sound confused but instead Gon almost sounds angry instead, and the difference makes Killua flinch. “What did you do?”

“Oh god, your family doesn’t know you’re here,” Leorio says, horrified. “I’m going to get arrested for kidnapping.”

“Leorio, this is not the time,” Kurapika snaps. He straightens himself up, squares his shoulders.
“Killua.”

“We need to get out of here. Now.” Gon opens his mouth to argue with him, and Killua shakes his head, white hair flying around his face. “We can talk about it later. But we need to leave now. Please.”

Nobody moves.

Nobody moves at all, and Leorio thought that maybe Gon would be standing between Killua and Leorio or Kurapika, being a friend and barrier all in one because Gon’s defense of his friends is stalwart and stubborn as hell, but no. No, Gon hasn’t taken his eyes off Killua since the mention of his family, and he doesn’t seem sympathetic. Just angry. Jaw tight and teeth clenched. God, Killua’s family, who doesn’t even know where he is, and they must be so worried and what if they’re following them?

Killua lets out a frustrated groan, but all he does is lower his head. “Please, I promise that I’ll explain, but we need to go.”

Kurapika surveys him for a long moment, then nods sharply, cutting off the beginnings of Leorio’s protestations. “Alright. To the subway and then the car. Now. We can talk about it when we get back to the hotel room. Let’s get moving.”

“I don’t want to,” says Gon, low and intractable.

With a put-upon sigh, Kurapika frowns. “Then you can stay here until you’ve worked yourself out of your fit or until you walk back to the hotel, but I, at least, am going to talk to Killua and figure out what’s going on before I jump to conclusions. Leorio? If you’re not joining us, then at least give me the keys.”

Silent, worry crawling up his throat, Leorio passes over the keys. “I’m still going with. I’m just. I probably shouldn’t drive. Too wound up.”

Kurapika lets out another, tight breath, and Leorio remembers suddenly that Kurapika has a bit of a temper problem and maybe this isn’t the best idea, but it’s too late now. Kurapika is already striding off down the sideway, barely pausing long enough to tell everyone to come with him. And he’s getting some serious distance, the crowd parting in front of him like a wave.

Leorio tries to check in with Gon and Killua visually, to get one of them at least to meet his eyes, but he gets absolutely nothing from either of them. Gon is angry, snapping energy along every point of his shaking body. Killua is still. Deathly, terribly still. And so Leorio shakes his head, puts a hand between their shoulder blades and starts ushering them along. Killua accepts the touch blankly. Gon shrugs it off, and Leorio sighs.

“Let’s go. Come on.”
two sad sparks blinking

Chapter Summary

He just wants to get it all over and done with. To break this storm.

But he also doesn’t want to be one of those people yelling in the parking lot and airing their various bits of dirty laundry either, so this uncomfortable bubble is just going to have to sit on them until the hotel room. Leorio will just hate it in the meantime.

Chapter Notes

hey so uh HI SORRY FOR THE ACCIDENTAL SIX MONTH BREAK. That was absolutely not the uh. Not the Plan. But life, shit happens, kinda lost my job in here and then focused on one other project which is done but not posted and then NaNo and I'm. YEAH lots of stuff.

But hopefully a monthly update schedule after this too, so. look forward to next month! Roadtrip shenanigans resume.

Chapter title from "Thunder Clatter" by Wild Cub.

Gon is tense the entire ride back to the hotel room.

Leorio knows -on a distant, secondary reaction sort of level- that he most likely should concern himself more with Killua right now than his little cousin, but he knows Gon. And the fact that he’s upset at all is… worrying. Even turning over the conversation in his head as they ride the subway, Gon no longer pressing his face against the glass, Killua no longer right beside him, Leorio can’t find anything that would cause something like this aside from the mention of Killua’s family.

But that’s the crux of the whole situation then, isn’t it?

Killua’s family. How the blood drained from Killua’s face the instant his brother was even mentioned. Hell, the fact that Killua doesn’t have permission to be here, on this roadtrip with them at all. They could all get in some serious trouble. Killua’s only sixteen, just like Gon, so no legal grounds there, and by the way he's talking, he's not an emancipated minor either. Man, Leorio’s about to go off to med school! He can’t do jail time now. And of all things right now, Gon is contained. How wrong is that? Gon is a little ball of energy, loud in everything except this, apparently.

They stand and leave in silence, and it is absolutely unbearable. The lack of conversation weighs on Leorio’s tongue, coats his throat all the way to his lungs. His breath is heavy, difficult to draw, the air too thick and poisoned with tension. He just wants to get it all over and done with. To break this storm.
But he also doesn’t want to be one of those people yelling in the parking lot and airing their various bits of dirty laundry either, so this uncomfortable bubble is just going to have to sit on them until the hotel room. Leorio will just hate it in the meantime.

As they approach the car, though, he does clear his throat. “You know, Kurapika, I can-”

“Shut up and get in the car, Leorio.”

Well, never mind then. He can just go fuck himself, he supposes.

Gon hops into the passenger seat before Leorio can get more than an affronted “hey” out. Leorio scowls at the closed door, but. A glance at Killua shows the kid already slipping into the back behind Gon, avoidant. Leorio would say he seems pale and wan, but Killua constantly looks on the verge of hypoglycemic collapse, so the difference is almost negligible.

Leorio sighs.

Eyes the back seat.

Unfortunately, when he got Paladin, it wasn’t necessarily for the spaciousness of the back seat. This is what he gets for not having enough foresight, he guesses. Carefully, Leorio folds himself into the chair, knees practically up in his chest cavity as Kurapika runs through his typical pre-drive checks, twisting the volume knob on poor Paladin viciously as he adjusts his seat up and moves the mirrors, which Leorio, circumspectly, Does Not comment on.

Not that the attitude is right for joking right now, as it stands.

Kurapika pulls out of the parking lot with jerky, over-controlled motions. Leorio breathes through the initial panic, reaching up to grab the handle over his window, but this is another thing that he Will Not Comment on. Kurapika’s driving is steady when he’s not angry. He just has to calm down and it’ll be fine. Just in case, though, Leorio takes the moment to send a prayer to any listening deity that death by vehicle not be part of the daily plan. Everything has been going pretty well, right up until that creepy clown-faced dude showed up. Surely Hisoka alone offsets all the good karma they’ve built up and they won’t need some sort of tragic accident, right?

Leorio opens his mouth to share this, but the urge is strangled before it even gets out. Now that they’re on the highway, the lack of conversation is even worse. The road does nothing for the pressure, the hollow ringing where words should be. Gon and Killua both only stare out the windows, both of them rigid. He nods, more to himself than anything else because no one’s even paying any attention to him. Right, okay, stewing in anger it is. He’ll just keep his grip right here and… wait for them to stop, he supposes.

Kurapika gets to the hotel, slamming the gearshift into park with enough force that it rocks the car. Leorio’s hand clenches even harder around the oh-shit handle, and he carefully forces it to relax, numb with the tension holding it there. Drawing in a deep breath, Kurapika turns to the others, opens his eyes, and says, tightly, “Get out.”

Gon and Leorio scramble for the door handles. Killua, Leorio notes, sits sullenly in the back seat for a few seconds before he slowly opens the door.

Or perhaps sullen isn’t the word for it.

If anything, Killua seems unsteady, his eyes focused on a middle distance, darting to and from, hardly able to catch hold of any one particular thing. Gon follows Kurapika into the hotel without looking back. Almost blindly, Killua follows them, a significant distance behind the others, and
bringing up the rear, Leorio, watching and waiting.

Elevators, as it turns out, are incredibly fucking awkward to be in when you’re with a group of people who are various levels of pissed the fuck off at each other.

Luckily, the ride is short enough, their room is close by, and Leorio feels like he can almost breathe when the doors ding open and Kurapika strides out, the boys trailing behind him like angry little ducks all the way to the hotel room. It'd be cute if everyone wasn’t so angry. Leorio catches the door over Kurapika’s head, holding it while Gon and Killua go inside. Leorio lets the door fall shut behind him. The sound of the latch clicking into place is loud, too loud, in the echoing quiet as Kurapika sits on their bed with an economy of motion that is frightening in its frugality. He crosses his hands at his fingertips, woven barely together. Gon takes up residence in the windowsill, staring, quietly, almost unblinking. Leorio moves further into the room, Killua sitting on the bed he and Gon claimed as their own.

Killua takes a deep breath, thin chest expanding.

Lets it go.

Leorio looks to Kurapika, who is not the most visibly agitated one out of them right now but is the one radiating his temper most, and sighs. No help there. Alright, it’s him then. He leans against the desk, situated against the wall opposite the beds, squares his shoulders as he braces his wrists against the wood. Inhales. Asks, “Alright, Killua, let’s set this whole thing straight right now. Are you or are you not allowed to be here with us right now?”

Killua’s mouth presses into a thin line, and he tilts his head back to look at the ceiling. Where he’s sitting, Kurapika regards him with intensity, nothing so obvious as anger, before he closes his eyes, bringing himself under control as Killua considers his answer. Gon, against the window, does nothing.

“Well,” he says finally, tone too light, “that really depends on what you consider “allowed” to mean. Did my parents say I could come? Not… really.”

“Fuck,” Leorio says feelingly.

“Are you going to get in trouble for me being here?” Killua continues as though there was no interruption, still staring up. His fingers clench, white-knuckled in the bedspread for a moment before he lets them go. “Probably not. I might, but you guys won’t. That’s not… how my family really works. Hell, I might not get in too much trouble either, if I go back without a fuss.”

That, at least, gets Kurapika to frown. “Without a fuss?”

“Well…” he says finally, tone too light, “that really depends on what you consider “allowed” to mean. Did my parents say I could come? Not… really.”

“Fuck,” Leorio says feelingly.

“Are you going to get in trouble for me being here?” Killua continues as though there was no interruption, still staring up. His fingers clench, white-knuckled in the bedspread for a moment before he lets them go. “Probably not. I might, but you guys won’t. That’s not… how my family really works. Hell, I might not get in too much trouble either, if I go back without a fuss.”

That, at least, gets Kurapika to frown. “Without a fuss?”

“Yeah. If I just go back on my own before anyone comes to get me, or if I go quietly when my brother does.”

“When your brother…?”

“Comes to get me.” Killua laughs. It’s a dry, terrible sound that brings Gon’s head up, around, hazel eyes intent on the side of Killua's head. “And take me home again. And then! I’ll probably never be allowed back out again, so they get to keep me home all summer just like they planned.”

“Wait, why didn’t your family want you to leave?”

“They were going to keep me home all summer instead of going anywhere because of some….” Killua exhales harshly, his eyes flicking over towards Gon. Away. “We had a … disagreement.
About a lot of stuff. And a lot of it was really important. So I let them think I agreed to stick around, but I sort of. Ran away when I got a chance. I’m not going to just sit back and let them tell me what I can and can’t do.”

Gon snorts. “Sure, because you’ve never done that before.”

Holy shit. The temperature in the room drops by several degrees. Leorio looks between the boys; at Gon, who is staring hard at the side of Killua’s head; at Killua, who is white-knuckled and white-lipped and shaking with it; then at Kurapika, whose mouth is also set firm as he watches them and waits. Not the best time for sitting and waiting, in Leorio’s oh-so-humble opinion, but trying to tell Kurapika that is tantamount to suicide.

Jeez, this shit is way too intense for Leorio. He gets the feeling there are a couple of layers of conversation that are happening between Gon and Killua, but exactly what those are is escaping him. A misunderstanding of some kind, obviously. And something about Killua’s family.

It’s always family, Leorio thinks, bitter and sick with it.

“I thought you trusted me,” Gon says quietly now that the silence has gone on too long, and Killua sits ramrod straight, nostrils flared with anger.

Woah.

What now?

Coldly, Killua says, “Whether or not I trust you has nothing to do with this, Gon.”

“We’re friends! My trust has everything to do-”

“No,” Killua cuts him off, finally looking at Gon. “Right now, it really doesn’t. I trust you with a lot of shit, but I couldn’t. Not with this. You don’t ever listen to me, and you’re not doing listening right now either. And if we’re talking about trust, how about you trust me for a bit and just let me handle this.”

“How could-. How can you say something like that? Killua, for fuck’s sake, if that’s what you really think, then why the hell are you even on this trip? Just. Go home. Be part of your perfect little family.”

That resounds in the room. Leorio looks between Gon and Killua, and his eyes catch, there, on the falling expression on Killua’s face. The downturn of his eyes, sharp moue of his mouth, the sudden loss flickering across his entire body, like the destruction of a heart in slow-motion. Leorio’s chest clenches in sympathy. But just as quickly as it’s there, it’s gone. Killua inhales shakily. Pushes himself up.

“Well, I’m just. Going to leave, then,” he says stiffly. “I don’t want to be where I’m not wanted.”

“Killua,” Leorio starts, but it’s too late, Killua half-running across the room. He slams the door behind him; the loud impact makes Gon flinch.

“Gon?” Kurapika asks, standing up for the first time during this conversation. Gon just shakes his head, and Kurapika makes a tense, unhappy noise. After a moment of deliberation, he turns, the furrow between his brows deep. “Leorio.”

“Yeah?”
Go after Killua. I’ll talk to Gon.”

“Don’t you think—”

But Kurapika is already sitting beside Gon, looking pointedly between the door and Leorio, and well, fine then. He’ll go, but damn it, he’s not happy about it. Someone needs to talk to Killua, after all. Really, it should be Kurapika, not Leorio. Leorio should probably be talking to his little cousin. Hell, Killua and Leorio can hardly get through a conversation without coming out the other side in an argument. Still, Leorio opens the door to go after Killua, looking up and down the hallway. No one’s there. Shit, shit, okay. Stairs then. Waiting for the elevator will only waste time. Leorio turns and goes, stretching out his legs as much as he dares to make haste but not make too much noise on the way.

He opens the door.

And there, on the steps leading further up into the hotel, head buried in his hands, is Killua.

Lucky break.

Leorio coughs, lets the door close softly. “Hey.”

Killua twitches, looks up. “What do you want?”

Leorio holds up his hands, comes over to sit near Killua. He makes sure to leave a fair amount of space, though. He’s not trying to corner the kid, after all; he’s sure that Killua’s instincts are screaming at him to leave, and sure enough, Killua gets tenser as Leorio moves closer, watching him warily as he sits. The quiet holds for a beat, two, three as Killua’s shoulders stiffen, as he inflates himself with the same bravado that every animal has when threatened.

“I’m not sticking around to argue with him about it,” Killua says, watching Leorio intensely. “I’m done arguing. He won’t listen and I won’t change my mind.”

“Alright, that’s fair. Gon’s a bull when he’s mad.” Leorio leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “But let me ask you. Do you want to leave?”

“What?”

“For you want to go back home? I’m sure it won’t be too hard to arrange, one way or another. Hisoka already said he’d be talking to your brother, and I’m sure your family has been trying to get hold of you on your phone.”

For a moment, Killua just stares at the far wall of the stairwell, a little dent on the curve of his lower lip from where he’s biting the inside of his mouth. Leorio waits him out, and if his heart is pounding, worry and anxious energy twisting all in his stomach because he doesn’t want the kid to leave, it’s not like Killua can see it. Finally, Killua exhales, pulls his knees up to his chest and rests his chin on them.

“Fuck no,” he admits softly, voice breaking just a bit. “Fuck no, I want to stay here.”

Oh thank god. “Even if you’re upset with Gon?”

Killua makes an indistinct noise, tucking his nose into the crook of his elbow. When he speaks, his voice is muffled. “He just doesn’t understand. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to be near him, I guess.”

Leorio’s eyebrow shoots up. “Oh?”
Cutting him a sharp glance, Killua leans down just to smack Leorio in the leg before turning his rapidly reddening face away. “Put that back down, you perv.”

Touchy subject, not to be brought up, alright. Confirms a few suspicions Leorio had, too, so he just raises his hands, mollifying. “Alright, alright. What doesn’t he understand?”

“Any of it? All of it?” Killua flaps his hand, waving it all off. “It’s whatever, though. I didn’t really expect him to get it, I guess.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“What the hell part of any of this made you think I want to talk about it? What’s there to talk about? My family was being shitty and I didn’t like it. We argued. I left. That’s all. That’s it.”

Leorio lets out a long breath. “Is it?”

Killua scrunches up his shoulders. “Except for whatever bee crawled up Gon’s ass and died, yeah. I don’t know why he’s so angry.”

Honestly, Leorio thought it had been pretty well laid out there with the whole trust question, but he doesn’t say anything, just shrugs. That’s something for Gon and Killua to work out between them. “It’s a bit weird for him to lose his temper like that. Don’t worry, though. I’m sure Kurapika will have talked to him about it and he’ll probably have cooled down by now.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll have to talk some more, easy as that.”

Sticking his tongue out, Killua rolls his eyes, sinking into the space between his knees like that will allow him to escape the inevitable. Leorio smothered a smile at how grumpy he looks. “Ugh, always talking.”

“Conversation makes the world go ‘round. And if conversation fails, money will always cover the gaps,” Leorio says sagely.

Killua blinks at him, then snorts, laughing quietly. It doesn’t last long, but it’s genuine. It gets his body to relax a bit too, to stop being quite so defensive, like he’s ready to be hurt. Leorio doesn’t like the implications, but the laughter is a good start. Leorio will consider it a win.

After a long moment of silence, Leorio asks, “Are you okay?”

He gets a noncommittal shrug for his trouble, Killua avoiding looking at him directly. “This is nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s not really an answer, actually. I’m not asking if you can handle it,” Leorio says, turning to face Killua. He makes sure to wait until blue eyes lift from the steps in front of him, until Killua is meeting his gaze. Waits until he is sure Killua knows the measure of his solemnity. “I’m asking if you’re okay.”

Killua inhales shakily. He nods. “I. I just need a moment.”

“That’s fine.” Leorio leans forward, pats Killua on the knee. “That’s fine.”

And then he waits there with Killua. Not pushing, just waiting, as his ass goes numb and his legs get cramped, as he shifts aside for a mother and daughter coming down the stairs, and shifts again for a
vaguely college-aged guy coming back up. Waits through Killua’s breath becoming slower and more even. Leorio looks up again when Killua moves, pushes himself up.

Killua sniffs. He rubs under his nose, then squints at Leorio. “Come on, old man, stop loitering in stairwells like a creep and let’s go back to the room.”

Brat. Leorio gets his feet under him, braces himself on his knees as he stands, groaning the whole way. “Oh god, this floor is not my friend. Why do I hurt everywhere.”

“Old. Man. I can hear your joints creaking from here.”

“Look, I’d like to see you not hurt when you get to be my age,” Leorio snaps. Then frowns. “Not that I’m old, just that joint elasticity sort of peaks when you’re younger and- stop laughing. You study as much as I do and see if your posture doesn’t take a hit for it.”

“You stand straighter than a flagpole, your posture’s fine, geezer. It's okay to admit that you're old.”

And then, as he comes to a stop in front of their hotel room, Killua falls silent. Leorio waits, takes his time, patient and waiting, Killua visibly steadying himself. He cocks his head towards the door.

“Ready?”

With a deep breath, Killua nods.

Leorio opens the door quietly, leaning into it to let Killua slip past him. And when he looks beyond, Gon is sitting on the bed where Leorio left him and Kurapika, both of them staring up at the sudden noise. Kurapika seems fine, a little worn down, with tear spots on his shoulder, and it only takes one look at Gon’s tear-streaked face to figure out where they came from.

“You’re back,” Gon says like it’s a marvel. “I didn’t- I thought-”

Shrugging with one shoulder, Killua avoids Gon’s eyes, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, all of the rigidity that had fallen out of him back in full force. Leorio wants to ruffle his hair, or something equally ludicrous to get him to loosen up a little. “I thought you didn’t care if I was around anymore.”

“I don’t want Killua to leave,” Gon says, sniffling while Kurapika rubs his back. “I want Killua to stay.”

And just like that, the lines of tension are cut. Killua’s shoulders relax from their tense position, and he goes over to gently punch Gon in the shoulder. Gon looks up, and the way he looks at Killua has Leorio’s heart clenching in his chest, wonder and regret as plain as day. His eyes are red-rimmed, breath still not catching properly in his lungs, and Killua’s not fast enough to avoid the hug he’s immediately dragged into - not that Leorio actually thinks he tried all that hard to get out of it in the first place.

That seems to be that.

A movement out of the corner of Leorio’s eye, and he looks away from the tearful reunion before it becomes frankly embarrassing. Kurapika’s edging his way out of the blast radius. A smile lingers around his eyes, gentle and soft, and Leorio can feel himself smiling in instinctive response. Another glance back at the boys -where they seem to be talking quietly, Gon mostly to Killua’s collarbone by the looks of it- and Leorio moves next to Kurapika.

Leorio leans over to murmur to Kurapika. “What was all that about?”
“Killua didn’t say? No, I suppose he wouldn’t. Apparently, they-” and Kurapika cuts himself off, looking askance at the two boys. His mouth twists to the side. “You know, I’ll tell you later. Most of what I know is just conjecture at this point, but I don’t think we should talk about it like this. Not where they can hear.”

“That bad?”

“Possibly. But also, perhaps not quite as bad as it could be, either. I think it’s a longer story than Gon really knows, and I don’t want to push Killua into talking when he’s not ready.”

That, while probably being true, doesn’t make Leorio’s stomach untwist from the uneasy knots it’s worked itself into. He needs to move, needs to go do something. All of the forced let-down of energy, all the tension with no true release, is wreaking havoc with his system, and while he’s sure as shit happy Gon and Killua worked it out without some huge explosion… Leorio smooths his hand down his face, feeling the rasp of stubble there.

“Should we leave now?” Leorio asks.

Kurapika lets out a long, tight breath, and shakes his head. “No. Tomorrow morning, we can go and go as far as we can, but I doubt Hisoka will do anything that will put Killua in danger tonight, and we’ll need the rest.”

Leorio groans, leaning back to put his head against the wall. The ceiling, from this angle, is his friend. A nice, calming ceiling with only vague spackling to look at. “Great, just what I wanted. A fun-filled road trip on the run from a kid’s family.”

“Well, you did say you wanted something life-changing to happen,” Kurapika offers mildly.

God damn it, he never should have said that out loud. Leorio knows the value of jinxing something, for fuck’s sake. Not that he’s superstitious; just that there are some things in the world you don’t mess with, like ouija boards, potentially jinxing things, and grandmothers. “Yeah, something life-changing. Like a really cool sunrise or amazing head or something. Not potential jail time for kidnapping.”

Kurapika sputters. “Amazing head?”

Oh boy, since he’s asking. Leorio’s grin gets wider, and he forces his shrug to be nonchalant. “I dunno, a gas station or something? I figured we’d stop somewhere long enough and maybe I could...”
find a girl who’s interested and get the hotel room for an hour or so—” Leorio cuts off as Kurapika shoves away from the desk with a clatter. “Hey, Kurapika! What the- Where are you going?”

“Oh.”

And before Kurapika can even reach the door, there’s laughter.

Right, Gon and Killua are here too. Sure enough, when Leorio looks over, the boys are laughing together, watching him and Kurapika. They’re leaned up against each other, shoulder to shoulder. Looks like they’ve finished making up, and the sight sends a rush of relief coursing through Leorio. No more half-finished conversations, then. Back to business, and by business, he means being offended by the laughter. Leorio sniffs. “Well, I’m glad you guys think this is funny.”

Killua flips him off like it’s a second language. “You’re hilarious, old man. Who taught you your bedside manner, an ogre?”

“Excuse you,” Leorio says snidely, “I haven’t gotten to my rotations yet. No one’s taught me anything about bedside manner, it’s au naturale.”

“Yeah, maybe cover it up and stop talking about blowjobs in front of a bunch of teens, you lech.”

A quiet step, the latch on the door falling closed, and Kurapika comes back down the short connecting entryway. He’s tilted against the wall, all crossed angles and wry amusement. Leorio is unaccountably glad that he didn’t really leave the room. “You shouldn’t have been listening to that.”

Killua raises a pointed eyebrow. “Then learn to talk quieter. I know it’s more Leorio’s problem than yours-”

“Hey.”

“-but jeez, I’m an impressionable innocent.”

‘Impressionable innocent’ Leorio’s bony ass-cheeks. The kid is about as innocent as Leorio can throw him. Bad example, actually. Leorio’s deceptively strong, and even though Killua looks muscular for a sixteen year old, he can probably lift him anyway. “One whose parents are probably out to get me.”

“Minor details.”

Gon laughs. “Minor.”

“Oh, he gets a pun. Progress has been made with the forest child,” Killua says, marveling as he prods Gon in the side.

Considering, Leorio studies the ceiling again. What a good ceiling. “Alright, honestly, who wants to go get ice cream?”

“For dinner? Just ice cream?” Gon shoots up, bouncing excitedly on his knees on the mattress. “Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

Killua at least tries to be the voice of reason, but his eyes are far too excited for Leorio to take him seriously. “Aren’t you a doctor? Shouldn’t you be advocating against that?”

“Eh, fuck it, first of all, and second, I’m a doctor, not a dentist. Besides, ice cream is good for your
soul. Especially after a day like today.” Taking stock, Gon and Killua are both pretty obviously on board with the idea, which leaves…

Kurapika, who squints suspiciously at Leorio. “Good plan, except for one little detail. Aren’t you lactose intolerant?”

The traitor.

“Like it’s ever stopped me before,” Leorio says with a quiet snort.

Gon blinks at him, head tilted to the side, even as he’s tugging Killua towards the door. His stomach waits for no argument, it seems. Leorio shouldn’t find it cute, but he does. Or maybe it’s more that he’s reassured now that Gon’s acting like his typical self again. “Are you? But I’ve seen you eat dairy before!”

“Yeah, you just haven’t seen me in unbearable gastrointestinal distress later, have you?” Leorio wags his finger. “Honestly.”

“If you’re going to hurt later, why eat it?” Killua asks.

“Have you ever actually had ice cream before?” Leorio waves aside any protestations Killua might make. He’s home-schooled and sheltered, probably, poor kid. “It’s worth the pain, okay. And after all this, we all could use a little sweetness and sugar in our lives, right?”

“What we don’t need,” Kurapika interjects, voice smooth as honey, “is to hear and smell you in the bathroom all night long. You can regret your personal choices as much as you’d like, but I’m not going to deal with it. Not when I have to share a bed with you. We will have ice cream. You will be getting frozen yogurt.”

“Why are you so hurtful, Kurapika?”

Kurapika smiles, walks over just to pat Leorio’s cheek with one, warm hand, and Leorio might be imaging the way his fingers linger, but he also might not. They do trail off, leaving lines of heat behind that infuse Leorio’s whole face. Their eye contact, green to gray, holds there, hung between them with a weight Leorio tangibly feels on his face, his chest, his hands, drawing and holding him there. “Because I care, Leorio.”

From the door, Killua stage-whispers, “Gay,” and that’s all the impetus Leorio needs to pull away from that strange gravity and chase the boys out the door, leaving the moment of intimacy behind. He checks, though, and Kurapika follows them at a sedate pace, a smile curving his mouth and.

Well.

Leorio just smiles back and carries the warmth close to him as he heads out into the summer night.
Chapter Summary

Leorio sighs. His nerves settle, dissipating into the vibrations from the road, nothing lasting. Well alright then.

Chapter Notes

Keeping on keeping on. I'm going to be doing the Hunter x Hunter Big Bang this year too, so I might miss either March or April depending on how crunched I am to get that done. It shouldn't be too awful but consider this a head's up.

Another note, Leorio’s friend who died when he was younger canonically doesn't have a name EXCEPT in the 1999 anime, so don't be confused when you encounter the name Pietro.

Chapter title is from "Solitude" by Re:plus, which I listened to almost exclusively while writing this chapter.

The summer air is warm, even at this time of night, smelling sweetly of cut grass and the particular daily humidity that lingers after sundown as Leorio herds them back to the hotel from the ice cream parlor they found. He scowls at the little bowl in his hand, spares a little of the glare at Kurapika, who only smiles sunnily, before he deigns to take a bite of his froyo.

Fucking froyo.

He’s not a scarf-wearing hipster piece of shit, he should be allowed ice cream. At least it has chocolate in it, because Kurapika couldn’t keep him from putting M&Ms in, but damn. Damn, he wanted ice cream.

“You’ll thank me later,” Kurapika, holding his own waffle cone of sweet, sweet ice creamy delight, says, patting him on the back warmly.

Leorio won’t, he knows. Both of them know Leorio won’t. But he would have regretted having ice cream later and he doesn’t have to suffer now, which is almost the same thing, so Leorio gives Kurapika the stink-eye, sniffs haughtily. “I’m sure.”

“So, Leorio,” Gon pipes up. He turns around to walk backwards, chomping happily on his fruit-covered mango monstrosity because the kid still somehow misses the point of sweets being destructively unhealthy for you. “Where are we going next?”

Ah.

That’s.
An excellent question, now isn’t it?

Leorio figures that now is as good a time as any to pretend that honesty is the best policy, but he still winces as he says, “Honestly, I have no idea.”

He can feel the disappointment radiating from Kurapika like a physical force. He doesn’t know what Kurapika was really expecting when he put Leorio in charge of coming up with their route, though. Leorio went about as far as he had already gone on other, smaller trips and then figured that they’d… figure it out now. Sure, he said they’d maybe go further down the coast before turning inland, but D.C. is as good of a turning place as any. It was all conjecture by this point anyway.

Gon perks up visibly, bouncing even as he walks backwards. “How about Disneyland?”

“I am not going to Disney.”

Killua snorts, not even deigning to look over his shoulder, face deep in his chocolate mountain of chocolate ice cream with chocolate mixed in and chocolate syrup on top. He nudges Gon to the side to avoid someone coming their way, gently herding him along the sidewalk. “Someone doesn’t want to be a grouch at the happiest place on Earth.”

“One,” Leorio corrects, “doesn’t want to pay for all of those people and the crowds and the heat. That’s a trip. This is a… this is something different.”

“You’re so particular about this for someone who has no idea what he’s doing,” Kurapika says dryly.

“Bite me, Kurapika.”

There’s a beat of silence.

Gon, not particularly put off by his earlier dismissal, offers, “I’ve always wanted to see that one place with the faces on it.”

“What?”

“The place. You know. The four dead dudes in a mountain or whatever.”

Leorio sputters while his mind catches up with what Gon is saying. He squints. “Mount Rushmore?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Where the fuck even is that?”

“South Dakota,” Kurapika says around a mouthful of ice cream. The bastard. Enjoying his ice cream and spouting off facts while Leorio has to suffer with froyo.

He shoves a spoonful of the stuff in his mouth, and sure, it’s sweet and tasty and won’t make him writhe with gastrointestinal regret later, but it’s the principal of the thing. Still, he thinks. South Dakota? Leorio scratches his cheek, looking up at the tops of buildings around them, illuminated and dark in turns, at the endless, empty sky beyond. It’s too bright here to see many stars, and he feels oddly lost without them. It’s not like he grew up with them. There’s just something comforting about a starry night. “Sure, I guess, we might as well? We were kind of thinking about heading over in that general direction anyway.”

Kurapika blinks, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “We were?”

“Yeah. Or at least, I was.” Use of the past tense there purely subjective, though. Leorio hadn’t been
planning on it before just now. Kurapika doesn’t need to know that, but he probably does anyway because he is clever, despite Leorio’s occasional remarks to the contrary.

“That was nowhere in the plans, Leorio.”

Damn. Immediately caught and called out. Leorio scowls at him, wagging a finger in his direction. “Look, no plan lasts first contact with the enemy.”

“That is about actual battle plans, first off, and second, there’s no reason we can’t continue south the way we were already planning on. Don’t go changing these things on us without discussing them first.”

“I think it would be pretty neat to see Mount Deadguy or whatever,” Killua interjects, reaching out to tug Gon’s sleeve, moving Gon out of the path of a tree.

“Don’t take his side in this!” Kurapika

“Why not? Gon’s the only one of you who’s remotely tolerable. There’s no reason not to.”

“No, not-. Not Gon’s side, Leorio’s. I…”

They all wait.

Kurapika closes his mouth, pressing his lips into a thin line. “Fine, alright. There’s no reason to not turn, you’re right.”

Gon pumps a fist in the air, crowing triumphantly.

“Come on, then. Back to the hotel room to sleep. That’s a long drive, and we’ll want to get started on it early.”

The ceiling is an indistinct blur of grey when Leorio wakes, sudden. It takes him a moment to piece together why he’s awake in the first place. His anxiety-driven insomnia tends to keep him up, not wake him from a dead sleep, and his disorientation is an absolute bitch when he’s unexpectedly awoken.

“Killua? Killua, are you alright?”

Gon’s voice.

Leorio sits up, movements uncoordinated and too-large, fumbling to turn on a light. He finds the switch on the hotel’s bedside table, and immediately regrets hitting it, squinting as he is through the harsh light. But he can see. Killua, on the bed next to theirs, breathes heavily, shaking stuttering inhales and unsteady exhales. His skin is covered with the faint sheen of sweat, and when he answers Gon, his voice is raspy, rough as though holding back so much more.

“I’m fine, Gon, I’m fine. I didn’t… just go back to sleep.”

“Was it a nightmare?” Gon asks, concerned, his hand hovering uncertainly a small distance from Killua’s back. Despite it not actually making contact with his skin, Killua shies away from even the potential touch, his mouth set into a firm line.

He shakes his head. “It was nothing. Go back to sleep. And turn off that damn light.”
Leorio hesitates for a moment, but Killua has already flopped down, rolling over so his back is facing everyone. A touch at his elbow. Leorio looks down, and Kurapika’s lips are pressed into a thin line as he shakes his head. Alright, so he shouldn’t press the issue, which doesn’t sit well with him at all.

But Killua needs the space. He’s clearly defensive right now.

Leorio swallows down his concern, his desire to push and know what’s wrong in detail. Turning off the light is harder than pressing a switch should be.

Even as he drifts off, he sees, in the fading flashes as he blinks, the dark outline of Gon still sitting up, unmoving. A sentinel against bad dreams, his face turned to watch Killua even as he sleeps, or pretends to.

Well, Leorio thinks semi-nonsensically as his eyes close again, he’s not driving. They can stay up if they want to.

Later still, he hears the soft murmur of voices from the next bed, too quiet to be made out distinctly. But Gon is laying down now, and there is the pale slash of Killua’s arm across his waist, and Leorio lets himself fall back asleep, assured that there have been no more nightmares tonight.

So they turn.

The drive is a solid three days at the outset or a hard two, at least according to Leorio’s phone. Not accounting for any stops or detours that they may or may not take, it seems like a pretty good leg of their trip, all in all. A shiver of excitement, of tension and anticipation and possibly a bit of nausea, scuttles its jittery way down Leorio’s throat as they begin the drive. This is it. This is the furthest from home than he’s ever gone before, and he swallows back the Lord of the Rings quote before anyone can make fun of him for it.

They set out early, Killua’s nightmare unsettling enough that none of them are truly able to sleep afterwards, and instead of forcing the issue, Kurapika just rolls them out of the room before six in the morning. Plodding through the continental breakfast is difficult at best, salt and grime keeping Leorio’s eyes from fully opening, but the relatively cool morning air (and the judicious overapplication of coffee) fix that before they get on the road.

Luckily, it seems like the magic of the road hits Gon and Killua both before they get out of D.C., because by the time Leorio takes the turn onto Highway 270, back up towards Pittsburgh, he has two sleeping sixteen year olds in his backseat.

He and Kurapika trade amused looks, and then it’s relative silence as Kurapika pulls out a book, tucks his hair behind his ear, the red flash of his earring hanging over his shoulder, and reads in the blue pre-dawn while Leorio lets the miles disappear beneath the wheels.

To his right, the sun rises.

To his right, Kurapika sits, one foot propped up on the seat, book held open in his lap. His hair is lit in flashes of red and gold when Leorio catches passing glimpses of him, the curve of his nose and lips highlighted to the point of inescapable attention.
“Leorio.”

He twitches. “Yeah?”

“Eyes on the road, please.”

“I’m paying attention,” Leorio says, stung and flustered, but he does as Kurapika says, and keeps his eyes fixed firmly on the disappearing horizon. “We’ll probably stop here in a few hours, when we get past Pittsburgh again.”

Kurapika hums, attention back on his book. He spares no more attention to Leorio.

Leorio sighs. His nerves settle, dissipating into the vibrations from the road, nothing lasting. Well alright then.

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Even after lunch, where Kurapika pulled his now-typical disappearing act and Gon and Killua were more asleep than awake, Leorio is left alone with his thoughts.

Traffic to get through Philadelphia is terrible, an accident adding another hour at least onto their time, and there are no viable routes that would be any faster. Leorio suffers through stop and go traffic, swearing under his breath (and occasionally out the window) at bullshit fucking awful drivers. He floors it when he gets past the accident, irritation taking him above the speed limit before he settles down.

The road is before him, as it was earlier and yesterday and the day before that, an endless tan strip of sun-bleached asphalt. Kurapika is wrapped up in his books, Gon and Killua are either asleep or very quiet, and Leorio can’t help but feel protective of this, this moment. This silence isn’t uncomfortable. It feels, instead, like the potential for new growth, the endless moment of what could be. A precipice.

The solidification of them all as friends, strong even in the silences, and as long as Leorio drives, leaving the others undisturbed, the growth will continue.

He turns on his blinker, passing into the left lane to go around an eighteen-wheeler.

Okay, really, he shouldn’t be left alone with his thoughts, and this is exactly why. He gets weird and esoteric and kinda mushy. Damn, he can’t even blame any of this on being like, happy drunk or even inspired by something specific instead of just being around them. At least he hasn’t been saying any of it out loud, because Kurapika, and Killua, and even Gon to an extent would never, ever let any of that go.

Leorio has to pull over as soon as he can and talk to someone again, just to get all of this out of him. Not about what he’s been thinking, no, but something else to bleed out this swelling of emotion.

God.

How long has it been since Philly? Half an hour? An hour? Too long and yet not long enough, time passing in its strange, endless way.

Surreptitiously, he checks on Gon, sleeping in the back seat. Killua watches Gon sleep on his shoulder with mostly lidded blue eyes, a smile in the barest upwards tilt of his mouth. He seems two seconds from drifting back off again, so Leorio says nothing. In the passenger seat, Kurapika has
drawn up a leg, to better hold his book. A rustle of pages, and Kurapika shifts a bit, tilting his head to rest on the knuckles of his hand, braced against the car’s window. His lips are barely parted, his tongue a pink dark across them.

Leorio jerks his gaze back to the highway once more.

He’ll be fine.

Probably.

“You have a big heart,” an old voice says to him. Its tenor and distinct enunciation have been lost with time, but Leorio still aches to think of it, aches more to think he’s lost it to memory. “If you ain’t careful, you’re gonna end up holding a lot more worry in there than you should.”

He had thought, at the time, that the whole conversation was ridiculous. Leorio isn’t soft or stupid. He isn’t going to let people walk all over him and use the care he gives them for ill-purposes. But all the same, he knows he can’t always leave anyone hurting behind, regardless of what it might do to Leorio. Those long, endless months with Pietro were more than proof of that. But this? Here? It’s not a bad thing, he tells himself, to be worried about his friends. To want to protect this fragile bit of peace they’ve managed to find themselves in.

(But his heart is curled and crumpling in on itself under the force of his own emotions. Damn it. Damn it and damn them and damn him.)

The feeling eases up when he pulls over for dinner at a random sitdown restaurant he finds along the way, and Gon starts immediately chattering about his dream, which involved catching a fish bigger than he was using some pretty implausible physics that would break almost any fishing wire and pole known to man.

Kurapika sits down in the booth next to him, and Leorio tilts his head, something pinging. He looks Kurapika over surreptitiously, head to hips to... vaguely shaking hands?

“Hey, Kurapika, are you alright?”

For a moment, it seems as though Kurapika won’t respond. But finally, he turns his head, smiles, does not quite meet Leorio’s eyes. “Yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“You’re shaking,” Leorio says, reaching out to boldly touch Kurapika’s soft, trembling hands.

They still under his touch, fingers jerking in towards sensitive palms, and Kurapika’s gaze jolts down to them too. In a curious contrast to the sharp motions, he pulls away slowly, pushing his hands into his lap, braced against his knees. “It’s just cold in here, that’s all, Leorio.”

Alright, the air conditioning is pretty intense, especially for a place that’s hardly above seventy at this time of day. Leorio hums, then stretches awkwardly, leaning half out the booth. Getting out of his jacket isn’t easy at this angle, but damn it, he isn’t going to stand and make himself look like a fool. He manages to shrug it off, then resettles his teashade sunglasses.

In retrospect, getting out of the booth would probably have made him look... less like a fool.

Whatever, Leorio doesn’t care.
He does, but it’s way too late for that.

He drops the jacket around Kurapika’s shoulders, where the back bunches up against the seat awkwardly, but it manages to get its point across. Kurapika blinks up at him, hands immediately going to the lapels. The jacket is large on him, draping awkwardly around the shoulders, and Leorio stifles the urge to smooth the front down.

“You’re cold,” he offers as explanation.

Kurapika takes this information and processes it visibly before he ducks his head, smiling crookedly. Leorio can’t help but smile.

Kurapika folds back the cuffs with a warning look to everyone else at the table. No one makes a comment, though Kurapika still seems like he’s drowning a little in the overlarge jacket. It’s… adorable, honestly, sending a warm dart through Leorio.

“Thank you,” Kurapika says quietly, and Leorio can’t help but smile.

There are quiet gagging noises across the table, but Killua and Gon are saved from a swift choking by the arrival of their waiter, so Leorio subsides back into his seat and plots revenge for later, cheeks heated by odd embarrassment and the sight of Kurapika in his suit jacket.

Kurapika gives him his jacket back after they leave the restaurant to a sense of regret from Leorio that he viciously squashes before he can think about it too much, and they continue their drive, hopping back onto the toll road leading them through Indiana. It’s only an hour or so before exhaustion scrapes at Leorio’s eyes, dragging his attention away from the highway time and time again. He can’t do this for much longer. Carefully, he digs into his pocket.

“Kurapika.”

“Mm?”

“Ready to pull over for the night?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Alright, find me a good place to stay, no farther than thirty minutes. Cheap is preferable,” he says, tossing Kurapika his phone. Kurapika huffs, mutters something about having his own phone, but dutifully looks up a detour.

“Take exit three-fifty-four, whenever you find it.”

“Got it.”

Kurapika takes one look at the place once they pull in and says, “No.”

Then, “No, Leorio, absolutely not.”

“Oh come on,” Leorio says, delighted. “You’re the one who led us here. It can’t be that bad.”
It is, in fact, somehow worse.

“It reeks of cigarette smoke in here,” Kurapika says from his position by the door. He hasn’t moved since they got in the room, standing with his arms crossed and nose wrinkled, lips pressed into a thin, disgusted line. Leorio grins at him as he lifts up the grotesquely floral bedspread, spotting a few all-too explicable stains.

“It has character.”

“It has mold.”

Killua pokes his head out of the bathroom, laughing the way teenaged boys do when they find something gross. “One, the shower is falling apart, and two, I’m afraid it’s going to come to life with the amount of dirt and shit that’s in it.”

If possible, Kurapika somehow looks even more nauseated than before. “Shit?”

“Oh, not literal shit. Stuff. Lots of it.”

“Gro-o-o-ss,” Gon says. “Leorio, this is so gross!”

“Yes.” Leorio pops the “p,” just to see Kurapika’s eye twitch.

“I never thought I’d find sleeping in the car an acceptable alternative to sleeping in a bed.” Kurapika gives the room a scornful look, then checks out the door. “Leorio, this is… missing a lock.”

Leorio comes over. There are two locks on the door. Arguably, that is. The top lock, the kind of simple little lever lock frequently seen on bathroom doors, is physically there; the wood anchoring it to the door frame is… not. He whistles, impressed despite himself.

“God damn, someone really wanted in this room.”

Kurapika looks at it, looks at him. “Alright, who wants to actually sleep in this room?”

“I love sleeping in danger,” Killua says immediately, bouncing on the bed. “And this place has free Wi-Fi.”

Gon shrugs. “I’ll sleep wherever Killua does.”

By the time Kurapika looks up at Leorio, a smile has already made its way across Leorio’s face, and there is no helping it. He just lets himself grin, schadenfreude and the sharp sense of adventure bubbling in him. “Come on, Kurapika,” he cajoles. “It’s part of the road trip experience.”

That gets him an icy glare.

“I am calling the other hotels in the area, and if I find something else more acceptable, I’ll pay for it, so we don’t have to stay here.” Kurapika pulls out his phone and exits the room. Muted conversation from the rooms around them is audible in his wake, even through the walls. Huddled together, Gon and Killua try to find a channel on the old, small TV to watch while they wait.

It doesn’t take very long for a red-faced Kurapika to stomp back in.

Leorio looks at him expectantly.
“There isn’t another motel in the next thirty miles that has an empty room,” Kurapika says tightly. “They’re all fully booked.”

He grins. “So?”

Kurapika’s lips are practically white, he’s pressing them together so hard. “So, given the fact that we have literally no other option, I suppose we’re staying here. But I don’t like it, and I demand rights to the first shower.”

Graciously, Leorio gestures for him to go ahead. He even manages to hold back his laughter until Kurapika closes the bathroom door behind him. That does not, however, stop Kurapika from hitting him in the face with his shirt, thrown around a partially open door frame, which makes the boys laugh at him. The sound of water in old pipes begins moments later.

Ten minutes later, there is a loud clanking sound, something that isn’t articulate enough to be called a shriek, and the cessation of water.

They all look at the bathroom.

Kurapika emerges, dripping wet, towel around his shoulders and plain blue boxer-briefs on. He appears fine, almost serene, eyes closed and breathing deeply.

In his hand is the shower knob.

Leorio can’t muffle his snicker quite fast enough.

Kurapika’s eyes snap open. “Not a single word. I don’t want to hear. A single. Word.”

He holds his hands up, giving up even as Killua and Gon both dissolve into bed-shaking laughs beside him. Making his way over, Kurapika deposits the shower knob on the bedside table with a soft ‘clank’, and he sits on the bed, toweling off his hair.

Leorio pulls his eyes away from Kurapika’s bare shoulders to stare at the little TV, settled onto some football game or the other.

And then, in the middle of the comfortable not-quite-silence, a phone rings. Leorio looks reflexively at his, then winces. It’s not even his ringtone, what is he thinking? Killua, however, reaches into the pocket of his weird hoodie-shirt (and honestly, what is with this kid’s fashion choices?) and pulls out his phone.

His phone, which is going off.

On the screen are several words, but one, especially, that Leorio can make out, even from across the beds.

“Dad.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck him right up the ass all the way to fucksville. Leorio’s heart slams against his throat.

For a long moment, they all stare.

Then Killua presses the lock button of his phone, effectively shutting it up, and shoves it back into his center pocket. He draws in a breath, and Leorio examines him, the way his mouth is quivering, uncertain, how his hands are tightly clenched, and aches to see someone so young look so afraid.
“Well, that’s only going to piss him off.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

Gon, by Killua's side, nods emphatically. Leorio can’t tell if he’s supporting Leorio’s question or answering it, but Killua nods too. “He won’t call again. It’d be different if it was someone else.”

That ruins the comfortable atmosphere, though, and Leorio isn’t surprised to find the length of the day creeping back over him, settling heavy in his bones and lungs and eyes. It had been held at bay by the sheer delight over how terrible the room is, but now? Now there is nothing but the reminder that, for one of them at least, this road trip is more fraught than it should be. He lifts an edge of the blanket, wedging himself under it and thinks hard about nothing until sleep takes him, the gentle sounds of a movie being played filling his ears.

(Sleep does not take him, because sleep is an asshole. Anxiety takes him instead, sitting hard on his chest and mind long into the night, long past the movie being turned off and the others going to bed, until the only thing that banishes it is a gentle warmth at his back, the touch of one of Kurapika’s hands against his spine.)

He must fall asleep somewhere in there, because he wakes up in the middle of the night again, this time to the door closing. Despite his threats of sleeping in the car, Kurapika is still asleep beside him, so it must have been…

Huh, both Killua and Gon, by the looks of it. Their bed is empty.

Leorio gets up as quietly as he can manage, goes to the bathroom, then contemplates going back to sleep. It wouldn’t be hard, though he’d have to move Kurapika, who apparently seeks warmth in empty beds, out of his spot. Or he could steal Kurapika’s. But the boys are outside, and he should at least make sure they're okay before he goes to bed.

Sighing, and resigning himself to probably having Kurapika take over part of the drive tomorrow, Leorio goes outside.

Luckily for him, at least, Gon and Killua haven’t gone very far at all. Killua sits at the edge of the second floor rail, legs swinging over the edge, Gon leaning against his back, half asleep.

Leorio yawns, scratching his belly. “Why are you out here?”

Killua doesn’t even seem surprised, tapping at his phone. “Dude, have you seen those beds? I swore I felt bugs all over me the instant those lights were off.”

He looks at Gon, who cracks an eye and mouths “Nightmares,” at him a couple of times until Leorio gets it. Right, okay. He’s playing tough guy still. Honestly the fact that he’s having nightmares means nothing good. Leorio had relaxed when he hadn’t seen any bruises on Killua, but he knows family doesn’t need to get physical to leave scars and wounds in their wake.

But this isn’t the time or the place. If the kid doesn’t want to talk about it, Leorio isn’t going to make him. He can focus on something else instead. With a groan (not because he’s old, just because he woke up recently and his knees enjoy tormenting him), Leorio sits on the floor beside Killua, his
back against the railing. He watches Killua play some swiping game on his phone, but he can’t make heads or tails of it. A matching game? “Killua, are you sure you should leave your phone on? Or even keep it on you, for that matter? There’s a lot of tracking shit your family could use, like GPS and shit like that to keep track of you.”

“Wow, big technological words from a grandpa,” Killua says, but it’s like he’s saying it out of reflex, his eyes darting as he thinks. Finally, he shakes his head, lips pressed in a firm line. “No, I… I’ve disabled the GPS on it, but it’s more important that I have it, just in case.”

“What if they keep trying to contact you?”

“Then I’m just going to have to ignore it, but trust me. If I got rid of the phone entirely, or shut it off, Illumi would be here even faster to get me.”

“Illumi?”

Gon’s shoulders tense. Killua, sensing it or feeling it, reaches behind him, probably to rub his knee or leg, though Leorio can’t see from this angle. The touch doesn’t seem to do much, but Gon leans harder against Killua as he answers Leorio’s tacit question. “My eldest brother. Dad and Granddad won’t bother, Milluki never leaves home, Mom’s too high strung, Kalluto’s too young, and Alluka… isn’t able to. It’ll either be Illumi or one of the butlers.”

“Butlers? Plural, butlers? Jeez, how rich is your family?” Leorio sighs, scratching the back of his neck.

Killua’s face does something interesting, though Leorio’s not sure how exactly to describe it. Not quite embarrassment, not quite pride. Some odd, wry mix of the two. Finally, though, he shrugs, looks away, finally pocketing his phone again. “Rich enough to live in California without too much trouble.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s true.” Leorio leans his head back, looking up at the blue-black sky above. Here, in the middle of nowhere, the stars are still visible even with the lights around. The noise from their neighbors hasn’t diminished at all, even given the late hour, and the lights lend everything an odd, decrepit yellow cast.

“You should go to sleep, old man. You don’t need to stay awake with us out here.”

“I don’t need to,” Leorio allows. “Doesn’t mean I don’t want to be here anyway. You shouldn’t have to deal with your shitty family problems alone.”

And that makes Killua blink, startled, before he laughs. “I’m right here with all of you and none of you assholes will leave me alone. Gon didn’t even let me go to the bathroom without him today.” Gon mumbles his assent to this without even lifting his head. “Believe me, I’m pretty damn aware that you all have my back. Even though sticking with me is a terrible plan and none of you should get involved. Just so you know.”

“Tough shit, kid.”

“See, that’s exactly the attitude I’m talking about.”

They drift into a comfortable silence together, watching the traffic below them as people come and go, belligerent and not, to and from the inn. It’s companionable enough that Leorio’s able to calm down, his mind finally breaking loose of the tired, old tread of worry. He yawns, jaw cracking.

Gon, leaning against Killua’s back, looks up. “Do you think they’ll make us pay for the showerhead
being broken?”
Silence.

“Shit. Yeah, probably.”

“Bastards.”

Leorio laughs. “It’s all part of the experience.”

“Well, it’s a shitty fucking hotel and a shitty fucking experience.”

The door to their room opens again, revealing Kurapika. His pajama pants go down to crease heavily over his feet, far too long for him, soft, cloud-patterned fleece, and the sight of them makes Leorio smile to himself, amused. Kurapika regards all of them slowly, still half-asleep. Then, he clumsily sits beside Leorio, immediately co-opting Leorio’s shoulder for his use as a pillow.

Leorio, very carefully, does not move.

“I understand that the room is a disgusting, slovenly cesspool of a place to sleep,” Kurapika says, voice rasping. “But I don’t understand why you all left me in there alone with the bedbugs if you’re just going to sleep on the balcony.”

“The balcony isn’t safe to sleep on, Kurapika.”

“Well, it’s a shitty fucking hotel and a shitty fucking experience.”

“Part of the experience,” Leorio says again, sagely.

Kurapika swats him in the shoulder. Not the one he’s laying on. “You’re awful and I’m picking the hotel based on rating next time.”

“Fair enough.” Leorio swallows a yawn, then pokes Killua in the side and Kurapika in the leg. “Come on, let’s go back to bed. You guys might have slept all day, but I haven’t, and a mattress is still more comfortable than this patio. I’m probably getting splinters just sitting here.”

“Poor Leorio.” But Kurapika gets up regardless, and when Leorio offers Gon a hand up, he takes it, levering himself up and shuffling after Kurapika into the room. Leorio catches the door with his foot, propping it open to wait for Killua.

Killua, who doesn’t move

He sighs, rubbing his face. “Come on, Killua. Earlier we go to sleep, earlier we get back on the road.”

“Like it matters. He’s going to catch up anyway. What good does driving away do?” Killua mutters.

Leorio’s not sure he’s meant to hear it, but it chills him nevertheless that he doesn’t have an answer. He reaches out, almost lays his hand on Killua’s shoulder, but stops. Lets his arm fall back to his side. Dragging in a deep breath, he shakes his head. “Come on, Killua. It’ll be more comfortable inside.”

Slowly, Killua turns. Goes inside.

Leorio looks after him, watching his progress in the yellow-lit slash across the room, until Killua crawls into the bed beside Gon, presses his face immediately to Gon’s arm. Gon gathers him close,
one brown hand in Killua’s white hair. Quietly, Leorio lets the door shut. He turns its handle lock, loops the metal catch around the knob, uselessly pushes the latch to the frame and drops it into place. Closes his eyes. Leans against the door.

Wishes he had something useful to give beside the space in his heart that worries.
He scrubs his hand at the back of his neck roughly, sighing as he does. “Alright.”

“I’ll be fine, Leorio,” Kurapika says, gentle.

“All packed?”

Gon pats his bag like he can ascertain its contents from the outside. “Yep! Let’s go, Leorio, I’m starving.”

“When are you ever not?” Leorio asks, the question fonder than intended. Leorio’s keys dangle from his finger, jangling familiarly before he silences them with his palm. “Alright then, we’re off. Nice and early.”

“Good,” Kurapika says, coming up beside him. “That means I only have four hours until I can take a shower.”

Leorio blinks.

What in the world does driving have to do with taking a shower? That makes no sense whatsoever. Unless Kurapika was planning on taking advantage of one of the truck stop shower stations or something like that, but he bitched enough about the hotel room that Leorio doesn’t think he’ll stoop that low.

So he asks, “What?”

“We’re stopping in Chicago,” Kurapika tells him.

Leorio narrows his eyes. “Since when? Wasn’t the plan to go and get as far away from Hisoka and Killua’s family as possible today? All yesterday, you were complaining that we stopped too soon.”
Kurapika grips him ungently by the chin. Leorio, wisely, does not protest too much as Kurapika bodily hauls him down into an uncomfortable crouch to stare him in the eye. He does scowl, even when Kurapika is leveling him with a look that could demolish buildings. It’s a matter of pride and the fact that Leorio firmly believes in keeping full eye contact with people who are about to kill you. There’s a slight chance, after all, that it could intimidate them into feeling bad enough for you to, uh, not.

Look, it's worked okay for Leorio so far, seeing as how he's still alive.

“We are stopping,” Kurapika says again, but slowly this time, as though Leorio hadn’t heard him before, “in Chicago. So I can take a real shower and we can all wash our clothes after staying the night in that awful place. I don’t care how long we’re there. I don’t care what else happens while we’re there. But I am taking a shower and getting rid of the chance for bedbugs to plague us the rest of the trip. Okay?”

Less wisely, Leorio’s traitorous tongue takes the moment to be a smartass. “You’re the one who took us there.”

Kurapika’s grip tightens. “Do I make myself clear?”

Hoo, it would have been less scary if he had somehow acknowledged that Leorio had even spoke. This is absolutely a losing battle though, so Leorio shrugs as best he can, hunched over almost a foot shorter than he actually is. “Absolutely crystal. Stopping in Chicago. We can sightsee for a little bit today and then keep going tomorrow, if that sounds good to you?”

Kurapika releases him, a satisfied smile curling his lips. “I’m glad you can see reason.”

“You’re a doctor,” Kurapika says archly. “What is your professional advice?”

“Juice box and a nap, honestly.”

Startled, Kurapika laughs, covering his mouth with the back of his hand, his smile wrinkling the corners of his grey eyes. Then the look turns evaluating as Kurapika looks Leorio up and down. “I’ll take the juice box and you can take the nap. Should you even be driving, Leorio? Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you haven’t been sleeping.”

Damn. Caught. Leorio crosses his arms before he really realizes how defensive that looks and uncrosses them again. “Tch, like you can say anything.”

“I’ve been sleeping more than you have and I haven’t driven nearly as much as you, either.” Mind clearly made up, Kurapika nods and holds out his hand. “Alright, give me your keys. I’ll take us to Chicago.”

“Then how will you pick a hotel? You can’t do that and drive.”

“I’ll pull over somewhere, or I’ll get it at lunch. Or, wonder of wonders, I’ll ask someone else to look for me. Killua, probably. Gon would find somewhere that’s actually a camping ground. So stop complaining and get in the passenger seat.”

“But—” Leorio starts, hand still clutched around his keys.

Kurapika points firmly. “Now, Leorio.”
And since this is a day of letting Kurapika getting what he wants (not that Leorio is in the mood to argue either, with the low weight of sleeplessness tearing at the back of his eyes), he goes. A day or a lifetime. Kurapika is very persuasive when he wants to be. Either that, or Leorio has less spine than he likes to think he does. Still. He lowers himself into the passenger seat gingerly, stretching his legs out as far as they can go in the cramped confines of Paladin’s chassis. Not the most comfortable, no. But already he’s feeling better, knowing that he doesn’t have to force himself awake. The long beige flats of highway aren’t for him this morning. Leorio slowly lets his eyes close.

The car doors open and shut as the others enter, then the typical rustles of the boys making themselves comfortable, of Kurapika adjusting the chair and mirrors. The engine starts, and Leorio finds himself already drifting between the white-noise of the road and the quiet conversation he can only half overhear behind him. Something about their summer camp? Hisoka's name pops up once, twice.

“Sleep, Leorio,” Kurapika says softly. His hand pats Leorio’s thigh above his knee, chiding and familiar and very warm. “We can handle ourselves without you, you know.”

He wants to make a snide comeback, he really does. It’s just that he’s warm and comfortable here, and so very tired.

(He settles for raising his middle finger. He gets a sharp swat for that, and passes into a nap with a smile on his face.)

“Leorio.”

He comes awake with a jolting snort that he will deny to his dying days. Kurapika, withdrawing his hand from shaking Leorio's shoulder, doesn't look like he'll be convinced to let it go anytime soon, a smile tucked into the corners of his mouth. Leorio swallows, and ugh cotton-mouth, asks, “Wha?”

“You are such a dad. Come on, we're here.”

Sure enough, they are pulled into a parking spot by a hotel, presumably somewhere near Chicago. Leorio drags himself out of the car, stretches. Four hours of sleep have apparently done him some serious good, because sure, he's still a little disoriented, but it's just the typical “just woke up” kind versus the “everything is moving and time isn't real” variety. His pre-med degree program has gotten him far too used to the second, and either way he's glad he didn't have to drive this morning.

Kurapika puts something in his hands. A sandwich? Sweet. “Here. We stopped and got lunch while you were snoring. Everyone's eaten but you.”

“What, couldn't even wake me up?”

“Believe me, we tried.”

“Why are you two being so SLOW?” Gon asks, butting quite literally into the conversation, nudging up under one of Kurapika's arms. He practically vibrates from contained energy. “Let's go!”

Kurapika laughs, ruffles his hair. “Calm down, Gon, we were just talking for a moment.”

“This place has a pool, Kurapika,” Gon says intently. “A pool.”
“Yes, Gon, I saw it when we came in.” Kurapika’s phone alarm goes off. He looks at it, his mouth twisting, then thumbs the sound off. “Come on, boys, let’s get the stuff up to the room. Then you guys can go swim while I get our laundry done.”

“No, I’m OK—” Kurapika starts to say, but Leorio’s voice interrupts him. “Sweet.”

They do, gathering their clothes into a collapsible mesh container Kurapika had apparently brought along for this purpose alone. Leorio helps Kurapika carry it all to the laundry room, set slightly offside of the entrance to the pool, and he watches Kurapika sort through the dirty clothes with deft hands. Piles for whites, darks, and colors quickly rise around his feet.

“Are you okay just sitting in here all alone?” Leorio asks, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. “I can call the boys back in and make them do their own damn laundry.”

Kurapika laughs, loading the first heap of whites into the washer. “Believe it or not, Leorio, I do actually enjoy spending time on my own. Quietly, even. I can handle some clothes without help”

“Still. I can sit with you.” Leorio makes his point by hopping up on the washer once Kurapika closes its lid, settling down on the cool aluminum surface. He starts pointedly unwrapping his food. “It’s no big deal. And besides, I need to eat still.”

“Shouldn’t you keep an eye on the boys?” Toss and close, and Kurapika has the next batch in the second of two washing machines their hotel stocks. He gives it a dubious look before adding change and punching it back, settling with satisfaction only once the machine begins humming.

“Eh, they’re grown up enough to handle a pool without adult supervision. Besides, I’d like a little quiet time without them, you know, and contrary to popular opinion, you’re not half-bad company.”

Kurapika opens his mouth. Closes it. Then turns his head to the side, sniffing. “Au contraire, popular opinion is that I’m excellent company.”

Mockingly, Leorio says, “Which is why I said you weren’t half-bad.”

After all, Kurapika did not turn away fast enough to hide his smile. The sight warms Leorio to his core, even as he hears, from outside the open door, the shouts and splashes that herald Gon and Killua’s rampage into the pool.

The hours pass, as Kurapika and Leorio sit quietly in the laundry room. Sunlight shifts slowly from one side of the room to the other, steadily turning more and more golden between the shuffling of clothes from basket to washer to dryer to basket again. Kurapika reads with his hair tucked behind one ear, the glittering red of his earring casting spots of sparkling carmine light on the wall. And after he’s finished his food, Leorio just sits and watches. Something about watching Kurapika sets him at ease, keeps his mind from boredom as he traces the familiar contours of Kurapika’s face and body. A few new freckles have appeared across the bridge of his nose, Kurapika’s skin unused to so much sun, and the very sight of them makes Leorio want to smile. This is nice. Quiet, now, here in this moment.

“What are you reading?” he asks, finally, and Kurapika looks up, startled at the sudden sound.


Leorio hums under his breath, not quite an acknowledgment. “Can I hear some of it?”

“What?”
“What, is that weird? Poetry’s nice, but I pretty much only like it when it’s being spoken, or not at all. It’s the only way it makes sense to me.”

“No, no, I-” Kurapika adjusts his hair behind his ear, gray eyes darting down to the worn book in his hands. He opens to the page his thumb is braced on, then a few pages further on, looking for something. “I can read it.”

There’s a quiet moment where Kurapika thumbs through pages, Leorio waiting patiently on top of the washer as he does. Kurapika frowns, apologetic. “Sorry, these get a little long sometimes.”

“I’m not in any hurry, Kurapika.”

Kurapika looks up at him, then, with an inscrutable look, mouth twisted wryly. “No, I suppose you’re not. Here’s a shorter one.

“Sometimes with the one I love I fill myself with rage for fear I effuse unreturn’d love,
But now I think there is no unreturn’d love, the pay is certain one way or another,
(I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return’d,
Yet out of that I have written these songs.)”

Leorio lets that wash over him. Kurapika's voice held an ache that is hard to express, something that makes Leorio's chest ache in sympathy. “Rage in place of love, huh. Sounds like he’s a bit right up your alley, isn't he?”

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“Whitman is very concerned with emotion, yes. There are so many poems in here about those he loved. Most everyone, by how he tells it. He was very proud of himself and his travels and how he related to the earth, and completely unapologetic for it.” Kurapika smiles down at the poems.

That's a nice expression on him, and Leorio finds himself smiling in response. He pats the washer, encouraging. “C’mom, read me another one.”

Kurapika does, and other one after that, before he starts picking through some of the longer works, finding his favorite verses and telling them to Leorio. Eventually, however, he fades into silence, coughing slightly. “Sorry, I'm not used to ... speaking so much. Did you...?”

“Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to make you talk that much. I just really like it. I like that he just. Loves himself. And everything. Fuck, I dunno.” Leorio shrugs. He feels like his tongue is too large for his mouth, like all of his words are clumsy now after having listened to someone who actually knew how to use it.

“No, I understand.” A shadow crosses Kurapika's face. He opens his mouth, closes it, brows furrowed deeply as he runs his fingers across the outer edges of the pages.

Leorio waits.

Carefully, as though he's picking his words with the caution one would typically use to disarm explosives, Kurapika says, “This book used to belong to my parents.”

Ah.

Yep.

“My mother would always read them to me, especially as I grew older. Sort of like bedtime stories, but she would ask me what I thought of them, what they brought to mind. How they made me feel. She always loved poems. It wasn’t just Whitman. It could have been anyone she liked at the time.
This is one of the few in English she liked. I just. This is... one of the only things that remained. After.”

After.

What an insufficient word.

Kurapika’s past is a muddled and curious thing, a tale he tells with a brutal sort of efficiency that cuts out every bit of emotional blowback. He guards everything that isn't his family's murder jealously. Like sharing it might dull down the memories. Over time, Leorio has collected the tiny bits that Kurapika has let drop, piece by piece, crudely assembling a vague picture of what his parents, his whole family, as vast and interconnected as they seemed to be, were like, and it makes him ache with every piece of new information. This one, he files away just like the others.

Leorio opens his mouth.

“Uh, Leorio?” Gon asks, poking his head in. “Did we pack aloe? Because, uh. Killua’s burned.”

God damn it. Moment ruined. Of course he is. Kid’s as pale as the underbelly of a fish. Leorio pushes himself off the top of the washer with a mutter, stretching as he goes. “Alright then, alright. Let’s get him something before it gets awful. See you back in the room, Kurapika?”

“Yeah. See you back there, Leorio,” Kurapika says, face still downturned, hair a golden fan in the fading sunlight.

Leorio thinks briefly about saying something, but lets the impulse go, sputtering out as he turns to follow Gon. What would he even say? Nothing useful. Leorio constantly comes down with foot-in-mouth syndrome at the most inopportune moments, and the topic of Kurapika’s family is not a place to misstep.

Still, regret weighs heavily on him as he goes.

After treating Killua's sun-pinked skin in the room, Leorio sets them down to wait for Kurapika. It doesn't take long before Kurapika finishes with their laundry, depositing half of the items on Gon and Killua's designated bed with a pointed look between them and their bags. Gon grabs his stuff and starts stuffing it wherever it will fit until Killua grabs him by the elbow and forces him to fold his clothes properly.

Huh. Maybe the brat is a good influence after all.

It's still not too late in the evening after that, so they head out to see Chicago before they have to leave the next day. Walking around the Navy Pier (after the ordeal of getting there anyway) is fun. Lots of people, all lit up, and maneuvering through the crowd is both relaxing and stressful. Something about the anonymity and watching Killua and Gon make asses of themselves is fun as Leorio and Kurapika follow behind. The ferris wheel takes them high over the boardwalk, lights shining below like a tiny, glittering sea. The breeze from the lake is cool and welcome.

Kurapika's hair is caught in the wind and Leorio finds himself watching the blond strands in the bright lights more than he looks out the carriage. Leorio is struck by how beautiful Kurapika is like this, half-lit, whimsical spots of light on his nose and lips, his delicate face and eyes turned to the view. It amazes him, time and time again, that Kurapika comes from such tumultuous circumstances, and still-
Kurapika looks over, tilts his head, curious.

“I loved a certain person ardently,” he hears Kurapika's voice say again,

His heart stutters, and Leorio looks away finally, heat inexplicably rising to his cheeks. What the hell, so he was watching some movement over the view? It's no big deal, thinking that Kurapika is beautiful, because he is. That's just fact. It's no big deal, he tells himself, even though it takes the rest of the ride for his heart to calm back down.

The next morning, before they head out, they visit Sears Tower.

(Willis Tower, Leorio insists, but as usual, no one listens to his pedantic nonsense.)

The tower is tall as shit, something that Leorio doesn’t expect to bother him until they're actually up on the observation deck, but between the crowd and the height and the ineffable knowledge that they are definitely swaying, he feels sort of sick. Okay, very sick. The fact that one of the glass-floored viewing decks is closed due to damages honestly makes it worse. Leorio just jams his fists into the pockets of his coat, and sticks as close to the center as he can.

“C'mon, Leorio! It'll be really cool!” Gon says, waving excitedly.

“Fuck no,” Leorio says, earning himself a few scandalized looks from surrounding families. Fuck 'em. “If you want to, by all means, go for it. But my bony ass is standing right here.”

“Coward.”

Hah! Any other day, that would get Leorio all riled up, but even another step away from the relative safety of the center makes his stomach turn. Leorio swallows and shakes his head. “Nope. I'll be great right here. You both have fun.”

And try not to die, he thinks, nauseous even watching Gon and Killua walk onto the glass floor. They exclaim quietly to each other, and that's when Leorio realizes he's lost Kurapika somewhere in all of this mess too. Shit.

Where the hell...?

Damn it. Of all days, of course, Kurapika would disappear today. As he looks around the crowd for Kurapika's blond hair (something that his height should make easier but isn't right now), Leorio wishes he could be surprised by this. It isn't the typical time for Kurapika to make his excuses and head off for a few minutes of alone time, so it's not that. Usually, Leorio wouldn't be too concerned, but...

This morning, Kurapika woke up pissed.

Or not pissed, really, but reticent in a way he usually isn't. Every expression he makes falls off his face the moment he isn't being watching anymore, like weights too heavy to lift a moment longer. And Leorio worries. Of course he does, because that's all he can do, even with his new fancy Bachelor's degree. Worry until he feels sick with it.

Luckily, he's good at it.

Leorio clicks his tongue, whirling one more time, and-
Oh wait, there he is.

His back to a wall, Kurapika is watching the crowd with a furrowed brow, something dim and lifeless in his eyes. He looks somehow out of place, odd, like he isn't truly there at all, like what he's seeing isn't the crowd, isn't Leorio making his way over, like a painting, and Leorio is seriously running out of comparisons because nothing adds up to how small Kurapika seems at this moment.

He breaks through the last few people barricading Kurapika from him, and Leorio greets him with a grin and a raised hand. “Hey! Lost you there for a second.”

It takes Kurapika a moment to look up at him, gray eyes distant. “Oh. Leorio. I'm... sorry. I was looking at the scenery and … I suppose I hadn't realized I got away from you all.”

“It's no problem,” he says, waving it off. Bullshit. Bullshit, because Kurapika is way too observant for something like that, but if he's going to deny it, Leorio is at least going to give him the benefit of the doubt. Kind of. “Hey, Kurapika, are you okay? You don't seem like you're doing that good today.”

There’s a curious tension to Kurapika's jaw, but he finally lets out a long breath and shakes his head. He does not meet Leorio's eyes. “I don't think I slept well last night. Sorry. I'm. I know I'm in a mood.”

Leorio sighs, puts a hand on Kurapika's shoulder. “Hey, it's alright. I just wanted to know if I said something to upset you.”

That does, at least, get Kurapika to look up, startled and already shaking his head, blond hair flying around his face gently. “No, no, it's. It's not you. Trust me. No one did anything wrong. My patience is … just shorter than it usually is today.”

“Alright,” Leorio says, finally, letting his hand drop from Kurapika reluctantly. His palm is cold, and he clenches his fist shut. Too little sleep can make for some low patience, it's true. But. Damn. Still nothing he can help, short of getting Kurapika some over the counter sleep aids, which he probably wouldn't even take, so argh, okay, he can just stop thinking about it now. He scrubs his hand at the back of his neck roughly, sighing as he does. “Alright.”

“I'll be fine, Leorio,” Kurapika says, gentle. “Let's go get the boys. It's time for lunch, and then we can move on from here.”

They eat, they rise, they drive again. It’s a cycle with them, he’s sure, as well as another great movie quote, albeit altered for his purposes. Unfortunately, now that it’s getting on later in the evening as Sioux Falls disappears behind them, the sun is in Leorio’s eyes. What a fucking pain in the ass. After a few minutes of scowling at the sunset, though, he tosses Killua the adapter jack again, this time with a warning. “Keep the screamo to a minimum, please.”

“I keep telling you, it's not- ugh, whatever, old man. Fine.” Killua descends into muttering to himself as he scrolls through his phone, looking for appropriate music. “Here we go.”

The song starts simply enough, energetic drums and guitars, and Leorio finds his head nodding along without really thinking about it. Killua makes up for his subdued reaction, though, bouncing to the beat in the backseat hard enough to shake the car, Gon joining in.

“Well, if you wanted honesty, that’s all you have to say,” Killua sings, sudden and loud, perfectly in
Ah, a sing along it seems.

Killua knows the song by heart, which doesn’t surprise Leorio. What does is the fact that Gon seems to know most of it too, fumbling a little here and there, but coming back in with the chorus.

“I’m not okay, I’m not okay!” sings the chorus, and Leorio’s gaze flicks to Killua’s face in the mirror. Killua spots it and wrinkles his nose at him.

“What?” Killua snorts. “Were you expecting Welcome to the Black Parade or something?”

Well if the shoe fits. Leorio splays his fingers off the steering wheel in an indicative gesture, shrugging slightly. “Or something, at least. I mean, isn’t that supposed to be your emo-child poster-song?”

“Leorio, don’t be an ass. He can sing if he wants to.”

Yikes, that was a bite. Kurapika's voice is harsh, just the wrong side of impatient and annoyed. What the hell crawled up his ass? Still, diffusing the sudden tension, Leorio lays a mock-offended hand on his chest, scoffing. “Who’s stopping him? Not me.”

Kurapika hums, unconvinced but subsiding into the same odd silence he's been drifting into all day, and Killua's music keeps playing. Leorio catches the boys looking between the two of them in the rear view mirror. Their expressions are inscrutable, unfamiliar in their concern as a whole world of conversation passes between Gon and Killua with the lift of an eyebrow, the cant of their mouths. Leorio is unversed in the context of all of this, and fixes his eyes on the road again, ignoring the stiff line of Kurapika's body in his periphery, angled defensively away.

Leorio sighs and, more to himself than anyone else, says, “Rapid City, Leorio. Let’s go.”

The landscape gives way from flat farmland to rolling hills, wide and expansive as the sun finishes setting and the world sinks into night. Leorio drives on the straight line of Highway 90 westward across the plains until even the flash of someone else’s lights flashing by stops becoming a regular event. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing. Just the quiet drone of the road, the soft conversations from the back seat that are held at a volume too low for Leorio to make out, and the turn of Kurapika’s book, his phone turned into a flashlight for the time being.

And the stars overhead, glimmering even through the windshield.

Huh.

Leorio leans forward, looking up through the windshield for a second. Then he looks around. No cars as far as he can tell, either coming or going. Perfect.

He pulls over.

(It could’ve been a graceful stop, but the road is dark and the little divots on the side of the road that are easy to get to are not so easy to find when all you have to see by is your headlights. So instead of something graceful, it's way more, uh, fraught with danger and skidding, and a little bit of swearing from the back seat.)
Kurapika, sliding his finger in between the pages, looks around them, confused, even as Leorio opens his door. “Why are we stopping?”

“It’s nighttime,” Leorio says, knowing it hardly explains anything, but not wanting to stop and explain any more than that. “Come on, get out of the car.” Bemused, Kurapika does, followed immediately by Gon, but the car’s lights stay on. Leorio huffs, braces his arm on the car’s frame to lean in and stare Killua down. “Get out.”

“Hell no.”

Leorio shrugs, standing up again. He looks both ways across the road. No headlights as far as he can see. Perfect. “Alright, then, you’ll miss out. You could just get out of the car and see, but if you’re just going to be stubborn…”

The car rocks. Killua stubbornly clings to the side of the car, feet braced on the frame. “No. Do you have any idea how many bugs there are out there? So many. I’m not getting friendly with any of them tonight. No little bugs crawling all over my skin and- Gon!”

Something happens over there that Leorio can’t quite see, but the car door ends up closed. The lights are off. Every light for miles is off.

Leorio breathes in.

And he tilts his head back.

“Look.”

Out here, in the middle of nowhere with no lights around, the stars open up the endless night sky, flecks of glittering light domed high above them. They go on forever, it seems; the kind of forever that makes his eyes unfocus and refocus, further and further, like one of those eye-puzzles where you have to focus just right to see the trick. Only there is no trick here. Just sparkling, distant stars. Pinpricks of blue and silver and gold, flickering overhead.

Vast and beautiful.

There is no noise this far away from towns. None of the background roar of cars on highways. Instead it is simply wind through the grass and the soft breathing of Kurapika beside him, his face raised to the pale, desaturating moonlight. It seems almost bright as day, only silver instead of gold, and he loves it for its gentleness. Quietly, Leorio says, head tilted all the way back and silence ringing loud in his ears, “Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself in the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time, look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.”

Kurapika looks at him, his startled expression clearly visible in the silver-blue light of the moon and stars. “Leorio?”

Ah shit.

“I remembered it. From yesterday.” Leorio rubs at the back of his neck. Shit, did he fuck up? Embarrassment crawls like a familiar friend across his neck and face, prickles of heat that he’s grateful no one can see. “I just thought it fit.”

And then, Kurapika smiles. It’s hard to see, and small, but it’s oddly pleased, like Leorio has done something very right, and that makes Leorio feel like he’s swallowed an ember, warm all the way down. “No, no, it fits. I’m just surprised. I wasn’t expecting you to remember it word for word.”
“I have mad memorization skills, what can I say?”

“Anything but that?” Killua asks. “You sound like you’re eighty, which makes your frequent claims that you’re only twenty-three kind of hard to swallow.”

Leorio glares at Killua, who’s currently being piggybacked by Gon. Seems like that was their compromise about the bugs. Killua isn’t looking at him, though, his eyes fixed wonderingly on the sky. Kid has a crazy snark reflex, it seems, because half the shit out of his mouth spouts off without him even seeming to pause and think. Maybe if it wasn’t all aimed at Leorio, he’d mind a little less.

“See any shooting stars, Killua?” Gon asks.

“No, none.” He goes silent again, staring. His mouth curves up, and even from where he’s standing, Leorio can see his hands flex, wrinkling the fabric of Gon’s shirt. “It’s so much brighter than I thought it’d be.”

“People always discount how bright it actually is out here, away from all the lights,” Leorio agrees. “Pretty, isn’t it?”

None of them seem to know what to say, fading into silence as they stare, above, at the endless dome of stars, distant and friendly and bright. Leorio keeps an eye on the road for other cars, but they stay undisturbed for several, uncountable minutes, until, finally, by silent agreement, they leave it behind and begin driving once more.

The mood is quieter after they get back into the car. Gon and Killua both keep looking out the windows at the stars, like they can recapture the magic of being under the open sky for just a moment. Even Kurapika seems loath to break the darkness, settling back with *Leaves of Grass* clasped loosely on his lap instead of pulling out his phone to keep reading. One by one, though, as the landscape remains unchanging and dark around them, they drop off. Leorio looks back to see Killua slumped onto Gon’s shoulder, Gon using Killua’s head as a pillow. It's adorable, honestly, and it's only when he goes to nudge Kurapika that he notices.

Kurapika has fallen asleep too.

Leorio stifles his grin. Cute.

Well, not, like, *cute*, but you know. Cute.

As though he can feel Leorio taking his eyes off the road, Kurapika stirs, lifts his head from where he has it braced on the curve of his arm. “How far is it to Rapid City?” Kurapika asks muzzily, hardly able to keep his eyes open.

Leorio finds himself smiling unconsciously at the hazy, indistinct tone. He keeps his voice low as he answers, “Another hour or two. We’re almost to Wall. Keep sleeping. I’m fine.”

Kurapika hardly lasts long enough for him to finish the sentence, nodding off again with an affirmative noise. Leorio grins. Reaches over, pats Kurapika’s thigh gently, because it’s sweet. Kurapika checking in on him is sweet. Unexpected, but he doesn’t mind. Kurapika shifts under his hand, gentle, not trying to get away, almost pressing into it.
He doesn’t pull away. Leorio doesn’t move. He should, he absolutely should. This isn’t the sort of thing Kurapika would probably allow when he wasn’t tired as hell, but. It’s comfortable here. It probably won’t be in a while, when Leorio’s left wrist hurts from bracing the wheel while he’s going seventy-five miles an hour, but it’s nice right now. He should move his hand. He doesn’t, won’t, because the desire to leave his hand on Kurapika’s warm thigh is small, private, and selfish.

Killua’s phone keeps piping music through the speakers, thin and quiet. Barely audible over the roar of the road. Voices, distant, filter through, bits of words here or there. He doesn’t dare to turn up the volume, doesn’t want to disturb the peace, such as it is, but he catches parts of it as they go. And a line, over and over:

“I don’t care where you’ve been, how many miles, I still love you.”

And, with the endless sky above, the endless road ahead, and the endless snoring from the backseat behind, one hand braced on the steering wheel, the other’s thumb stroking gentle lines across Kurapika’s thigh, Leorio drives.

Chapter End Notes

Experiences at the top of Sears Tower courtesy of my sister, who pretty much did the entire vertigo thing that Leorio does here. Plus, the hotel that was in last chapter IS a real place. I based my description off actual pictures of the location, and it is Not Good, my guys.

Also also, the short extra story "Miles to Go," found as the next part in this fic series, technically goes in this chapter, right before Leorio and Kurapika do laundry together.
Hello My Old Heart

Chapter Summary

Leorio sighs, then takes his hands off his eyes. He blinks past the bright spots they leave behind. Okay. No time for this. He can mope later. Inside. And pretend as though nothing happened, because nothing did. It will be fine. He'll make sure of it, even if his chest is caving in, falling apart like so many glass shards.

Chapter Notes

this got done a lot faster than I thought it would! It would've actually been done even sooner, but I had a convention last weekend, which I had stuff to finish first, so. Yeah! I fully blame the absolutely amazing feedback I got on last chapter, which did directly inspire me to pump this chapter the fuck out ASAP because I just got so jazzed about writing and everything.

Also! If anyone wants to take a look at that fic I did for the HXH Big Bang, you can find it here! It's about Leopika and dragons, and who doesn't love that!

This chapter's title is from "Hello My Old Heart" by the Oh Hellos. A great song.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rapid City is a quiet town from the looks of it, though that opinion might be slightly biased by the fact that it's nearing on towards two in the morning by the time they finally arrive. Leorio thanks his lucky stars that he finds a hotel fairly quickly off one of the main roads in the town that still has a vacancy large enough for the four of them. The night air is brisk on his cheeks, and Leorio nudges Kurapika awake before he tries to get the boys up. Kurapika goes with ill grace, staggering upright blearily.

Herding still-mostly-asleep teenagers into a hotel is hilarious, entirely because Gon trips over himself and faceplants directly into a wall once and then decides to stay there until Leorio’s recovered from laughing enough to carry him like the child he still is in Leorio's eyes the rest of the way into the room.

When Leorio wakes up, he can’t move.

It's automatically obvious why. He doesn't even have the sleepy luxury of wondering. Kurapika is, dare he even think it, cuddling with him.
Leorio holds himself like a man standing on a bomb, tense, intensely aware of imminent danger, because Kurapika is pressed against him. From shoulder to ankle, Kurapika is there. His arm is across Leorio’s chest, his fingers curled into the hem of his shirt collar. One leg is thrown over his, weighing him down to the mattress, foot tucked between Leorio’s shins. Kurapika’s tawny head rests against his shoulder, his eyes closed and mouth very slightly parted, sweet looking in slumber. Like this, Leorio can even hear the faint whistle of his breaths.

Leorio’s heartbeat stutters. Becomes heavy. Threatens to choke him with its sudden loudness.

Oh god he needs to leave. Immediately right now, right this instant, he needs to go. But if he moves… Leorio can’t even shift without the very real possibility of Kurapika waking up. After all, his right arm is on Kurapika’s other side, since Kurapika has co-opted Leorio’s shoulder as a pillow. His hand is splayed against the gentle dip of Kurapika’s lower back. His leg, hell the right half of his whole body, is *underneath* Kurapika for the most part, and everywhere Leorio touches the bare slips of exposed skin, his body lights up like a goddamned Christmas tree. Aware, with a capital “A”.

It’s intimate.

It shouldn’t be.

It’s just sharing a bed. The room was cold. Kurapika sought warmth in the middle of the night. Probably. Sure, it hasn't happened in the last, what, four or five nights? But this is clearly different. Maybe the bed is smaller or something.

But Leorio hasn’t woken up with someone beside him like this since before he started college, and he really needs to get out of this before his body starts getting the wrong idea.

(A lost battle already, from the feel of it, actually, but Leorio needs to leave before *Kurapika* sees or feels and gets the wrong idea.

Look, morning wood is an absolutely regular occurrence that has more to do with the brain's cyclical release of testosterone into one's system during the sleep cycle than any mystical nightly dudeboner power, but Kurapika is Kurapika and Kurapika always thinks that Leorio’s a pervert above all else, which is not an argument he wants to have in front of the kids. Or hell, what if the kids see what’s going on too? They’re sixteen, and Leorio knows Gon has at least been dealing with those particular bodily urges for a few years now, but they are also both in the “point and laugh at anything phallic” stage of their natural development, so Leorio would really rather save himself the embarrassment.

Thinking about “Kurapika” and “the boner” so close together is not helping his problem at all, actually.)

But past that all, it’s actually just… kind of nice.

Kurapika is a warm, comfortable weight against his side, settling the static that Leorio wears within him like a second skin. Even the quiet breaths of air against his neck are more reassuring than irritating, or even arousing, once he settles down a little, and slowly, very slowly, Leorio lets his eyes drift shut once again, face turned into Kurapika's sweet-smelling hair. If he just goes back to sleep, and lets Kurapika wake up first, it’ll be a little less awful for him. Maybe, anyway. Probably.

He’d get to hold onto Kurapika for a little longer, which is pretty much reason in and of itself to pretend, Leorio thinks. The slender curve of Kurapika’s back is beneath his hand, and Leorio strokes that small bit of silken skin gently, hardly daring to breathe for how bold this feels.

It’s just a little touch, but Leorio feels like he’s on fire from this alone.
Something tickles his neck. Kurapika's hand in the center of his chest tightens, and Leorio grumbles, pulling Kurapika even closer in a simulacrum of sleepy malcontent. No moving. If he's not going to get up to deal with below-the-belt issues, then no one is going anywhere. He's too comfy here. His hand comes up from the soft skin of Kurapika's lower back (which he is Not Thinking About). Carefully, he cards his fingers through Kurapika's hair, gentle and repetitive petting motions as Leorio drifts into the grey-warm haze of almost-sleep. It's odd, Leorio thinks, to be awake before Kurapika. Since Leorio tends to stay awake worrying himself sick, Kurapika is typically out of the bed before Leorio fully wakes up, brushing his teeth or hair or doing some part of his arcane skincare routine that'll keep him looking half his age long into his fifties.

Odd, but kind of nice. Intimate, and there's that word again. Leorio breathes in deep, lets it out, and brushes his lips against the crown of Kurapika's head.

Kurapika's fist clenches tightly once more before smoothing out, palm flat against his sternum, warm. It's so comfortable here that Leorio could just-

Killua's voice breaks the cradle of silence. “C'mon, are we getting them up for breakfast or what?”

“They're cute; I don't wanna wake them up.”

Well that nixes the plan to go the fuck back to sleep. Leorio at least manages to transform his grumble into a sigh, opening his eyes to glare balefully (or at least what feels like balefully) at Gon and Killua, currently perched side by side on their mattress, staring at where Leorio and Kurapika are tangled together. He holds that for a second before saying, “I'm not cute.”

Killua snorts. “Not on your own, god no. But he's a nice addition. It's all about framing, Leorio.”

“Frame this,” Leorio grumbles, his head falling back onto the pillow, and extends his middle finger.

“Ooh, damn, grandpa, you sure showed me.”

Leorio wishes there was a way to bold or capitalize or somehow emphasize a physical hand gesture. He settles for shaking his hand pointedly.

“Leorio? Have you ever thought about asking Kurapika out?” Gon asks, gentle and curious.

What?

Seriously, what? Leorio sputters quietly. Super quietly. He tries his hardest to not jostle Kurapika, whose hair is still tangled in Leorio's hand, and he starts petting it again, hoping that maybe the repetitive motion keeps Kurapika asleep for a bit longer. Him? Asking Kurapika out? Honestly the argument about his definitely-not-a-boner would be preferable to Kurapika waking up to that ridiculous question. “What?”

“Well, alright, I guess that means no.”

“I am not in love with Kurapika,” Leorio protests. Which, he realizes a moment later, wasn’t even the question they asked, but still. Related. Leorio isn’t-. He’s not-. Kurapika doesn’t like him like that at all, so it’s absolutely out of the question. They’re friends. Best friends. Which is great, and Leorio wouldn’t ever ask him for anything more than that, because they’re great the way they are, and did Leorio mention that he doesn’t like Kurapika like that?

Gon and Killua’s matching expressions of disbelief show how much credit they give that. Damn. “Are you playing dumb or do you actually not know? How can you not know?” Killua asks. “You’re all over him all the time.”
“I am not.”

Gon tilts his head, pointing at the bed. “He’s literally laying on you right now.”

True, but not the point. Or maybe that’s all the point. Leorio shifts just a little. Maybe if he edges out a little bit, he won’t be half as- okay nope, Kurapika is pretty firmly barnacled to his side. There’s no graceful escape for Leorio like that. Leorio huffs. “That’s him being all over me.”

“Sharing your jacket?” Killua asks, ticking off his pointer finger.

Of course the brat remembers that. Not, uh, that it wasn’t pretty blatant, but Leorio hadn’t been making a move or anything like that. It would have been, if he was planning on asking Kurapika out. Which he’s not. Obviously. “He was cold!”

Another finger. “Your bed?”

“That’s necessity. You guys share a bed.”

Killua shakes his head. “Not what we’re talking about right now.”

“Look, not only do you touch him as much as possible,” Gon interjects before Leorio gets going again, “he lets you. Kurapika’s really private, but he lets you in so much. You guys are really close. I think he likes it when you touch him, honestly. You guys would be good for each other, and I’ve seen the way you look at him, the way you act around him. That’s not even including the way he looks at you back. He likes you, I know he does. So you should ask him out.”

Heat rushes to Leorio's face, and his hand tightens in Kurapika's hair for just a second before he forces it to relax. Calm down, just calm down. Kurapika is still sleeping, thank god, and who knows how after that, but Leorio's grateful he didn't have to hear that. Even the very idea of Kurapika liking him is completely ridiculous. Kurapika is clever, gorgeous, a compact force of nature. He's going to end up being the top lawyer in his field, bringing people to justice left and right, and if he does decide to get involved with someone, it'll be someone just as driven, just as fierce, someone like an equal to him.

Someone he'll actually let in. Someone he can talk to about his family and everything that happened to that scared twelve-year-old boy he used to be.

Leorio turns his face to the side, getting a mouthful of Kurapika's hair as he mutters, “Don’t… don’t say it like that, that’s weird.”

“What's weird about that? You’re the one getting all the wrong ideas.”

“Come on, Leorio, it's time to make like a Disney movie. You guys deserve a happy ending.”

“Make like a-? Don't be ridicu-”

Leorio abruptly stops when, against his chest, Kurapika lifts his head.

The boys fall silent.

“I would appreciate it,” Kurapika says, tensely, mouth set in an unhappy line, “if you would all stop gossiping so loudly while I’m trying to sleep. Also, if you plan on talking about other people’s emotions- which, I might add, you have no right to even speculate about- you might want to make sure they’re not within hearing range of you first.”
“Kurapika-” Killua starts, but Kurapika levels him with an unimpressed look as he sits fully upright. Killua swallows whatever it was he was about to say.

(Leorio misses the weight of him against his side immediately.)

“I don't even have words for you two right now. My life is not your business, nor your concern. I will ask out whomever I like. I don't want either of you, any of you, butting into it. Leorio and I are friends, and there's nothing wrong with that.” Gon opens his mouth, and Kurapika could strip paint with the glare he gives the kid. Yikes. “Just friends. Leave it alone.”

Gon tries again, the stupid, brave fool that he is. “Kurapika, come on, I know-”

Kurapika scoffs as he drags one hand through messy blond hair, fingers catching here and there on knots. “Know? You don't know anything. You assume, and you guess, but you don't know. Do me a favor, Gon, and get your nose out of my business. You have no right and no reason to butt in.”

“Hey, we're just trying to help,” Killua interjects. His arms are crossed defensively across his chest, brows drawn together. Both he and Gon seem a bit shaken, and honestly, Leorio doesn't blame them. He gets not liking the subject, but Kurapika is going a bit far.

“Then help someone who actually needs it. You can help me out by leaving me the hell alone,” Kurapika says, sharp, curt.

Killua stiffens. In a flurry of movement, he stands, turns on his heel, (“Killua,” Gon calls, half-standing himself) and stalks out of the room. Gon doesn't even wait for a second, flicking Leorio a confused glance before following. The sound of his voice, calling after Killua, fades as the door closes.

And then there is silence.

The relaxing warmth of Kurapika against Leorio's side has been almost entirely forgotten, and Leorio watches, resigned, as Kurapika stands, makes his way to the bathroom. With a sigh, Leorio follows him. He's tense as he watches Kurapika brush his teeth with jerky motions, the sharp lines of his anger visible. He leans against the door, waiting him out, until Kurapika meets his eyes in the mirror and frowns. Spitting out his toothpaste, Kurapika asks, “What?”

“You're being a dick,” Leorio says bluntly. “You didn't have to snap at them like that.”

Kurapika lets out a tense sigh, setting his hands firmly against the counter. “No. I didn't. But they don't- They shouldn’t be talking like that, anyway. I don’t need them shoving their noses in where they don’t belong.”

Hoo, he’s upset. Leorio raises his eyebrows, and he’s honestly startled by how adamant Kurapika is being about this, how clipped his words are. “They were just joking around, Kurapika. Everything they were saying was perfectly harmless.”

Kurapika’s mouth twists to the side, an unreadable expression on his face. “I'm sorry. I suppose I was mistaken when I heard them speculate about my love life, which, again, none of their business. So we woke up cuddling. I was colder than I thought last night. I ended up sleeping against you. It won’t happen again.”

“No, no, you, uh, you’re fine. Don’t worry about it at all. The cuddling was whatever. The boys weren’t doing anything wrong. They’re just-”

Kurapika laughs, and the sound is unhappy, wry in a way that makes Leorio tense. “Ah, alright, so
Leorio’s jaw drops, and he sputters for a moment, unsure of how to continue, because what. That was full of vitriol and caustic, and Kurapika looks like he regrets what he said even as he finishes saying it. Leorio swallows. “What? No, just. They’re just teasing us a little. Kids. You know. It’s no big deal. They’ll make stuff up wherever they see it. So they saw us cuddling and made a guess. It’s not a big deal at all.”

One blond eyebrow lifts, and Kurapika shakes his head, visibly choosing to not comment on Leorio’s stumbling words. “I can’t count the number of times I’ve found Gon and Killua sleeping on top of each other because there are too many. I think it’d be easier to count how many times they’ve been apart. If any of us should be asking anyone out, it should be the two of them.”

“I know. Again, kids, assholes, it’s no big deal.”

Kurapika smiles, though it doesn't reach his eyes. He looks down, away, and Leorio wants to make him look back up again, get that expression off his face. “If you say it doesn’t bother you, I suppose. I might still have another talk with them, though. Jokes like that aren't something they should be in the habit of.”

“They really weren't joking~” And his words fall on deaf ears, as Kurapika leaves the room, the door snck-ing shut behind him. Leorio's hand falls to his side. What the hell was all that about, anyway? Kurapika can be touchy, but he's usually able to keep a better grip on his temper than that, letting it burn slowly instead of exploding the way he did.

There has to be something more here. Something that Leorio's missing.

He and Kurapika haven't ever really talked about dating, period. Leorio assumed that, much like himself, Kurapika was too busy with classes to be bothered with something like that, and the only thing he did find out from one particular late night conversation is that Kurapika doesn't bother with anything short term. He's an all-or-nothing sort of guy. Maybe that's his problem?

But something about that doesn't sit quite right.

He'll have to figure it out later.

“No big deal,” Leorio repeats quietly to himself. He drags a hand through his hair, sighs roughly, and supposes he has nothing more to say. There's no one here to listen. He knocks his knuckles against the door frame, a quick report. “Right. Yeah.”

The drive to Mount Rushmore is, predictably, awkward as shit.

While the boys are talking to Leorio, they're definitely not talking to Kurapika, hardly even looking at him as the drive continues. For his part, though, Kurapika is ignoring everyone, choosing instead to sit perfectly still, gaze fixed on some unknowable middle distance. Leorio misses the easy camaraderie of their night under the stars. But he drives on regardless, through the pine forest of the Black Hills, letting himself be awed by the rock formations surrounding the highway.

They get there and start the hike up to the actual monument when Gon and Killua's quiet conversation stops. Gon nods, both to Killua, then to Leorio, confusingly, before he turns to Kurapika.
“Hey, Kurapika?”

Kurapika just looks at him.

“Sorry for being nosy and assuming stuff. You're right, and we shouldn't have.”

For a long moment, Kurapika says nothing. Then he sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “No. No, I shouldn't have yelled at the two of you like that. Leorio said you guys weren't intending to be mean, and he's right. It's just... a touchy subject. I will date when I want to, alright?”

“Alright. We just want you guys to be happy, though.”

Leorio catches Kurapika looking at him. He cocks his head, curious, but Kurapika says nothing, and his expression gives nothing away. Finally, though, Kurapika seems to find whatever it is he's looking for, and the upcurve of his mouth would be called a smile if it held any amount of positive emotion at all. “We're just fine, Gon. Don't worry about us.”

Leorio isn't sure he likes that expression.

By that point, they finally finish the staircase, coming up to the main plaza before the monument. Killua looks up, squinting even past his sunglasses. He surveys the scene before him, then nods firmly. “Yep,” he says eventually, “those definitely are four old, dead, white dudes carved into a mountain.”

“Oh my god,” Leorio mutters.

It's early, so Mount Rushmore is thankfully not chock-full of people right now, so Killua's exclamation manages to get almost no censure from the crowd. “Look, am I supposed to be impressed? They're old, they're dead, I would've rather seen the rock as it's, y'know, actually supposed to be. Like, how cool would a random-ass holy rock in the middle of nowhere, rising out of this bullshit, be? Super cool. Australia did it, why'd we have to ruin a good thing?”

Gon nods. “There are spirit bundles tied everywhere. The carvings are like... desecrating a church.”

“I know, Gon. The least we can do now is to not disturb the prayer bundles,” Kurapika says, patting Gon on the shoulder.

“I won't touch them!”

“I know, but it bears repeating anyway. You're not the only one I'm talking to, after all.”

The three of them, bastards all, turn to look pointedly at Leorio.

“Oh come on,” Leorio protests. “Even I know better than that!”

“Whatever, dumbass central, this is all well and good, but who wants to take a picture of me kissing Lincoln?” Killua asks, holding out his phone. “I can't get a good angle from here.”

Gon eagerly helps him out while Leorio looks on, amused. Beside him, Kurapika sighs. Under his breath, he mutters, “They're so... rambunctious today.”

Leorio cocks his head, then watches the boys clown around for a bit. It seems like they can't manage to get Lincoln to really focus, and have to give it up as a bad job, but they're laughing over the blurry pictures anyway. “They're just having fun,” he says. “Don't worry about it, Kurapika. We're here early enough that we're not bothering too many people.”
A hum. Noncommittal and sort of peeved. “Maybe so.”

Before Leorio can ask what that's all about, Killua runs back over. “Okay, what if – and hear me out on this – we recreated Mount Deadguy but with us instead?”

“No,” Kurapika says.

“This is the stupidest thing I think I've ever done,” Kurapika says five minutes later.

“Tell your boyfriend to stop being so tall, Kurapika,” Killua says heartlessly, trying to prod the four of them into position correctly. “He's making this difficult.”

Sputtering, Leorio protests, but Killua doesn't seem to pay him any attention at all. Gon, however, leans out just a bit and smiles significantly, looking between Leorio and Kurapika pointedly. Good god, the kid has all the subtlety of a flashing neon freight train. He could try to be less obvious. Especially after their conversation immediately prior to this. Despite what Kurapika said, Gon obviously hasn't given up on the idea of the two of them together.

“This is the most aggressively touristy thing I have ever been part of,” Kurapika grumbles.

“Conveniently, we're tourists right now, so who gives a fuck. How about that? No, Leorio, just- ugh, crouch down a bit more.”

“How am I supposed to be straight-backed but still crouched?”

“I don't know, Washington, just make it happen.” Killua frowns at them, then nudges Kurapika to the side just slightly. “Get up on your tiptoes, come on. I think if we all do, it'll all turn out okay. Bend your knees, beanpole, work with us here.”

“Who's even going to- oh,” Leorio says, as Gon runs off to waylay a passer-by, “right of course, you're going to just ask a complete stranger to take our picture. You're right, Kurapika, this is the most aggressively tourist thing we've ever done.”

Kurapika sighs. He braces himself on Leorio's back, holding himself perfectly upright to stare over his shoulder. His hand is warm through Leorio's shirt. “I can't believe we're actually doing this.”

“Face forward, come on! No, not- Kurapika, look over this way. Yeah, there we go. Perfect. Okay, take the picture!”

It's not half-bad which is the most hilarious part. Gon looks cartoonishly stoic, face screwed up in a caricature of seriousness as he takes the place of Lincoln. Killua, for his part as Teddy Roosevelt, doesn't even try. He just stares straight at the camera as his head floats in the space between Kurapika and Gon, wide-eyed. His face makes Leorio crack up laughing for ten solid minutes, and once that stops, the peeved look on Kurapika's gets him started all over again.

Killua and Gon survey the picture with great seriousness.

Finally, they both nod, almost in unison. “Cursed photo,” Gon says sagely.

“Prime cryptid material, fucking look at me. If only my eyes were red and glowing.” Killua grins.
“This is the best picture ever. I'm going to make this my profile pic everywhere.”

“Please don't,” Kurapika says, despairing, but Leorio catches him smiling at the boys when they aren't looking, and he pushes down the burst of warmth he feels at the sight. A gentle smile shouldn't make his chest clench like that.

He nudges Kurapika with his shoulder gently. Kurapika looks up, somehow startled, and Leorio is caught by the realization that he has tiny spots of freckles across the bridge of his nose, the upturn of his cheek. Leorio swallows. Pulls his attention forcefully away from the delightful specks of brown. “You good?”

“I think so. Sorry about earlier.”

“Hey, again, no big-” Leorio’s phone rings in his pocket, and he pulls it out before he can even really think about it, catching sight of the familiar name on the display right before he puts it to his ear, motioning for Kurapika to go ahead and keep up with the boys as he steps away. “Hey,” he says with a tired grin, even though the other person can’t see him. “What’s up?”

“What’s up? Is that the best you’re gonna give me after you disappear for this road trip of yours and don’t bother to call?” Zepile asks, laughing already, and Leorio’s smile turns more genuine. “Rude, my guy, rude as hell.”

“You’re rude,” Leorio retorts, a bit nonsensically, but it gets a laugh anyway. “How are you?”

“I’m great! Bored as all get out without my favorite drinking buddy, but I’ll survive until you get back. My liver probably needs the break before we both drown ourselves in alcohol because of school again anyway.”

Leorio lets out a quiet groan at that, turning away from the group. Zepile is great, an art historian that he met in his sophomore year that quickly became his friend as they bonded over awful chemistry labs and their completely legal drinking habits that had definitely not started while they were both still in high school. Zepile is a man after his own heart, honestly. “You don’t have to go get your Ph.D. you know.”

“If I want to consider having a job, yeah, I do. But!” Zepile coughs, chagrined, and Leorio, nose scrunching, is suddenly reminded why he hardly ever asks Zepile for anything amounting to dating advice. “Dude.”

He regales him for a few minutes, leaving out some of the more harrowing stuff about the ever-present threat of Killua's family. Zepile is an appreciative audience, making all the right exclamations in all the right places, and finally, Leorio's story has wound down to the events of the morning. Sunlight glints off the white stone of Mount Rushmore, and Leorio squints at it, pausing his story. After a moment, he asks, “Hey, Zepile?”

“Yeah?”

And this is such an unimaginably bad idea, but Leorio sticks his courage to the screwing point, remembers the weight of Kurapika’s head on his shoulder this morning. There are worse things in the world than a few moments of embarrassment. “...what do you think about Kurapika?”

“What, the focus of your hopeless crush? He’s too good for you, but I like him anyway. Why, has the roadtrip given you feewings?” Zepile coos, and Leorio, nose scrunching, is suddenly reminded why he hardly ever asks Zepile for anything amounting to dating advice.

“Dude.”
After a short laugh, Zepile continues without the mocking tone in his voice. “Look, all I’m gonna tell you is this: If you’re wondering if these soft, gooey emotions are new, they’re not, and anyone who has ever seen you two around each other for five minutes can corroborate. If you have the chance to ask him out or something while you’re off exploring, just… do it. Live in the moment, Leorio.”

Leorio makes a face. “Have you been talking to Gon?”

“We text sometimes. Your little cousin is cool. But hey, give it some thought, okay? Worst he can say is no.”

Leorio looks over to where Kurapika is following the boys around, a gentle, if tired, smile on his face, already so different than his mood this morning, and wonders. “Yeah, alright.”

“Call me if you get laid. He's hot and I want details.”

“Zepile, oh my god.”

Rapid City, as it turns out, is a black hole for tourists.

There’s just so much to do. They easily waste time there, spending one day wandering around the historic downtown, with its water fountain and nifty thrift stores and shops full to bursting with works of Lakota art and craftsmanship. There’s a goddamned hill with dinosaurs on it in the middle of town for fuck’s sake, which Leorio, Gon, and Killua get pictures on top of, of course. Kurapika stands to the side, looking over the town below, silent as he surveys them from the heights, untouchable and austere as the wind whips his hair around his face. The next is spent driving out to the dry sandstone of the Badlands, where the plains fall away to reveal striated rock, miles and miles of awe-inspiring geography, so quiet Leorio can hear his blood pulse in his ears.

And all the while, Leorio finds his eyes drawn more and more to Kurapika, coming back to Gon’s question, to Zepile and Killua’s quiet insistence.

And he wonders.

What if he gave it a shot? What if he did ask Kurapika out? What would happen? Would they get along alright, or would their arguing, already caustic, start driving a wedge deep between them? Or would Leorio bring a certain measure of peace to Kurapika’s constant, quiet fury in the face of injustice? Would he be able to be a bulwark there and protect him? Would Kurapika push Leorio past his worry enough to act?

Would they work?

See the problem is, it isn’t like Leorio hasn’t thought about it.

He has. God knows he has. It’s not that he’s in denial about his sexuality or something, but there’s just always been something else, something more to be doing, like school, or taking care of Gon, or studying for the MCAT (god, those are some war flashbacks right there). There has always been something else for Leorio to be focused on. His life, his future, takes priority over anything personal. Leorio’s goals are too close for him to set them aside, because the shadow of Pietro’s death lingers on him still, and how is he supposed to worry about something like dating when he has everything else to take care of first?

It’s not that he doesn’t know how beautiful Kurapika is. He does. He has eyes, for crying out loud.
It's just never been the right time.

But now, with the roadtrip and the past week of being almost entirely alone with Kurapika, being around him makes Leorio think more. Makes him wonder, in a much more immediate sense. He's woken up every morning since they got to Rapid with Kurapika pressed against his side, with his head on Leorio's shoulder, warm and welcome, and Leorio is helpless against his wonder. Against the creeping urge to brush the barest hint of lips across Kurapika's brow, because-

What if?

(“There is no unreturn'd love,” he hears Kurapika say softly. He has found himself asking to hear a few more poems here and there, but that one, the first one he heard, still comes back to him. The vision of Kurapika's down-turned eyes, amber in the sunset, his mouth moving to carefully form the words.)

What if they're right?

His biggest saving grace that offsets his terrible impulse control has always been the pure and simple knowledge that there was no way Kurapika would ever like him. They're friends. Good friends, even. But...

(“The pay is certain one way or another.”)

A relationship doesn't have to ruin that.

(“I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd. Yet out of that I have written these songs.”)

They pull into the hotel they've been staying at after a long day out in the caves north of Rapid and in Spearfish Canyon. Roughlock Falls was a fun hike, and the cool dark of Wind Cave was incredible in its silence, the water-carved calcite formations stunning, and Leorio's mind has finally stilled to a single question as the boys unload, as Kurapika gets out of the car and he follows.

Why not?

And then, a haze falling over himself, Leorio moves. It's like he's watching himself from the driver's seat, still there but somehow removed from the immediacy of his own actions. Leorio catches Kurapika by the elbow, pulling him aside the barest amount while Gon and Killua race ahead. He opens his mouth, hesitates, uncertain.

“What, Leorio?” Kurapika asks shortly.

(This, he realizes later, should have been his first clue.)
“I was wondering... Uh. What do you think about letting the boys have dinner here at the hotel, and the two of us could, maybe, go somewhere. Alone. Together.” Kurapika opens his mouth, and Leorio dredges up the last bit of his courage and blurts out as he lets his hand drop from Kurapika's arm, “Like a date.”

Kurapika stares. For several, silent seconds, all he does is stare, eyes slightly wide, breath caught on a startled inhale. His cheeks flood with color. Leorio doesn't think he's ever seen Kurapika's eyes as pretty as they are when they're offset by that pink flush. Thinking it makes his chest clench, something pleasant in his gut twisting, and Leorio takes a half-step closer. Then Kurapika's lips part, tongue darting out, and-

“No, Leorio,” Kurapika says. “I'm flattered, but no.”

Oh.

Well.

That, uh.

Right. Leorio swallows once, twice, coughs when it gets stuck in his throat just a bit. He shrugs jerkily, trying too hard to make the motion look natural. Shit. “Okay, that's. Uh. Yeah, that's fine! Sorry, I didn't-”

“Leorio, stop.” Kurapika reaches out, hesitates, then carefully does not touch Leorio, lowering his hand back to his side. That hurts more than Leorio expected it to. “It's okay. I didn't even know you liked... guys that way. You surprised me, that's all.” Kurapika picks up speed the more he speaks, almost as though the quickness of his thoughts will keep everything else at bay. “After all, you've never said anything about liking guys before. I'm sure you're just. Cooped up. Or something, after being so close to just me and the boys for so long. Don't worry-”

“Hey, that's not-” Leorio interjects, but Kurapika only talks faster, louder, like he's trying to convince both of them of the truth of his words.

“-it's not the first time a guy has thought I would do in a pinch when there weren't any girls around. I mean, I know I'm small and people keep calling me pretty, so I'm not surprised. Anyway, we're friends, it'll be fine. It can be awkward for a little, I know, and I'm sorry, but it just-”

“Kurapika-”

“-wouldn't work out.” Kurapika nods and damn it, damn it, this isn't at all how this was supposed to go! Leorio's jaw clenches so tight it hurts, teeth grinding. “Let's just... let it go, okay? No hard feelings?”

“Kurapika,” Leorio says, again, helpless and angry with it. His thoughts are spinning. What should he say? Something isn't right here. He wants to say that there's been some misunderstanding, but he's not even sure where to start. He doesn't know. Was he wrong to ask Kurapika out? Does Kurapika think he's joking?

Kurapika looks up at him, a quick, darting glance before dropping his eyes again. His smile is weak, an ill twist to it. Leorio's heart seizes, adding a whole new dimension of pain on top of fucking everything else, because still, even now, Leorio wants to reach out, to smooth away, to do anything to take back everything he's said wrong. He should have never asked Kurapika. How could he have been so stupid? “Let it go, Leorio.”

And then he turns and walks away. He brushes past Gon and Killua both, immediately going inside.
Leorio finally lets himself close his eyes.

Damn.

Damn.

This is why he doesn't listen to his idiot friends. Leorio presses the heels of his hands into his eyes, bites the inside of his lip, anything to stop the heated, embarrassed flow of blood and tears to his face. Fuck, that was the stupidest thing he could've done. Kurapika got so angry when the subject of dating was brought up only a few days ago. He should've known better. Just because they kept cuddling hadn't meant anything. Just because Leorio thinks he's beautiful, just because Leorio lo-

No.

Just because Leorio let himself wonder, it didn't mean it could work out.

They're friends.

That's fine. They can stay friends. Leorio just doesn't want to lose Kurapika entirely, and what if this is it? What if this is the point where Kurapika quietly asks to be given another way to get home? Because if Kurapika wants a plane ride home, to spend the rest of his time alone in Mito's house without Leorio, damn it, he won't like it, but he'll let it happen. He won't push. If it helps smooth this over...

(Damn it, he had let himself want it, let himself wonder how it might be, to be the center of Kurapika's attention like that, to be free to show Kurapika in new ways how much he cared, in careful, gentle touches, had gotten greedy, and now it's all gone.)

Leorio sighs, then takes his hands off his eyes. He blinks past the bright spots they leave behind. Okay. No time for this. He can mope later. Inside. And pretend as though nothing happened, because nothing did. It will be fine. He'll make sure of it, even if his chest is caving in, falling apart like so many glass shards. Spine straight, he heads over to Gon and Killua, who are standing behind one of the pillars leading to the entrance. He draws himself up. Leorio forces his voice to be even as he asks, turning the corner, “Killua? Gon? Why are you two just standing here? Come on, let's get up to the room and wind down, okay?

“Leorio, wait, don't-” Gon starts, but it's too late.

Leorio walks towards the entrance, and when he sees the man waiting by the door, he jolts just slightly, startled. The man is tall, slender, limbs arranged with a carefulness that is somehow doll-like in its uncanny precision as he turns the pages to the book he's reading. His hair is long, black and sleek and shining in the artificial light overhead.

Behind him, Killua makes some move that he hears but doesn't see. “Old man, come on, let's-”

At the sound of Killua's voice, the man looks up. He blinks once, twice, placid, before closing his book with a soft snap, and pushes off the wall. He moves so smoothly, unnaturally so, and Leorio's hackles raise as the man comes close, closer, and then- just moves right around Leorio like he isn't even there, coming to stand in front of Killua, who fell silent the instant the man began to move. His gaze does not move, does not flicker. He hardly even blinks, and Leorio almost isn't sure he even sees anyone that isn't Killua.

Killua's hand, where Gon is holding it pressed between the two of them like a lifeline, is white-knuckled and shaking.
That alarm in Leorio's mind goes off again, thin and blaring.

The man tilts his head to the side, raising one hand and waving Killua forward. “Hello, Killu. It's time for you come home now.”

Chapter End Notes

for what it's worth, I swear I'm at least a little sorry, but everything has to go at least a bit to shit before it gets better, right? you didn't actually think we were done with killua's family right??

(but what about Kurapika and Leorio, Zene, what the FUCK was that, you might ask, and to that, I scuttle away cackling)

The picture Killua takes of him kissing Lincoln is a direct recreation of a picture I have of me doing the same, as well as the picture Leorio, Gon, and Killua take on top of Dinosaur Hill in the middle of Rapid. Here they are on my twitter, you're welcome.
“(you're not) Mine to Keep

Chapter Summary

“If I go quietly when my brother comes to get me,” Killua voice whispers in Leorio's memory, and his mind, already panicked and blaring, shoots straight into prickling white-noise. Too much is going on, even though no one has moved, even though it's only been a few breaths. Anxious energy jitters through him, jump-starting his body while his mind concerns itself with cycling through every available option.

Chapter Notes

Hey, in case you guys missed it, go check out the pictures of Mt. Rushmore and Dino Hill I linked at the end of last chapter. Could I link them again? Sure. Am I too lazy to do that? Yes. Should you imagine the Gang doing all these things? Absolutely.

Also, if you check out this, it's the playlist for this fic! It's on Playmoss right now, because I have a grudge against 8tracks for restricting the amount of free playtime for non-paying users, but I'll get a link up to Spotify here shortly, because Playmoss has some licensing problems they have to work out. But it'll at least show you all of the tracks regardless of whether it can play them, so! It's something.

Thank you all so much for your continued support! I'm aiming for the next update to happen towards the end of August, probably, but no later than the middle of September. Real life sucks, pretty much, but you guys are awesome and make my writing go so much easier, because you're all wonderful ♥

Chapter title from "It's Only" by Odesza, which is the only song that really doesn't fit in with the rest of the songs on the playlist, mostly because it's there for Illumi and Hisoka more than anyone else. Love those terrible murderhusbands.

Also, if you need content warnings, check the endchapter notes. Illumi and Hisoka are not good people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a very brief moment, Leorio can only stare between the stranger and Killua.

Home?

“If I go quietly when my brother comes to get me,” Killua voice whispers in Leorio's memory, and his mind, already panicked and blaring, shoots straight into prickling white-noise. Too much is going on, even though no one has moved, even though it's only been a few breaths. Anxious energy jitters through him, jump-starting his body while his mind concerns itself with cycling through every available option.

Run? No, they can't run. First, Kurapika's in the room with all of their stuff, and second, that
wouldn't really solve whatever is happening here.

Let Leorio handle it? Might work, but too risky. Leorio's temper isn't the best right now, and he doesn't want to say anything to Killua's family, much less something he'll end up regretting. There's too much he doesn't know.

His protective personality bristles regardless. Hundreds of variations on these are taken in and tossed aside, before Leorio settles on moving back, planting his feet beside Gon and standing there, one hand on Gon's shoulder, between this stranger and Killua. He can't do much, but damn it, he doesn't like this, and he isn't just about to let Killua deal with it on his own. From his new vantage, he can see the startling black of the man's eyes, and, more importantly, the swaying figure of Hisoka, leaving the lobby with a long smile on his face.

"Dear, I couldn't – oh!" Hisoka hardly sounds surprised to find everyone there, merely pleased. Leorio suppresses a growl. "Oh, how wonderful, there they are. Hello Gon, Killua."

The tall man looks at them with those dark, expressionless eyes. A shiver racks Leorio’s body, starting from his shoulders and feet and ending in his hand tightening just a little bit on Gon’s shoulder. Gon doesn’t give any indication that he’s really paying any attention, other than to shift a little, pressing himself closer to Leorio and Killua, but looking down at him, Leorio sees that that’s not the case at all. Gon is wire-taut and still, gaze locked on the stranger in front of them.

"Killu," the man says in a light voice, too light, too lilting, everything about it wrong. "Isn’t it about time for you to come home now?"

It takes a second, but Killua jerkily shakes his head once, twice, stiff like the muscles in his neck aren’t working right. "No," he rasps out, once, and then again, stronger. "No. Illumi, what are you doing here?"

Illumi, as he’s been named, tilts his head slightly. Uncanny fucking valley. This guy doesn't look real. "I came to get you, of course. You shouldn’t be out on your own anymore."

"How… How did you find me?"

"Oh, Killu," Illumi sighs, almost disappointed. "You didn’t really think we let you leave without supervision, did you?"

That answer rocks Killua visibly. His pale hair flies around his face as he shakes his head, in denial, in fear, mouth firmly pressed into a thin line. "I'm not going home," Killua says. "Not now. Not yet. And I'm not going with you, either."

Illumi's expression remains utterly impassive as he takes this information. When he speaks, however, his voice is lyrical, practically sing-song for all its variation in tone. It's strange, to hear such an expressive voice come out of a face so still. "Are you sure about that?"

Like a pale cloud, Hisoka drifts forward, placing a hand on Illumi's shoulder that the other shrugs off almost immediately. Like a horse flicking off a fly, Leorio thinks. The spot of humor does nothing for the tense atmosphere, but it helps keep Leorio's wildly rushing emotions at bay. Not that the dismissal phases Hisoka at all, the smile never slipping from his face. Mildly, he says, "Now now, let's not be unreasonable. Come on, Killua, your family is simply worried about you."

Gon bristles. He jerks just the slightest amount in Leorio's grip, the hand on his shoulder seemingly the only thing holding him back at that moment. "If they really cared, they wouldn't have treated him badly in the first place! They can't say they're worried now just because he went away!"
“Oh, is that what he told you?” Illumi asks, inquisitive tone pinging all along Leorio’s spine in the worst way. He does not look away from Killua, something important seemingly passed between them. Leorio almost reaches over to put a hand on him too, just to give him some measure of physical support, because right now, Killua seems so fragile.

With a near-inaudible gasp, Killua looks away first.

Now freed, Illumi gently turns his head to the side, dismissive. “Children like to exaggerate things for attention, after all. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to find out that even Killua has some bad habits.”

Oh hell no. Leorio steps forward, points firmly at the tall form of Killua’s brother. “Hey, don’t even fucking start that shit. There will be no gaslighting on my watch.”

“And Killua is certainly still only a child,” Illumi continues, as though he hadn’t even heard Leorio speak. Bastard.

Even if Illumi didn’t pay attention, Killua seems to draw some measure of strength from Leorio’s support, lifting his face again. “I’m old enough to understand what’s going on. I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Then why did you tell them you were being mistreated, I wonder?” Illumi taps a finger against his chin. The utter blankness of his expression is unsettling. Leorio almost wants to punch him, just to see if that would get him to at least blink, but he suppresses the urge. Not helpful right now. Maybe for a quick escape later, but not right now. “You? The golden child of the family? After how much Father and Mother both dote on you? Even with how much you know I love you? You were still allowed to leave. You were allowed to come here.”

Killua falls silent. Mouth closed.

Gon looks at him, brow furrowing. “...Killua?”

Illumi keeps talking as though there was no interruption. “You were allowed to leave. You were allowed to stay out for this long. But your fun is over now. You promised you would stay home for the summer if we listened to you, and we weren’t the ones who broke our promise first. Our half of the deal is still intact.”

At that moment, picking up Illumi’s words as though they had practiced, Hisoka slides into the conversation, idly examining his nails. “But that can change so easily. And Alluka misses you so much.”

Alluka?

Leorio shoots Gon a look, but Gon’s eyebrows only draw further together, and he shakes his head. Okay, someone Gon doesn’t know either? Weird. But Killua’s breath stops at the name. His fists are shaking, pale and tense with unknown, unspoken emotion.

Hisoka grins, all teeth. “You don’t want to leave your dear little sister all alone with your family, do you? Not after what happened.”

What?

What happened?

Something about that just strikes Leorio the wrong way, a warning chord lit up from within, but that
reaction is magnified tenfold in Killua. He jolts like he's been electrocuted. He opens his mouth, closes it with a click of teeth, like he doesn't know how to respond, and he looks... furious. Killua looks angrier than Leorio's seen anyone be in a long, long time.

Illumi takes a step forward, and Leorio's hackles go even further up, though Illumi still doesn't take any notice of him. “Killu, just come home now,” he says, cajoling. “You've hard your fun, haven't you? You're done with it now. Our agreement can still be fulfilled.”

The disbelieving look Killua gives him for that is so derisive Leorio wishes he could frame an expression and hang it on his mental wall to recall anytime he needed a good kick to the spine. Yikes.

“Your obedience for the … treatment Alluka requires.” Illumi spreads his hands wide, undaunted by the caustic look he's getting from Killua. Brave guy. Or emotionless. Leorio hasn't figured it out yet. Both, maybe? Focusing on this makes not flying off the handle a lot easier. “This was our arrangement. Come home now, and all will be forgiven. Would that be so bad? Alluka will be safe and taken care of. Your friends untouched. All you have to do, Killu, is come home with me.”

Killua...

Does nothing.

He wavers visibly, face screwed up indecisively. Leorio sees his eyes dart between his brother then back at Gon and Leorio. Several times, he looks like he's going to say something, but he backs out. Leorio isn't sure of all the facets of what's going on here; he's fully aware that there are parts of this conversation that he's missing again. But damn if this isn't making him feel bad for the kid, getting cornered like this. It's bullshit.

And just as the tide of Leorio's swelling anger tips him over to the point where words clamber up his throat, Gon steps forward first, with a quiet, incredulous laugh, reaching out to wrap his fingers around Killua's wrist. “Killua. Killua, come on, you know you can't just....” But even that point of contact doesn't get Killua's gaze to settle. It only turns even more agonized, helpless, and Gon's anger snaps up his spine in sharp motions. He turns to Illumi and Hisoka, straight-backed and firm like he's staring down an avalanche. “Killua doesn't need to go with you. He doesn't want to go home, and you can't make him!”

And Illumi quietly, chillingly quietly, the tenor of his voice sending a shiver up Leorio's spine, asks, “Is that so?”

“I think you should ask Killua what he thinks, Gon.” Hisoka taps a slim finger against his curved, grinning mouth.

Gon makes a frustrated noise in the back of his throat before rounding on Killua once more. “Killua, you can't go home. You know what will happen if you do!”

Killua's body jerks straight, like he's been shocked, and his eyes, wild and electric, turn on Gon. “And you don't know what will happen if I don't!”

And Leorio hears the final thread of his temper just. Snap.

His chin jerks up, and Leorio gestures firmly. “Okay, okay, woah there. Boys, hotel room.” They start to protest. Leorio cuts them off without hesitation. “Now. Go. We're not arguing about this here. Room.”
For a moment it doesn't seem like they'll listen. Then Killua nods, mouth set in a thin, bloodless line, and he skirts around the other two adults silently. Gon, after a slight pause, follows, and Leorio, distracting Illumi and Hisoka, continues talking, “And you two. You guys can leave. If Killua wants to go home, he'll go, but I'm not going to stand here and watch two grown men bully a kid into rejoining his abusive household.”

“Abusive?” Illumi asks.

Hisoka lays a prim hand on his chest. “Bully?”

Leorio snorts, raising one eyebrow. “Am I wrong? Because that's what the fuck it looked like to me, and I'm not going to put up with it anymore.”

There is a brief pause. Leorio somehow gets the feeling that it's not because they take him seriously, but rather because they're surprised he's even bothering to stand up to them in the first place. Illumi shakes it off first, and turns to follow Killua inside.

Leorio grabs him by the elbow, fingers tight, dimpling the skin beneath them. “Don't even think about it.”

A slow, startled blink, as Illumi regards the hand gripping him with something that almost resembles surprise, before he looks back up at Leorio. His head cocks the barest amount. “You should let me go. Before you end up regretting it.”

“You take one more step towards Killua right now, and I'll punch your goddamn lights out, got it? You can wait. So go wait somewhere else.”

“I came to get my little brother, and I won't leave until I do.” With a single, quick pull, Illumi frees his arm from Leorio as though it was nothing at all. “Do you think you can stop me?”

“Do you think you'll be able to get him out of here without me causing a scene?”

At that moment, Hisoka steps forward, sliding between Leorio and Illumi. He holds up his hands, almost placating, except for the dangerous smile curling his mouth. He makes a condescending “calm down” gesture at Leorio before writing him off almost completely, focusing on Illumi instead. “Come now, Illumi, we can wait while Killua gathers his things. Let's not keep daddy away from the kids too long, okay?”

Illumi blinks, slow. “What on earth just came out of your mouth?”

That's probably the best opening Leorio could have hoped for, so he takes the moment and fucking books it. There are a lot of advantages to having legs as long as Leorio's, and he's feeling all of them right about now as he darts inside the hotel.

Just as Leorio gets past them, he hears a phone ring. An irate sigh follows, before Illumi answers it with a mild, “Hello? Yes, Father? I found Killua and—”

And Leorio hears nothing more, the doors sliding shut behind him. He breathes out, sharp. Should he stay? He might overhear something interesting if he does, but he's not sure that will help anything. He might get caught listening. He probably has a better chance with Killua, trying to figure out what the hell is going on with that kid's family. Who Alluka even is, and why her “treatment” is being held ransom for Killua's obedience. Leorio straight up just Does Not Like It. It sits sour in Leorio's gut. Mind made up, Leorio strides towards the elevators. Killua and Gon are probably up in the room by now, and oh god he sent them in there with Kurapika, who has no idea what just happened—
-Kurapika, who just turned him down.

Leorio presses the elevator buttons a few times, like that'll get them here any faster, then veers sharply to the stairs when that yields nothing fast enough for Leorio's racing thoughts and racing heart. He can take them two at a time and get up there just as fast. Faster, even. Maybe burn off a little of the jittery energy exploding from his chest, crawling across his neck and skin.

Burn off a little of the meltdown he can feel building within.

He makes it to the room just in time for Killua to pivot sharply on his heel, gesturing widely at Gon, who seems to be dogging Killua's every step. (And two steps to the side. On the bed, the bed that they had slept in, that Leorio woke up with Kurapika's head on his shoulder for days in a row now, is Kurapika, red-eyed, hands clenched in the bedspread as he watches this all unfold, and Leorio can't spare the time to think much more than “even now he remains lovely,” before he yanks his attention back to the boys. Now isn't the time, now isn't the time.)

Gon's wrapping up something that Leorio misses in the thunder of his heartbeat, but luckily for him, Killua has no such problems, whirling on him at the other end of the room. “Gon, can you just- drop it! Please!”

“No, I can't just drop it!” This seems to be it, Leorio realizes, as Gon finally digs in his heels, a frown cutting across his face. This is the sticking point. He tries his best to stifle his irate sigh. Of all times and of all places. “Are you going to go with them or not?”

“What does it matter? I have to go home sooner or later!” Killua throws his arms in the air, bristling and helpless, and Leorio hates the tired, pinched look on Killua's typically impish face. “This has been really great, perfect, a fairytale vacation from the hellscape of my life, but I do have to go back there.”

Gon growls. “No, you don't!”

“Yes, I do! Why can't you ever just listen to what I say? Do you ever listen to me?”

“What- of course I listen to you?”

Killua snorts, crossing his arms. “Oh, really, so you're listening right now when I'm saying that I have to go home eventually?”

“I don't care, Killua!”

“Well that's fucking great, because I do!” Killua shouts, the force of it rattling the very breath in Leorio's lungs. “I do care, Gon!”

That hangs in the air for a moment.

Quieter now, Killua continues, brokenly, “Alluka's life is on the line. She's my sister, Gon. You don't know how they treat her.”

“I didn't even know you had a sister,” Gon says accusingly.

“Boys-” Leorio starts, but neither of them pay him any mind. He casts a beseeching look at Kurapika, but Kurapika is watching this all unfold with that same, stony expression. He hasn't
moved. He doesn't look like he's planning to either. He doesn't look like he wants to be here at all. Some help he's going to be.

“Yeah? You don't? Gee, I wonder if that's because you *don't fucking listen to me?* You don't ask me how I'm doing, or how I feel, or anything at all about myself, the way you do for fucking *strangers on the street.* How is that supposed to make me feel, huh? You don’t treat me like any of your other friends!

“You’re not like any of my other friends, you’re-” Gon flails for a moment, clearly taken off guard. Leorio just watches this with a fascinated raise to his eyebrows because this was all..... very interesting information. Possibly not the best place for it, and Gon covers, continuing with a muttered, “You’re different!”

Killua snorts. He's clearly not buying it. Leorio winces. “Yeah, I’m fucking unimportant! You just! I’m not important to you. You don’t care about me at all, all you care about is your other friends; you don’t think about me! You don’t care about what I need or what I want or fucking *anything* like that! You just want to talk about yourself and how you're doing and what I can do for you, right?

Gon starts to protest, but Killua's on a roll, and he isn't stopping anytime soon, pacing agitatedly.

“You're not even mad right now that I have to leave, that I have to go back to my *family* that you know is awful! You're just mad that I'm going to be ruining your fun little vacation.”

Gon flinches. “That's not- Killua, that's not true! It's just- you're *here,* with *us.* Your family doesn't need to-”

“My family is trying to get me back home, and I wouldn't do it if they weren't holding my sister effectively *hostage,* Gon. I made a bargain to save Alluka's *life.* Don't you *dare* hold that against me. So yeah, I couldn't talk to you for a bit, and I couldn't go to summer camp, and I ran away and risked all of it to be here with you right now. But if I leave now, I might still have a sister.”

Helplessly, his righteous anger burning low and lower on lack of fuel, as Gon's temper begins to rein itself in, Gon says, “I just- you never told me you even had a sister. I’ve never heard anything about that! You never said she was in trouble, or that you were trying to keep her safe! Why didn't you trust me? Why can't you just... trust that I'll help you?”

“It's not about your trust! It's about my sister's life!”

“I.”

“If it was just me, I would have left that house years ago, but I can't leave her there alone, okay? Alluka needs me. I'm the only one who can get them to even pretend to care about her, and until I can fix that, I don't.” Tears begin their sudden, unstoppable trek, and Killua rushes to brush them away before they can trail down his cheeks, face red and frustrated, hurting. “I don't know what else to do.”

“Killua-”

“But since you're just going to be an asshole about it, fine! Fuck it! I guess I really am better off nowhere!”

Those words hang in the air. Killua hardly waits for them to fade, already turned and bolting out. It's like a vacuum depressurizing, air and noise equalizing across all boundaries. The door bounces against the wall because of the force Killua used to fling it open, and it doesn't make it all the way back to the frame.
Gon is already there.

“W-Wait, Killua!”

And then he too is gone.

The door latches with a quiet click.

Quietly, with feeling, Leorio mutters, “What the fuck.”

Nothing in the room gives him any kind of answer. Not the ringing silence. Not Kurapika standing up behind him. Not the absence of his little cousin and his little cousin’s best friend with a massively fucked up home life. Because, really, holding someone’s medical treatment (from what it sounded) hostage in return for good behavior? Not normal family stuff, and really, Leorio should have listened to his instincts sooner. Damn it, this is what he gets for trying to just blithely pretend that everything will be okay. Fifty-fifty shot on that, and those are terrible odds to risk in life.

He shakes himself, like rising from a dream. Leorio propels himself forward, taking a few steps towards the door. “Come on, we should -”

“I’ll go find the boys,” Kurapika says suddenly. “You should wait here. For them.”

Leorio stops. He turns, raising an eyebrow. Kurapika is hovering just slightly out of his reach, and the only thing that belies how nervous he is is the shaking hand wrapped, tense, around his opposite elbow. His eyes are red-rimmed, and Leorio doesn’t understand. He doesn’t get it. Why does Kurapika look so heartbroken? Why does Kurapika look like he’s just been broken up with? Leorio asking him out isn’t the end of the world, even with as awkward as the conversation was. And then Leorio shakes himself. There are more important things at hand here. It’s... probably not Leorio he’s worried about at all, it’s the boys. It’s not about him, Leorio reminds himself.

Gently, Leorio asks, “Shouldn’t we both go? Cover more ground?”

For a moment, Kurapika wavers. Then he shakes his head, blond hair fanning out behind the graceful motion, a swing of his barely concealed carmine earring. Leorio wants- “No, just stay here in case one of them comes back.”

He gathers his screaming thoughts. One step at a time. Might as well try to clear the air. He knows that Leorio’s still going to be his friend, right? He knows this isn’t the end of everything, doesn’t he? “Hey, Kurapika about earlier.”

Leorio doesn’t get any further.

“We can talk about it at another time, Leorio,” Kurapika cuts him off, curt.

“But.”

“Another. Time.”

The tableau holds for a beat, Kurapika looking somewhere left of Leorio’s shoulder, but statuesque in his stillness. Then, with a rush of air, a startling suddenness, Kurapika ducks around him and leaves, the hotel door clicking shut behind him, leaving Leorio standing, hand unconsciously outstretched.

It clenches into a fist.

Leorio is reminded of a window shattering. A few cracks propagating outward before, all at once, it
With a long, heavy sigh, Leorio sinks onto the bed. He rubs his hands across his face, letting the friction and pressure ground his clamoring mind. What should he do? What can he do? Gon and Killua are somewhere, hopefully in the hotel, though Leorio isn't holding onto that much hope. Kurapika has gone after them, and he isn't even really speaking to Leorio right now. Somewhere, Illumi and Hisoka wait and send a straight clench into his gut. So many points for him to spiral around, and here, alone in his room, Leorio lowers his face to his hands and surrenders himself to the tear-hot wash of panic.

What can he do? Why did he have to mess everything up? If he had just kept his damn mouth shut, he and Kurapika wouldn't be on the outs right now. He could still have that, at least. But no, he had to make himself important and put himself before the needs of his friends and-

What can he do?

When the door opens an untold amount of time later, Leorio has just enough time to scrub his face free of any tears (and snot; look, he's not a clean crier, okay? Don't judge) before he looks up to meet Gon's shattered brown eyes. Within the space of a breath, Leorio boxes all of his shit back up. From the heartache to the worry, piece by piece, he sweeps it into a corner of his mind and firmly closes the door behind it. Now isn't the time. He's had his moment to panic. Now, though. Gon needs him, and needs him to be a solid rock to stand on.

“Any luck finding him?” Leorio asks, and both he and Gon pretend to not hear how rough his voice is.

Wordlessly, Gon shakes his head. His lip trembles, and he makes several aborted motions, attempts at beginning some kind of explanation that never comes to fruition.

Sighing, Leorio opens his arms. “C'mere, kid.”

Gon crumples into him.

It's nothing as easy as crying. Gon just sits cradled in Leorio's arms and shakes, hands fist ed tightly in Leorio's button-up. Leorio makes quiet, soothing noises, shushes and clucks that are probably more suited to using for baby animals than a teenager, but Gon doesn't seem to mind, pressing closer and closer until Leorio laughs once, short, hand caught in the short, dark hair at Gon's nape. “Gon, if you try to get any closer, you're going to merge us into one person.”

Gon sniffles. Okay, so maybe some tears, then. “S'worth it. Wouldn't have to deal with any of this.”

“I'm still here dealing with it.”

“Yeah, but I could drive.”

Leorio snorts, hunching to press a kiss to Gon's temple. “Cute, kid, but I don't think that'd solve this.”

“No, but. When Killua asked if I could come see him, I could've gone,” Gon mutters, and Leorio lets out a long sigh. “And when he stopped responding to any of my messages, I could've hopped into the car and made sure he was okay.”

“Wasn't he on his way here by then?”
Slowly, Gon shakes his head, forehead still pressed hard against Leorio's shoulder so it ends up in an odd pendulum motion. “No. Not for the first bit, at least.”

Ah. Crux of the problem: Unresolved argument that has now festered into uncommunicated resentment. Doctor's diagnosis done. Now time to prescribe some treatment. Leorio pats Gon on the back of the head. “Have you gotten to talk to him about it yet?” he asks, already knowing what the answer is going to be.

Gon shakes his head again, sheepish this time.

“Maybe, just maybe, you should try talking to him without yelling.”

“But-” Gon cuts himself off, sitting bolt upright. “But his family! He never said he was in enough trouble for-”

“Gon, I don't think this reaction is very helpful to Killua right now,” Leorio interjects gently. “He's in some tough shit from their end of stuff. He doesn't need any of that from you too, now does he? The interrogation can wait for him to feel better, or it can wait for whenever he wants to talk about it. For now, what you need to do is just let him come to you, okay? Give him some space. He's probably worrying a lot. He might think you're mad at him, not just worried.”

Gon scowls, picking himself out of Leorio's lap finally. His poor legs. The kid is still small, but he's more densely packed with muscle than Leorio really gives him credit for. “I don't think that'll work.”

God save him from stubborn teenagers. “Are you going to listen to me and try it anyway?”

Just then, the door opens.

Killua steps inside.

Gon looks at him, wide-eyed, then suddenly jerks his gaze away, turning his back to Killua.

Oh boy. Leorio can see the exact moment where this plan of Gon's goes wrong. Killua, red-eyed, tear tracks visible on his face, flinches. After a moment of terrible stillness, he just breathes in, mouth pressed into a firm, unhappy line. He opens his mouth, closes it, then shakes his head, white hair flying around his face, and Leorio can hear him grit his teeth from all the way across the room. Damn. He tries to get Gon's attention, to get him to at least greet Killua, to say something, because “give him some space” doesn't mean “ignore him” but there Gon is anyway! Damn it!

But it's too late now.

The damage has been done.

“Fuck this, I'm going to bed,” Killua says tightly.

Gon remains facing pointedly away. When Killua does exactly what he said he was going to, Gon looks at Leorio as if to say, “See?” and Leorio just feels his mouth flattening out. Sure, Killua isn't going to be the one who starts this conversation, especially when Gon is practically broadcasting signs that he doesn't want to talk. But that, to Gon, makes the lack of effort Killua's fault and-

He's way too old for this bullshit, Leorio thinks, rubbing his face with his hands. It's barely even nine o'clock and they haven't had dinner yet, but Leorio sure as shit isn't bringing that up. Instead, he just watches Killua lie down on the bed, tucking himself under the sheets, turning away from Gon, watches again as Gon mirrors the actions and turns off the light, leaving Leorio alone with his thoughts. And no good way to really distract himself from them, either. Leorio would sigh, but even
that edges too close to breaking down the hastily constructed front over the bullshit emotional whirlwind within.

The silence is unbearable.

And Kurapika is nowhere to be found.

Yellow light spills into the dark room as the door creaks quietly open. Leorio, reclining on the bed, sits up to watch Kurapika catch the hotel door and ease it shut with gentle fingers. He clears his throat. Kurapika jolts, surprised, and for a long, expectant breath, Leorio and Kurapika only stare at each other. What an awful word, stare. It sounds so frail for what it really is, a charged gauging of intent as Kurapika's gray eyes dart between Leorio's. They don't blink, Leorio's breath is caught in his lungs, their air between them thick.

Then, finally, Kurapika drops his gaze.

The air returns.

Leorio breathes as Kurapika makes his way further into the room. Leaning over, Leorio turns on the lamp, almost missing the quiet “thanks,” the gesture gets from Kurapika, and says, “Hey, Kurapika, I was thinking... About earlier, I-”

That's as far as he gets, though. Kurapika cuts him off with a harsh sigh, one that rides too high to be anything short of frustrated, on the verge of tears, and Leorio-. Well, Leorio can't really parse that out. “Leorio, I said I didn't want to talk about it.”

“I'm just trying to- Ugh, would it kill you to listen for two seconds?” Leorio drags his hands through his hair, then sighs tightly, trying to force his rising irritation down. It's like fighting a tidal wave, but damn it, he tries. “Look. I only wanted to tell you that I'm not going to make a big deal-”

Kurapika cuts him off. “Leorio. I am so tired. I-. I just want to lay down. Please.”

Leorio looks up at him and suddenly notices almost delicate way Kurapika holds himself. His arm is crossed across his chest, fingers white-knuckled where they wrap around his other bicep, and he isn't even looking at Leorio. His lips are pressed thin. He looks. Well, he looks exhausted. Kurapika's eyes are still slightly swollen, the dark circles beneath them like purple sweeps, like the curve Leorio's finger would make against that soft skin, and he really, really shouldn't be thinking like this.

“I...” Okay. Okay, Leorio thinks, rubbing his face and feeling the rasp of stubble against his palms. Okay. Not the best time for this conversation still, apparently, and Kurapika does look exhausted. It's not important enough for him to push right now, not with Killua and Gon on the next bed over, and so Leorio nods. “Okay. Sorry. Just. Later, okay?”

“Later,” Kurapika agrees, dull. He lies down, pulling the covers over his shoulders.

Leorio doesn't even have the heart to mention that Kurapika hasn't changed into his pajamas. Instead, he just rubs his face with his hands again and lets out a slow, quiet sigh. The hotel room air is chilly on his skin. Tiredness aches on the back of his eyes, in his joints. In the quiet thud of his aching heart.
Leorio is still awake when the sound of a low cry echoes across the space between two beds, and honestly, he’s out of the bed before any amount of conscious thought really comes into play. Killua lets himself be pulled up, physically, out of the dream, which is an honest surprise, but one Leorio appreciates. It’s easier to comfort people when hugs are involved, after all.

“Shh, kid,” he murmurs into the soft crown of Killua’s hair. He rubs the stiff, unyielding line of Killua’s tense shoulders and back, uncoordinated from lack of sleep. “Shh, it’s okay. You’re okay. It was just a dream.”

He repeats that over and over while Killua says nothing and does nothing but breathe shakily into the space between his face and Leorio’s neck. Finally, inch by contentious, terrible inch, he recovers, subsides, his exhales stabilizing and spacing out. Hands fist in Leorio’s shirt before gently pushing him away. Leorio lets go in degrees. Killua’s face is shadowed, impossible to see fully in the dimness of the room. Even so, he can make out the wet shine of tears, the tremble in the limbs against him. Leorio frowns.

“You think you'll be able to go back to sleep?”

Killua shakes his head.

Leorio looks at Gon’s sleeping form and pats Killua on the shoulder. “C’mon, kid, let's take this outside.”

The space seems like it helps Killua breathe a little easier, Rapid City’s cool night air and easy breeze wicking away the sweat beading on Killua’s brow and exposed shoulders. Leorio is content to sit in silence on the bench outside the front door of their hotel, letting nothing but air pass between them, and with every passing moment of silence, Killua relaxes just that much more. Leorio does, in fact, know when to not press for details, and Killua’s raised hackles are a constant red warning, cooling slowly to orange, then yellow as they sit outside the hotel, watching the road beyond the shine of the parking lot's lights. The wind shifts in the trees. Killua threads his fingers together.

Quietly, he says, “You know, if I had shown up a day later, I wouldn't even be here right now.”

Leorio hums. “Hm. Yeah, I guess that's true.”

“….Do you ever think... that some things are just fate?”

That makes Leorio snort, and he shifts from staring at the vague, inky darkness beyond the light to examine the thin-lipped press of Killua's mouth, his downcast eyes. The whole picture of him, fingers steepled, shoulders spread. Young and awkward with his own growing limbs. Unknowable.

“What, unchanging? Like, immovable points that you can't do anything about?”

“Yeah.”

“No, not really.” Leorio sighs, stretches. The bench outside a hotel is honestly not the best place for this, and (Leorio checks his phone, then winces) three A.M. exhaustion doesn't exactly lend itself well to deep conversations either, Leorio's words full of cotton and sleep, but he muddles through as best he can regardless. “I think life sets you on a course, but where exactly you go from there is half determined by you, and half determined by your environment. Some things you can change. Some things, you can't change, but you can always choose how you react to them. What choices you make. It's all up to you.”
Killua makes a noncommittal sound.

And that, for a while, is that.

Leorio drifts there, in the distant sound of cars occasionally driving by, the hum of electronics ever present, the tapping of Killua's fingers against the wooden bench as he shifts and sighs and thinks. He wishes he knew what to say. Leorio wishes he knew the perfect words to dispel Killua's fear and doubt, because there is no doubt that it's fear or uncertainty that's keeping Killua from making whatever decision he needs to make. If there was just a certain, set conversational path for him to follow instead of this mired swamp. If only life was like a dating simulator, he thinks, wishing he could reload a previous save to avert the disaster of this evening.

Finally, Killua speaks, breaking their strange silence. “Way to sound like a fortune cookie, old man. Do you do anything but worry about other people?”

Leorio snorts. “Excuse the fuck out of you, I do plenty. I'm just a pro at multitasking, so I can worry in double time. Which means I can worry about you and worry about myself and not lose any available moment.”

That, at least, gets the faintest suggestion of a grin out of Killua, who shakes his head. He examines his fingers, latticed as they are in front of him, for a long moment before letting out a long sigh. “Just go back inside, Leorio. I'm gonna... go get a drink or something from the vending machine and then I'll be back in, alright?”

“Alright, kid,” Leorio says. He levers himself upright, scratching at the back of his neck as he yawns. His heart isn't totally settled yet, but Leorio knows himself enough to know that he is in fact a pro-worrier, and left alone to his own devices, he'll just have to wait it out. “See you in the morning. Don't stay out too late.”

It isn't until the door is swinging shut behind him that Killua speaks up again, quietly. His words are almost lost to the silence of the hallway, but Leorio catches them just in time. “Yeah, see you.”

And that is that.

Leorio lets the door close behind him. Exhaustion is a familiar companion by now, but even so, he doesn't welcome its familiar, dragging clutches. It makes the journey up to the room long, longer than he really wants, lengthening everything with long, purple tinged sideways presses, like old video glitches. Numbly, he gets to their room, opens the door. He goes to the bed with dragging steps in bare feet, the short carpet scratching as he does, and it's only when he sits down on the mattress that he really lets himself look at the blanket-covered line of Kurapika's back.

At Kurapika in general, who has hardly said anything to Leorio directly since...

Well, since Leorio fucked everything up, essentially.

He is faced away from Leorio, blond hair a desaturated gray in the dark of the room, fanned out across the pillow. A quick look confirms what Leorio already knew, Kurapika's earring resting innocently on the bedside table. It's dull and dark. Looking at it, remembering the heat of Kurapika's skin lingering in it makes Leorio's gut twist. He doesn't- He doesn't like that. Doesn't like thinking that... he lost the chance he might have had. Did he really read everything wrong?

Did he really even think about what else Kurapika's reaction could have even been?
Of course Leorio was turned down. Kurapika probably didn't like him like that in the first place, and Leorio hasn't yet been able to explain that it wasn't just because Gon's question, the entire conversation that Kurapika overheard, had set Leorio's mental wheels spinning. Like, sure, Leorio likes women, but Leorio isn't straight. He hasn't been his whole life, so he wouldn't just... use Kurapika's proximity and admittedly less traditionally masculine features as some sort of excuse or something. Leorio likes Kurapika.

Zepile wasn't lying when he told Leorio that the warmth and affection he feels for Kurapika isn't new. Because. They're not. Leorio has, since that first meeting where Kurapika stared him down with gray-eyed fury across an old study table in a library, since they spent thirty minutes yelling at each other and proceeded to repeat that experience daily for weeks, since the first time Leorio saw a smile light the lovely curves of Kurapika's mouth and face, always liked him. He likes Kurapika's fire, his strict adherence to his own path. Sure, he vocally appreciates women more frequently than he does anything else, but that's... complicated.

(As complicated as the throb of a pair of old scar-silver knife wounds, one low on his hip and the other high on his bicep, earned defending himself and Pietro from some pretty fucked up slurs getting tossed at them back in high school. Safer, afterward, to be loud and unquestioned.)

Kurapika doesn't... really think that Leorio is the type of person to be that shitty towards him, does he?

Maybe he does.

Gingerly, he arranges himself beneath the sheets, trying not to tug at the blanket, not to disturb whatever rest Kurapika is getting, or pretending that he's getting. It's hard, harder than it has any right to be. Leorio won't wake up tomorrow morning with Kurapika cradled to his chest. He just won't. Not after his disastrous rejection. But still, Leorio wants. Wants in complicated, unknowable ways, wants so much that finding only one thing to do, one aspect to focus on, is impossible.

If he can just...

Reach out.

Maybe curl his hand in the hem of Kurapika's shirt, where the fabric has caught up a bit of Kurapika's body heat, soft and warm. Maybe that will be enough to settle the drive in Leorio's skin.

Maybe it will have to be enough.

Leorio closes his eyes, curled onto his side like a sad, unmirrored parenthesis. His hand tightens around the worn fabric of Kurapika's shirt as he selfishly allows himself this one thing, this single point of negligible not-quite-contact.

And then, in his sleep, pretend or otherwise, Kurapika shifts back.

Enough that Leorio's knuckles barely touch his skin. But even that small bit is electrifying. Leorio clamps down on himself, forcing himself to stay still, to not twitch or give away anything that could make Kurapika move again. It's grounding, like gravity, like a charge that Leorio didn't know he had built up is sucked out through that single, small point of contact, and that, pathetically, is all it takes for Leorio's heart to slow. To quiet its heavy beating to where it won't choke him anymore.

It will have to be enough.

Chapter End Notes
Content warnings: attempts at gaslighting, reference to abusive situations / behaviors, reference to withholding medical treatment in exchange for behaviors, Illumi and Hisoka Generally Existing in the same sphere as Gon and Killua, non-explicit panic attack, reference to past dealings with homophobic behaviors.
Don't Tell Me to Not Go (i must)

Chapter Summary

Leorio has to keep checking to make sure he's not speeding too egregiously. Most police officers probably won't accept trying to kidnap a kid from his abusive family as a good excuse for breaking speed limit, no matter how Leorio feels about it.

Chapter Notes

See look, right near the end of august, just like i said.

Alright, so not much new here, extended and continued thanks for supporting me all this time! If you want to know other ways to support me, check out my tumblr and definitely consider reblogging the post I made for this fic. Tag visibility is completely nonexistent on good ol tungle these days, so those reblogs really help get this fic out there for new people, and I deeply appreciate it.

Look for the next chapter near the end of September! I have some hopeful job prospects on the horizon and things might end up a bit delayed if that's the case.

Not much else to be said for this chapter. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter Title from "Water Lily" by Illion.

“Leorio!”

A hand on his shoulder, shaking roughly.

“Leorio, come on! You have to wake up! Leorio! Leorio, please!”

Fuck, fuck, fine, he's waking up, okay? Damn! A little patience would be great, Leorio thinks before the reality of what's actually happening hits him. He struggles upright, uncoordinated as he pulls the comforter from his flailing arms, and Leorio squints at Gon in the relative dimness of the hotel room. And he sees. Tears, streaking down Gon's cheeks, his mouth curved into a distressed bow, and Leorio reaches out to – to grab him, ground him, somehow calm the frenetic energy jolting through Gon's frame. “What? Gon, what's-”

“He's gone,” Gon sobs. “Killua isn't here. He left and I don't know- I don't know what to do or where he went or how long he's been gone, but Leorio, Killua's gone!”

And Leorio looks over the room. There is one less bag, Killua's backpack conspicuously missing in the midst of everyone else's belongings. He himself is nowhere to be found. According to the clock by the bedside, it's barely even ten in the morning, and Leorio had talked to him last about seven hours ago and shit, Leorio had just left him there alone while Killua probably talked himself into leaving. Fuck. A white static crashes through Leorio's body. He is subsumed by it, gigantic and
overwhelming as it lights up every nook and cranny, because this?

This is all his fault.

Leorio sat by and let Killua go back to an abusive household and he could have stopped it from happening if he had just fucking been paying attention to something else besides his own heartache for two goddamned seconds.

Fuck.

Frantic searching turns up nothing. There's no sign of Killua. The front desk can confirm that one of them saw him leave, but they don't remember when or what direction they took. (They also, helpfully, remind Leorio that he has to check out by eleven today, because why the fuck not have that on top of everything too? Hotel staff: super helpful at the best times, full sarcasm.)

As Kurapika helps them look, Gon tries calling Killua's phone.

And again, when it rings to voicemail.

And again, when he gets cut off.

That, finally, cuts Gon's strings. He sits on the edge of the bed, staring down, numb, eyes distant, until Leorio comes over and sits next to him, slowly rubbing his back. “Hey kid,” Leorio says, gentle, as gentle as he can manage past the panic still clogging him, “What'cha thinking?”

Gon shakes his head. “I don't know. I just don't know what to do.”

“What do you want to do?” Leorio asks. He doesn't stop rubbing Gon's back. The repetitive motion serves a dual purpose of calming the both of them down, grounding Leorio so he doesn't get up and start pacing through this. Again.

“I.” Gon cuts himself off, shaking his head as he draws his knees up, hugging them to his chest. “I don't want Killua to go home.”

A snort from Kurapika. “Little late for that.”

Leorio snaps a glare up at him and is viciously satisfied to see Kurapika already looking ashamed of himself, mouth twisted to the side.

“I can't leave him there,” Gon says into the space between his legs. “I can't leave him there, not with how his family treats him, Leorio.”

Kurapika makes a noise that Leorio isn't sure how to classify, his arms pressed tight against his chest, stiff and uncomfortable. “Apparently, Killua is willing to risk it for his sister.”

Gon lifts his face from the safe haven of his arms, tear-soaked and red. “Then I'm not leaving her there either.”

Leorio opens his mouth, takes a good long look at the determination on Gon's face, then sighs. “I can't believe I'm going to end up going to jail for kidnapping two minors before I even get into med school.”

“Give yourself some credit,” Kurapika interjects. Leorio is about to get angry at him when he
recognizes the faint trace of wry humor around Kurapika's words. Teasing this time, then. “You have gotten into medical school. You just haven't started attending yet. Completely different. Still kidnapping though.”

“So we're going after him then?”

Gon nods. Then frowns. “I mean, if you two wanted to go somewhere else, that'd be fine. I'm not coming back without Killua, but-”

“Nope, nope, not happening.” Even the idea is completely ludicrous. The denial comes instinctively from a place deep inside Leorio without even a moment of hesitation. Leorio reaches over, scruffling Gon's hair until it's a mess. Well, more of a mess than usual. “No way in hell am I letting you take the Greyhound alone to Killua's family's probable murderhouse.”

“Killua took it and was just fine.”

“Killua's family runs a murderhouse, so it's whatever for him.” Leorio waves off both Gon and Kurapika's worried and exasperated (respectively) expressions. Then he grasps Gon firmly by the shoulders, hunching just a bit to look Gon directly in the eyes before asking seriously, “Look, okay, do you have his address?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Then we go after him, just like you want to. End of story, little cousin.”

Kurapika chooses that moment, when Leorio has finally begun to clear the lingering panicked air around Gon and he starts relaxing, to say, “Even if he doesn't want to be found? Or brought back? It was his own choice to leave, you know.”

Oh for fuck's sake. What the hell crawled up Kurapika's ass and died today? Leorio doesn't give himself time to second guess his words, the rush of anger too sudden to do anything except weather it. “Well, if you're fine leaving a kid to the hands of his stalker-abusive family, by all means, I can leave you enough money to get yourself a flight home.”

And there's that out in the open too.

The option for Kurapika to just... leave, and Leorio just threw it out like it doesn't mean anything, like he isn't afraid to come back to Mito's house and find it empty of Kurapika's presence, to be drifting and more distant, passing silently at the campus except to make awkward eye contact. The option, right here and now, to leave and let Leorio know that his affections can be scabbed over in Kurapika's absence.

Kurapika, surprisingly, looks shocked at the offer, and he shakes his head jerkily after a moment. “No, that's-.”

Nothing Leorio really wants to hear right now. He jerks his chin roughly at Kurapika's bag. “Then shut up and get packed already.”

“.... Fine.”

“He's still not answering,” Gon says into the tense silence that follows, throwing his phone on his bed before he starts shoving spare pieces of clothing haphazardly into his suitcase. Leorio can see his hands shaking from here, and he frowns. Gon lets out a heavy breath, looking around with a determined set to his mouth, and nods. “That's all my stuff. Can we-”
A vibration. Two short buzzes, muffled by the bedspread.

All eyes snap to Gon's phone.

Gon grabs it, types in his passcode as fast as his trembling fingers will allow. Leorio doesn't look over his shoulder; he won't invade Gon's privacy like that, but he does stick close, watching the play of emotion on Gon's face carefully. Gon sucks in a tight breath.

“What is it?” Leorio asks.

“It's Killua. He says-” and Gon shakes his head, like he can dispel what he's read by the motion alone. “He says, “Thanks for having me along. It was fun. Goodbye.” I don't...” Gon fades into silence, though his fingers are already furiously tapping out a message in response, brows drawn together, determined.

Leorio nods, standing in a burst of movement. “Okay, you text him back. See if you can get him talking. Kurapika, finish up packing while I check us out, okay? Meet me downstairs as soon as you're done.”

Ten minutes later, they're on the road, the bright midday sun turning the highway into long, tan stretches of asphalt, and Leorio has to keep checking to make sure he's not speeding too egregiously. Most police officers probably won't accept trying to kidnap a kid from his abusive family as a good excuse for breaking speed limit, no matter how Leorio feels about it. Gon's foot taps constantly in the back, a quiet drumming that only heightens Leorio's own anxious twitching, but he can't bring himself to tell Gon to stop. Gon is direct. He solves his problems shortly, quickly, and the necessary delay in all of this is probably driving him nuts, the poor kid. Leorio should have never left Killua outside alone. This could have all been avoided if he had just... paid more attention.

Damn it.

“Leorio, speed,” Kurapika says, and Leorio curses under his breath before slowing back down to a more respectable five-over.

“I'm getting Killua out of his house.”

At Gon's serious voice, Leorio flicks his gaze to the mirror, getting a good glimpse of the determined set of Gon's face. Welp. The avalanche has made up its mind which way down the mountain it's going.

“I can't-, I won't just leave him there. He left because he needed to before, and he came to see me. I won't let him down, not when he came to me.” Gon frowns. “I won't let this end with a fight between us. I... Killua's my friend. He deserves to know that he isn't alone.”

“If Killua left of his own accord,” Kurapika says, eyes downturned and unfocused, “then there really isn't much for us to do, is there? He's going home, and if he wants to stay there, there's nothing you can do about it.”

Gon makes a frustrated noise. “You don't understand how they treat him there! I'm not going to just let him-”

Mildly, Kurapika interrupts. He does not move his gaze from the loose clutch of his fingers, the bright phone screen within. “You seemed content enough to let him do whatever he wanted to
yesterday.”
Gon freezes.

Yikes. “Okay, Kurapika, focus on navigating me, not on being a dick to Gon.”

The mood in the car goes from tense to fucking icy in no time flat as Kurapika lifts his gaze to stare at the side of Leorio’s face, coldly furious. No words come out of his mouth, and Kurapika very pointedly turns his back on them, tilting to look out the window at the passing scenery. Leorio sighs, quiet. Okay, so Leorio’s temper isn’t the best either. And he probably shouldn’t have snapped at Kurapika, but fuck it. Everything’s already gone to shit. He might as well heap it on.

“Sorry,” Gon murmurs from the backseat. He doesn't sound sorry, he just sounds mullish and upset, but Leorio's beyond caring at this point.


Gon nods, firm. “Right.”

It's mid-afternoon when they finally stop because Leorio is too hungry to keep driving. It's quick and easy meals, McDonald's drive-thru bullshit at the first place in Wyoming that has one that Leorio scarfs down in a nearby parking spot, but even Gon's obvious impatience can't get Leorio to eat so fast he chokes, damn it. Every few minutes or so, Gon tries calling Killua again, but his phone rings, again and again, into silence.

“Leorio.”

It's the first thing Kurapika has said for hours. Leorio pauses in draining a ketchup packet directly into his mouth to blink at him curiously.

Kurapika's mouth is pressed in a thin line, but the angle of his shoulders is upset, not defensive. “I'm sorry. About earlier.”

“S'not me you gotta apologize to,” Leorio says, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

“I'm sorry to you, too, Gon. I shouldn't have snapped like that.”

Gon shrugs. “It's okay, Kurapika. I forgive you. Can we start driving now?”

“I'm not-”

Kurapika interrupts. “I can drive. You, you've been driving so much. I can take over until you feel up for driving again.”

Eying him warily, hamburger hanging half out of his mouth, Leorio squints. “You sure?”

“Positive.”

Well shit, alright then. Leorio isn’t about to argue too much about a chance to rest his eyes, so he lets Kurapika trade him seats, pushing the passenger side back as far as it can go and laying the seat down to get a little rest once he's done eating. Kurapika pulls back onto the highway and starts them back on Killua's probable trail.
The hum of the road surrounds them. Leorio finds himself drifting easily there, in the warm space between thought and dreams. A bare half-hour out of town, food happily processing in his stomach, Leorio takes stock of everyone. Kurapika seems clear-eyed, still, though rigid, but Gon has finally managed to fall asleep. Poor kid probably ran out of batteries. He needs his rest.

Leorio looks at the tense, straight-armed form of Kurapika in the driver's seat and his heart clenches. “Kurapika...” Leorio sighs, rolling over. “Are you okay?”

“When I said that we should talk another time, this isn't what I meant.” Kurapika's mouth flattens. “I'm not going to have this conversation in a car where Gon could overhear us.”

A bright spark of anger flares, pushing up, burning from his lungs to his esophagus, and Leorio exhales loudly just to push it out, the stop the crowd of words flooding his throat. There are so many things he could say to that, all of them varying levels of angry, and he knows that he'd be justified in snapping out about half of them and could make a strong case for the other half. Instead, he holds back, limiting himself to a terse, “I wasn't planning on having some intense conversation, though the fact that you thought so now kinda makes me want to. I just asked if you were okay.”

“I...” Kurapika sighs, rubbing his face with one hand, the other braced firmly on the steering wheel. “Yes, I'm alright. Thank you, for asking.”

“You know you can talk to me if you need anything.”

“...yes, I know.”

And Kurapika keeps driving as Gon rouses again in the back seat, tapping at his phone to hear the shrill ring, ring, ring, silence, again and again as the miles fly by. The lack of response never deters Gon. Every half hour or so, he wakes up and pulls out his phone to try again, to check the messages he gets (or doesn't), and it becomes so much habit that Leorio drifts in and out to it, marking the passage of time by the rustle of clothes and that ringing in the backseat.

Until.

It's cut short.

The oddity has Leorio waking and paying attention before he's fully cottoned onto what's happening, but Gon's excited, hopeful shout would have gotten him next if he hadn't. “Killua? Killua, it's-”

And Gon freezes. Extends the phone out and presses the speaker button.

“-who you are, Gon Freecs, and I think it is time you ceased contacting my brother,” Illumi says, mild, threatening all the same. “He has made his choice.”

Gon's hand clenches hard enough that his knuckles whiten. “I don't want to talk to you. Put Killua on.”

“I don't care.”

“Let me talk to Killua.”

Illumi, calm -seriously, is there ever a time where this guy isn't doll-like in his fucking unflappable-ness? It's bullshit- says only, “No.”

“Illumi. Let me talk to Killua. Now.”
An aggravated sigh. “Asking more than once isn't going to change anything. Killua has decided, as he should, to come home where he belongs instead of haring off with you. He knows, as he always has, that his family is the best place for him, that we will love and support him, no matter what, unlike you.”

“You don't get to say how I feel about him,” Gon says, cold.

“Someone who cared wouldn't have fought with him. I understand him in ways you can never dream of. Killua is mine, the family's, and we are never letting him go. We never let him go the first time, not truly. And I'm sure he said he had fun with you all, but it's time for him to put such childish things behind him.”

“He's only sixteen,” Leorio growls. “He's has plenty of time to be a kid still.”

For a moment, there is only silence.

“Killua will not,” Illumi says, “now or ever, go back with you. He made his choice, and his choice was to come home and stay there. His good behavior for Alluka's treatment. He'll be happy here. Happier than he ever was with you. Even if he isn't completely content right now, he'll suffer anything for his sister, which will lead him to sacrifice for the rest of his family too. Killua's very smart and very good at learning what he needs to know. He won't make this mistake of trusting someone outside of the family again. So hear me now:

“Don't come near Killua ever again. I will make him regret it before I even lay a finger on him. You all, however, make excellent targets.”

A dial tone.

With shaking hands, Gon lowers the phone to his lap.

“Hold on,” Kurapika says. “I need to-”

He whips around an eighteen-wheeler blocking their way and floors it, zipping Paladin's protesting bulk down the highway. He's grumbling under his breath, furious, and somehow, Kurapika's anger makes this easier to bear. Easier for Leorio to reach into the back and fumble for one of Gon's clenched hands, to unwrap his fingers and thread them between his and squeeze until Gon looks less stony, less blank.

Brown eyes lift to his, and Leorio offers Gon a faint smile. “We're going to get him back. Come hell or high water.”

Gon nods. Once, then again, firmly, because an avalanche doesn't stop for the trees in its way, and Gon's mind will not be so easily swayed.

It's late, the sun having long since set, by the time Kurapika pulls over into a well-lit gas station outside of Wells, Nevada and rubs his eyes. “That's as much as I can do for right now,” he says with a yawn. “Leorio-”

“Yeah, I'll take over. Fill up and bathroom break for right now, okay?” Hopping out of the car, Leorio puts one hand to the small of his back and straightens, feeling his spine shift in ways it really shouldn't, given that he's only barely twenty-three. He takes out his wallet, passes Kurapika his card, before he starts heading inside. “I'll be right back.”
A quick trip to the bathroom later, Leorio comes out, rubbing still slightly damp hands on his pants, and stares at the florescent lit rows of candy and drinks. Something caffeinated can't go awry. He nabs a Pepsi and a small bag of honey roasted almonds and some jerky too, chewy things to keep him awake, and digs a couple of spare bills out of his pocket. The cashier rings him up, Leorio's eyes dart to the wall behind the tired worker, and he's saying “And a pack of the Camel Wides, please,” while grabbing a cheap lighter and putting it on the counter too.

The cashier doesn't even blink an eye. Of course not.

But Leorio feels a twinned sense of guilt and “fuck it” that leads him outside, with his bag of actual goods hanging from his wrist as he drags the lighter and a single cigarette out of the bag. A careful flick, a gentle spark, and Leorio brings the cigarette up to his lips and takes a deep drag, letting the nicotine and mild oxygen deprivation calm the frantic churn of his stomach. It's disgusting, the way it always is, but a familiar kind of gross. Leorio only wishes that gas stations sold clove cigarettes. He could use something sweet smelling right now.

There's a step on pavement, and Kurapika approaches him, head tilted. He offers Leorio's card to him silently, and Leorio takes it, shoves it back into his wallet. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Kurapika watch him. His expression is impassive, curious without passing judgment.

“I thought you quit smoking,” he says.

Leorio shrugs, exhaling in a plume of fragrant smoke. “I did. But it -this, this whole-” and he waves as though he can somehow encompass all of the relevant bullshit in their current situation, “-everything. I mean, fuck. I needed a smoke.”

Kurapika says nothing, does nothing except to reach out and take the cigarette. Without changing expression, he puts it to his lips. The act of smoking seems oddly practiced for someone Leorio knows has never smoked before. Kurapika looks a bit pinched around the eyes when he goes to exhale, and Leorio hides his amused grin when Kurapika glares up at him and starts coughing. There it is. Kurapika may be good at fronting confidence through situations unknown, but even he has his tells. Somehow, right now, it's reassuring to see them. To see something familiar, when so much else is not.

Still. Leorio gestures at Kurapika's stolen cigarette. “Didn't take you for someone who'd smoke,” he says. Really, his self-restraint should be rewarded. He could have said any number of increasingly deprecating comments, and he managed to stay away from almost all of them.

“Well, it's not like it can kill me faster than anything else,” Kurapika replies, dry throated and still coughing.

Leorio blinks. “I. That. No, that's exactly what it does, actually.”

A snort. One, followed by the quick-stutter of a few more muffled ones, and then, like a warm, tinkling bell, Kurapika laughs. Leorio smiles, and then he, too is laughing. For a brief moment, everything feels like it's back to normal. The breeze picks up, lifting the blond strands of Kurapika's hair, and Leorio watches them fan out, and then the almost delicate way Kurapika tucks them behind his ear before going to smoke again. It's a futile gesture, really, since there's always more hair and the wind hasn't given up at all. Every time he gets one ear situated, the hair behind the other has tugged free.

Before thinking, Leorio reaches out and brushes the loose fall of Kurapika's soft, smooth hair back, tucking it behind the warm shell of his ear.
His red earring, caught in the wind, flutters against the heel of Leorio's hand.

Statuesque, Kurapika is frozen in place, staring up at Leorio who can only stare back.

“Hey,” Leorio murmurs, “we're... okay, right?”

Slowly, Kurapika blinks. Blond lashes dip against pale skin, lightly freckled from the sun. A flash of pink tongue, Kurapika wetting his lips, and then he brings the cigarette back up to his mouth. He turns his head to exhale, dislodging Leorio's hand, coughing again. “Yeah. We're alright, Leorio.”

Leorio's about to protest, when the filtered end of the cigarette is unceremoniously shove into his mouth. Reflexively, he closes his lips around it, breathing in smoke. Kurapika waves at him, turning to head inside.

“Hurry up and finish, Leorio. And stop smoking. It's bad for you.”

Well.

That was. The most anti-climatic conversation Leorio's ever had.

For a moment, Leorio honestly considers letting it go there. It would be easy, to let Kurapika retreat from this conversation the way he always does when he doesn't want to open up, but diverting the train of frustration from breaking out and saying something stupid apparently meant sacrificing the ability to resist making bad decisions for the rest of the night.

“Kurapika,” he calls out, bringing Kurapika's retreating footsteps to a halt. Leorio doesn't wait for Kurapika to turn or acknowledge him more than that. “You know we can't avoid talking about this forever.”

For a moment, it seems like Kurapika won't respond. Then, softly, “I thought me turning you down was clear enough, Leorio.”

Leorio sighs. He scrubs at the back of his neck, tries to figure the shapes of the words clogging his lungs. “I'm not going to try and convince you to give me a chance, if that's what you're thinking. I respect your decision. But we're still friends, and there are some things you said while turning me down that I'd like to clear up.”

“Like?”

“Like the fact that you think I'm not interested in men.”

Kurapika starts. He turns, staring at Leorio with wide gray eyes as Leorio takes another smooth inhale from his cigarette.

“Because,” Leorio says, his words shaking around the corners, in the uncertain, vulnerable tremble of his hands, “I feel like after-what, four years of knowing me?—you would know that I'm bi as shit.”

“I... You... What?”

“I'm bisexual as hell, Kurapika. I haven't made an active secret of that since before I knew you. I thought you knew, honestly.”

Kurapika's mouth opens, closes, his eyes darting around the steady contours of Leorio's face, which he makes sure to keep even and calm, squashing the slim ray of hope that maybe Kurapika's rejection was all a big misunderstanding. He can't get ahead of himself here. He can't make Kurapika feel like
he's being backed into a corner. Worst option, there. Catastrophic in proportion. Leorio just has to be patient and calm. Let Kurapika come to him.

(What, he can be both patient and calm, and even at the same time without hurting himself, thank you very much. He just. Doesn't bother most of the time when he's not out on rotation, because maintaining that kind of emotional labor for everyone in his life -not just his patients- is tantamount to suicide. And sometimes, people need someone to just cut through the bullshit instead of tiptoe around it.)

“I didn't,” Kurapika says. “Know, that is.”

That's not a surprise. Well, it kinda is, but given everything Kurapika said to him before, it shouldn't be. How Kurapika hadn't known is still a mystery, because he's one of the few people that Leorio has ever unclenched enough around to admit that a few guys here and there weren't so bad to look at. Leorio nods. “Guessed that much.”

“But this isn't-. This isn't the time or place. For this conversation. We can talk about it later, Leorio,” Kurapika says quietly.

“If I leave it up to you, later isn't ever going to come.”

Kurapika makes a sharp motion with his hand. “No, please. Just. Listen. Right now, this isn't important. What's important is finding Killua and getting him away from his family.” He stands between Leorio and the gas station, braced against an unseen force, the delicate bow of his lips pressed flat, chin angled defiantly up, as though he expects a fight. “We can talk about this after.”

Leorio searches his face. The determination, he expects. The defiance, the readiness for a fight, he doesn't. Perhaps he should. This last week only seems to be highlighting all the ways that Leorio doesn't actually know Kurapika. Perhaps they should have just stayed friends in the confines of their dusty study room. Perhaps Leorio should have never hoped for more.

(And yet. Still, still, Leorio can't bring himself to actually regret any of it, remembering the warmth of Kurapika's head on his shoulder, the glint of his eyes in the sunset, the poetry shared quietly between them.)

“Promise?” Leorio asks, suddenly, not caring that it's childish, that he's twenty-three and shouldn't need reassurances like a simple, easily discarded word. Because to him, it isn't easily discarded. Between him and Kurapika, it never has been. Kurapika always keeps his promises to Leorio. If he doesn't agree to the promise, all bets are off, but Kurapika has never bothered lying to him before. He'll evade and he'll lie afterward, but Kurapika doesn't make a promise with the intention of breaking it.

It hangs between them, heavy with their shared history and so many unspoken words.

“I promise,” Kurapika says, and then he heads inside.

He takes a deep, clear breath. Ruins it by raising the half-abandoned cigarette to his lips and breathing in again. Leorio lets out a long, final sigh of smoke and crushes the cigarette beneath his foot. He can't dare to let himself hope, but it swells up sweetly within him against his wishes, a faint light beating back the darkness.

Driving through the night is an experience unlike any other.
Driving late in cities is one thing, the constant orange pass of streetlights and the occasional car company enough, but out in the middle of nowhere? On the long stretches of highway? First, there are the late drivers, trying to get home. Then they fall off and there are only eighteen-wheelers, trundling their deliveries.

At some point, even they, too, take a break, and it's there Leorio just drives.

He isn't thinking of much beyond the destination, the quiet drone of Gon's phone hooked up to the speakers, and the Maps app telling him how many miles before his next turn off. Everyone else has fallen asleep. It's too dark now to keep busy in the car, and really, there isn't anything else to do except sleep and wait. Leorio's feeling alright, after all, even though the world seems to hardly exist past the white illumination of his headlights.

Luckily, or perhaps not, that small stretch of road isn't all he has to look at.

Kurapika is highlighted gently in the blue-green glow of the car’s center console. Leorio can’t do much more than sneak glances here and there, but he tries his damnedest to set it in his memory. Just the way Kurapika’s head is tilted over towards the window, arms tightly tucked against his body, blanket over his lap, pillow beneath his ear. The delicate fan of his hair and eyelashes against his skin, monochromatic and compelling in the late hour. His mouth is open gently, just the barest part, and Leorio feels something warm and solid lump in his chest, where his heart beats heavy and low.

Leorio looks away from the sight, turns his eyes back to the road, and keeps driving. The road stretches on, empty and dark in front of him. It is hard to breathe. Hard to resist the pull of strong emotion, strong enough that his throat closes against words he can't bring himself to say.

Turned low, the stereo murmurs into the night as Leorio drives across the barren middle of Nevada.

"-Cold pizza, tie-dye shirts, broken hearts, give ‘em here, give ‘em here."

Leorio can barely even hum along. His throat is too full with unnamed and unacknowledged feelings, and he knows he’s avoiding thinking about it too much right now. If he drops one hand from the wheel, laying it down in the passenger seat where it’s just close enough to touch Kurapika’s thigh on the outside of the blanket, well.

That’s no one’s business but his.

"-I don’t care (cold pizza) where you’ve been (tie-dye shirts), how many miles (broken hearts), I still love you.

"I don’t care (hand me downs) where you’ve been (leftovers), how many miles (sloppy seconds), I still love you....."

Dawn comes. In strident teals and pinks and yellows, arcing across the landscape, turning it from featureless black to distant red hills and prairie scrub. Leorio is more grateful than he can say that it's all happening at his back, because his eyes ache already without the added stress of direct sunlight. Finally, though, near the border of California, he pulls into a rest stop.

“Leorio?” Gon asks, sleepy.

“Need to get out and stretch my legs.” Also, he feels scummy and disgusting, but that's something that can't be fixed until they get somewhere he can shower and shave. Leorio knows his facial hair
has gotten past the “carefully scruffy” look he prefers going for, and he rubs his chin with hands half-numbed from the road's vibrations. Ugh.

“Thank goodness. I could use a break.” Kurapika stretches, his shirt lifting to expose the plane of his stomach, the soft golden hairs in a trail leading-

Leorio jerks his eyes back to the dashboard. Jesus. Self control, Leorio, have some, damn.

All of them exit and avail themselves of the bathroom, which doesn't take long. Leorio isn't surprised to find Gon sitting on the curb in front of the car by the time he's done, and he plops himself down in a tangle of limbs beside his little cousin. Gon has a surprisingly serious look on his face, watching the long stretch of highway before them.

(Leorio is reminded, uncomfortably, of another conversation with another sixteen year old, watching the road before them. At least this one he probably can't screw up nearly as bad.)

“What's eating you, kid?” he asks, jostling Gon gently.

Gon takes a moment to think about it, which is serious enough on its own. “Are Killua and I still friends?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Well,” Gon says, looking at his hands. “He didn't... trust me to talk about this? Like, any of it. His family, his sister. I knew things there weren't great, but he just brushed me off, and... I let him. And now we've fought, and, Leorio, we've never fought like this before. It's... between us, it's never been like this. So... is that why he left? Because he thinks we're not friends?”

Leorio lets out a long sigh. “I don't know if that's the case.”

“I do,” Gon says.

Okay, no. Leorio cuts that particular train of thought off at the pass. “Look, Gon, it's tough to understand, but. Sometimes, the people in your life are going to let you down. They're not going to understand what you need from them, for one reason or another. You're not going to communicate well, or they're not going to listen. You're going to make assumptions about each other, because you think know each other well enough that you don't need to ask. Assuming is easier than asking for clarification, and asking for clarification isn't something you see others do on television. On TV, you see people who need things spelled out as the butts of jokes.”

Gon's mouth is still set in a stubborn moue, though Leorio likes to think that he can see a little uncertainty bleed into his features. Something other than the high of Gon's righteous rigidity would be so wonderful.

“Your own feelings are complex. Other people are equally complex.” Leorio shrugs. “People are messy, Gon. And since your friend's been abused by his family-”

Ooh, fist clench. Yeah, Gon doesn't like the reminder there, but Leorio's already moving on.

“-then he's going to be messier than most. Killua has hidden potholes and speed traps. Things meant to protect him, yeah, but they're unexpected and devastating to run into.” Scrubbing the back of his neck, Leorio sighs. “Maybe a minefield would have been a better metaphor. Point is, you can't predict what's going to make him blow up, but, pro-tip, when he does blow up? Blaming the entire problem on him being selfish? Not the best plan.”
“I didn't-” Gon starts but cuts off when Leorio raises an eyebrow pointedly. He chews on his lower lip for a moment, then tries again. “I didn't mean to.”

Leorio pats him on the shoulder, sympathetic and grounding. “No, you didn't. But that doesn't change the fact that you did. Now you know better. Now you can try to not do it again.”

Gon nods. Then his face falls. “Assuming Killua ever talks to me again,” he says morosely.

“Kid, I hate to break it to you, but you're a very likeable sort of guy and Killua's very devoted. I'd be more surprised if he didn't talk to you.”

“But he hasn't been answering his phone.”

Snorting, Leorio shakes Gon gently with the hand still on his shoulder. “Big Brother's still right there, isn't he? Bet you Killua can't call.”

And then.

Shattering the moment with a shrill ring, Gon's phone goes off.

A cheerful jingle. They both flinch at the suddenness of the noise, one of Gon's many, many custom ringtones. Leorio thinks this one is from a game the two boys played together online all the time. Then Gon is scrambling for his phone desperately, clawing at his pants to get it free and Leorio has barely enough time to read-

Call from: Powderpuff BF

(Who the fuck? Gon names his friends the weirdest shit in his phone.)

But Gon's eyes light up and he presses the accept button as fast as his shaking fingers will allow, so clearly he knows who the fuck is calling him at -Leorio checks his watch- seven fucking thirty-ish in the morning.

“Killua!” Gon yells into the phone.

Oh shit. Leorio's eyebrows rocket up, and he leans back on the curb to look around for Kurapika, who has serendipitously exited the bathrooms and is headed their way, a curious tilt to his head.

“Killua! Where are you? Are you okay? Wha-” Gon stops, quiets just as Kurapika joins them, leaning over Leorio's shoulder. “Are you okay? Hm? I... okay?”

He lowers his phone and presses a button, putting Killua on speakerphone.

“Hey guys, sup, how are you doing? Great? Great, so, I'm gonna ask a quick, completely innocent and in no way related to my current situation question, okay?” Killua says, talking a mile per minute. “Out of curiosity, like, how close are you to Sacramento right now, and how soon would you be able to get here? Just. Y'know. Curious.”

Leorio checks the map already up on his phone, squinting. “Uh. About... half an hour?”

“Sweet,” Killua says, almost reflexively. Then Killua sputters. “Wait, half an hour? You do know I'm talking, like, Sacramento, California, right?”

“Yeah, I know?” Leorio scrunches his nose. For a moment, he didn't get why Killua sounded so surprised. Sure, they were making pretty good time, but it's not like Gon didn't know Killua's address. Then he realizes, and his tone gentles as he asks, “Killua, you didn't think we were just
going to let you disappear into the night without going after you, did you?"

There's silence from the other end of the line.

“Dumbass fucking kid, I swear to god.”

“Hey, you didn't have any reason to come get me. How was I supposed to know?”

“Except for liking you?”

“Ew, who does that?” Killua asks, faux-offended, but his fake laugh is trying to cover up the fact that
his voice is audibly choked up. He clears his throat before continuing. “But this actually really helps,
because I'm gonna need to be picked up before Illumi figures out I'm out of the house.”

Kurapika leans over Leorio's shoulder. Leorio tries to not think about it too much. “Wait, how did
you even end up in Sacramento? Your address is in San Francisco, isn't it?”

Killua makes an indistinct noise. “Yeah, look it's not that big of a deal, okay? I've used public transit
before, and it's no problem. But seriously, Illumi's gone on some overnight business venture. I don't
really want to think about it, and the timing is seriously lucky, but the sooner you get here, basically,
the better.”

“And Alluka?” Gon asks, and Leorio smiles, patting him approvingly on the back.

“Well, you know, there's nothing wrong with her big brother taking her on vacation. Dad already
knows and then he said to not worry about it. He's going to have a talk with Illumi, and that should
be it.”

Leorio's mouth skews sideways. “Just like that?”

There's a long static silence before Killua sighs, and in it, Leorio can finally hear how tired he is. Has
Killua even gotten a chance to sleep? He can't imagine the kid would feel comfortable enough to
sleep in a car with Illumi and possibly Hisoka. “No, probably not, but it's good enough for now.
Look, just-”

“Hey, don't worry yet, okay? We can talk about it when we get to wherever you are. Send Gon a pin
of your location and we'll be there as soon as we can. And Killua?”

“...Yeah?”

“Don't run off like that again, okay, brat? Scared me half to death. Answer your phone, you're as bad
as Kurapika.” He ignores the quiet, offended “Hey,” that gets him, and levers himself upright, one
hand on Gon's shoulder. “Come on, then. Let's go.”

Killua, voice small over the distance, calls, “Leorio?”

Leorio turns with a hum of acknowledgment, hoping that makes it all the way to the phone's
microphone.

“Thanks.”

“Don't mention it, kid. We'll be there soon.”
The Denny’s is quiet and low-lighted only in comparison to how bright it is outside. Immediately inside, Gon casts about, physically craning from side to side, his eyes darting here and there as he searches for Killua’s familiar cloud of white hair. Leorio scuttles fully in to pull him back, because the hapless server who has no idea what she’s getting into is just side-eyeing the fuck out of them.

Way to make a first impression, honestly.

Chapter Notes

/skids in half a month late with a longer chapter than usual, sup guys, also we broke 500 kudos and i'm in FUCKING AWE tbh because i never expected that!!!

So I was right and job stuff picked up! I have a new fulltime job, which does cut into my writing time a bit, so I'm going to hedge my bets and say to expect the next chapter in late November / early December!

Thank you all so much, as always, for your continued support. If this chapter gets a bit hard for you, I did post another side story to this that's set a bit later, after things get figured out. Also, I got some lovely fanart of Chapter 12 by zappychild on tumblr that you all should check out ♥

Also, Killua isn't going to say it because he doesn't feel like it's his place, but I will, because people can pry transgirl!Alluka from my cold, dead hands, but yeah, HRT is specifically the "treatment" that Illumi was referring to withholding from Alluka as punishment for Killua's behavior. Again, Zoldycks, not good people.

Chapter Title is from "Closer" by Tegan and Sara.

Leorio pulls into the restaurant Killua sent them to and stares balefully up at the sign. The bright yellow letters glare back, even at eight in the morning, and Leorio can’t help his reflexive distaste. “Why did it have to be a fucking Denny’s,” he mutters. “That kid is a walking meme.”

“Oh no,” Kurapika says with a sigh, pushing himself out of the car. “I’m not going to listen to your rant on how, cosmically, we will always end up at Denny’s when we least expect to. I’m just not.”

Leorio waves a finger at him, putting it down only to shift the car fully into park. “Hey, don’t sass me when I’m right. This is the fourth time it’s happened! He knows no one ever plans to go to Denny’s-“

“Yes yes, they just end up there. I remember. As I said,” and Kurapika leans back down through the open passenger door to raise an eyebrow at Leorio, “I’m just not going to listen to this for the sixth
“Shit.” Leorio scrambles out and up, catching a blur of green shorts and boots, the tail end of Gon running into the Denny’s. Fuck. Already this entire situation is getting messed up. “Come on, Kurapika, or we’re going to-”

“Don’t tell me to come on when you’re the one holding us up-”

“-miss everything and I gotta at least see-”

“-while you pontificate-”

“-Pontificate, are you serious, who says that,” Leorio bitches, wresting the door open.

The Denny’s is quiet and low-lighted only in comparison to how bright it is outside. Immediately inside, Gon casts about, physically craning from side to side, his eyes darting here and there as he searches for Killua’s familiar cloud of white hair. Leorio scuttles fully in to pull him back, because the hapless server who has no idea what she’s getting into is just side-eyeing the fuck out of them.

Way to make a first impression, honestly.

Leorio opens his mouth, ready to intercept when there’s a clatter from deeper in, the noise of a chair being hastily pushed back, then footsteps.

It’s Killua.

Running in the middle of a restaurant like an undisciplined heathen, and Leorio’s heart clenches, leaving him breathless with tangled relief; he can’t bring himself to even want to snap at the brat for running indoors. Especially with the desperation Leorio can see in Killua’s expression. Gon centers himself like a magnet suddenly pulled north. He takes one step, two, then he is running to meet Killua halfway, a strangled noise escaping him, all joy and wonder, a sharp, desperate sound.

They collide. Neither of them slows down to avoid it or mitigate it at all, instead slamming together with teeth-rattling force. The boys hold onto each other desperately, as though they had been separated for months, years, instead of barely a day.

Given the circumstances, Leorio can’t even poke fun at them for it. He turns his head, throat tight, and his eyes catch on Kurapika, who also watches the spectacle with an uncharacteristically open softness. His hand is covering the very slight smile on his face. Leorio sees it, sees the moment it wavers, and the quiet, steadying inhale before Kurapika bites his lip. Then, before Leorio can look away, he glances up. The unsteady motion of his mouth settles into another smile, different, softer. Kurapika nudges Leorio’s elbow and holds out a tissue that he pulled from God-knows-where.

“Shut up,” Leorio mutters, sniffling. He takes the damn tissue though.

“Sap.” But Kurapika nudges him, and the fond motion smooths over any bite the words contain.

Leorio’s mouth is, suddenly, very dry for reasons he doesn’t examine too closely.

He drags his eyes away from the pink curve of Kurapika’s mouth because Leorio has priorities. Damn it. He smiles apologetically at the server, who’s just watching this with the wide-eyed expression of someone who’s trying to determine if they’re getting paid enough this early in the morning to break this up.

“Sorry, they’re long distance best friends. We’ll be sitting with them, so don’t worry about getting
That mollifies her enough for her to visibly decide that it’s not her problem, and she shrugs. “Sounds good to me. Want some menus?”

“Yes please,” Kurapika says.

Leorio takes a step towards the kids, ready to break up the hug-fest and move them to a booth when Gon tightens his fists and yells, “I’m sorry!”

Killua’s eyes widen, and he jerks back. Or tries to, Gon’s hold on him too strong to break easily. Gon clutches Killua’s shirt, wrinkling the black fabric beneath his hands as he holds Killua fast. It doesn’t seem like the kid really knows what to say in the face of a blunt declaration like that, and Leorio doesn’t blame him. Gon is a lot at the best of times.

“Killua, I’m really, really sorry.” Gon lifts his face from Killua’s shoulder, mouth and jaw set in a firm line, made firmer, Leorio realizes with a start, by the beginnings of stubble harshing the shadows. His little baby cousin, growing up enough to have to shave. When the fuck did that happen? Oblivious to Leorio’s inner mini-crisis about getting fucking old, Gon says, “I said a lot of stuff that I didn't mean to. I was upset, and I'm sorry because I shouldn't have told you to leave. Your family is awful and I know you do trust me, and that means this must mean a whole bunch to you if you still felt like it wasn't safe enough to share with me. I should've respected that, and I'm sorry.”

A shaking pale hand reaches up and pats Gon’s shoulder. Leorio would think the motion awkward if he couldn’t also see how Killua’s lip wobbles, his whole face turning slightly watery before he gets it under control. “It's okay, Gon.”

Frowning, Gon holds out a hand between them, expectant.

Killua looks at it, up at Gon, confused, then over at Leorio and Kurapika.

“He wants you to smack him on the wrist for bad behavior,” Leorio says. “It’s a thing.”

And Killua snorts, before very gently tapping Gon on the back of his hand. More of a simple touch than anything else, and from Gon’s pout, it doesn't make the cut, but Killua refuses to do more, lifting his nose haughtily. Gon huffs, tugging at Killua, who relents only to flush a bright red when Gon twines his hand together with Killua’s.

“Shouldn’t we go sit down?” Kurapika suggests gently.

Killua sputters something that might be agreement, but it’s completely lost in the way he gazes down at his fingers, threaded between Gon’s. Leorio muffles a snicker behind his hand. How cute. Despite his (honestly not very intense) efforts at not being heard, Killua’s head whips around and he glares at Leorio, pink-cheeked, yanking his hand out of Gon’s grasp.

Gon actually whines.

Okay, no one expects Leorio to not laugh at that, right? His little cousin is being adorable. And yeah, Leorio’s just going to call it as he sees it there. That’s a crush. There aren’t many people Gon, who is notoriously oblivious, would be so insistent on physical contact for, and it’s precious. He’s almost contractually obligated by blood to poke a little fun at them, and Leorio is positive that Kurapika will back him up on this. Lawyer school and all. There’s precedent, or whatever.

(This is a goldmine of potential material for Leorio, honestly, and sure he’s being a bit of a shit to Killua and Gon, but it’s just a front that’s covering the thudding swell of relief that’s threatening to
cut Leorio out at the knees.)

Killua is avoiding Gon’s seeking fingers while Kurapika gently herds them towards a table where a lone black-haired girl sits. After one particularly handsy grab, Killua makes a mortified noise. “Gon, knock it off! My sister is right over there!”

“Right! Come on, you can introduce me!”

He sputters. “Well duh, obviously? Who else is gonna introduce you? Leorio? God? You can't find God in a Denny's, Gon.”

“You can find God wherever you want to find them if that’s what you’re into. Including Denny’s,” Gon says primly before grabbing Killua’s hand again and threading their fingers together like he’s fitting a latch into place. Immediately, Killua’s voice trails off as he clearly loses track of what he’s trying to say and instead just stares wonderingly at their joined hands. Gon tugs on him, insistent. “Come on, Killua, I want to meet your sister.”

“Y-yeah. Yeah.” Killua shakes himself and leads them through the thankfully scarcely occupied restaurant, past a few tables and towards a line of booths. A few of the patrons give them some gimlet stares as they pass, but Leorio scowls back at them and they look away before he does. He snorts. That’s fucking right. Damn rubberneckers, trying to get a good glimpse of anything emotional like that'll give them some satisfaction of their own. It's like trying to watch an accident. There’s a point past where the loud noises should get your attention.

He almost runs right into Kurapika when they come to a stop.

“This,” Killua says with a gentle smile, “is my sister Alluka.”

Leorio takes in the girl sitting at the booth. Her long hair is as dark as Killua’s is light, though not nearly as curly as Killua’s. They have the same open face and wide eyes, and Leorio guesses that she’s a few years younger than Killua, though with teenagers, it’s hard to tell. She smiles at them all, warm and open, and waves just the slightest bit. Despite the heat outside she’s wearing a long sleeved pink shirt, though it falls back when she raises her hand. Leorio’s mouth thins. A few faint bruises dapple her wrist. Remnants of someone holding on too tight. So they wouldn’t lay a hand on Killua, but they’d hurt Alluka? Disgusting.

And Leorio remembers, uncomfortably, that Illumi had called Killua favored. This is almost certainly what he meant.

“Hi, Alluka. It’s nice to meet you,” Kurapika says, gentle.

Alluka turns to regard him first, watching as he slides into the booth across from her. She puts a finger to her mouth, tapping thoughtfully, then grins. “You’re Kurapika! Right? Brother said that you spoke politely and were nice. Which means that you’re Leorio,” and she points at him, smiling wider when he nods, “and you must be Gon!”

Leorio can't stop himself from snorting. “What’d he say about the rest of us if he got it wrong and said that Kurapika was polite?”

He absolutely deserves the elbow to the ribs he gets for that as he folds himself into the booth beside Kurapika.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, Brother said that Kurapika was nice and polite and would tear someone’s arm off for looking at him wrong.” Ignoring Leorio’s mutter of “Sounds about right,” she continues. “And he said that you, Leorio, were loud and selfish and a jackass, but also that you have the gooiest
Leorio scowls at Killua who seems completely unrepentant, down to the bright red tips of his ears. “Alluka, don't swear,” Killua says. It has all of the words of a reprimand but none of the tone, and Alluka grins.

“And me?” Gon asks, pointing at himself. He scoots into the booth eagerly, all knees and elbows and enthusiasm, and Alluka’s eyes light up even more when she watches him.

“You’re Gon! Killua says that he lo-“

“Oh, woah there, enough,” Killua says, clapping a hand over Alluka’s mouth. “You’re my best friend, duh, she’s heard a lot about you over the years, okay? Too much for her to summarize like that.”

That last part was said pointedly through clenched teeth. Alluka giggles, but gives her brother a thumbs up and says nothing more when he carefully retracts his hand.

The server comes by their table, taking Alluka and Killua's actual orders and the rest of them get drinks. Leorio isn’t sorry about practically begging for their strongest, blackest, worst coffee; now that he doesn’t have the road and the hot twist of anxiety pushing him forward, his energy levels are tanking hard.

“It's really nice to meet all of you.” Alluka pushes her fingers through the condensation on the table, leaving streaks behind. “I've heard a lot from Brother, but it's different, knowing you for myself. I've wanted to meet you all! Well, Gon, mostly, because he's the one Brother spoke about the most. You're just like how he said you would be.”

This last part is directed straight at Gon, who points a finger at himself and grins. “And what'd he said I'd be like?”

Killua is not fast enough to cover Alluka's mouth this time. “Perfect.”

“Oh I can already tell that you, little miss, are going to be my favorite. I need another person to help me keep Killua in check.” Leorio says with a chuckle, wagging his finger at Alluka, who beams at him.

Until, that is, her big brother chimes in. Casually examining his nails, Killua says, “Oh, I wasn’t planning on coming with you guys any further.”

Gon freezes. From the corner of his eye, Leorio can see Kurapika raise one eyebrow. Leorio... doesn’t know how to react, his gut already churning a constant grind of deep-seated denial. He can't in good conscience just desert these two at a fucking Denny's and go on the rest of this trip like nothing’s ever happened.

“Brother, you know we can stay if-” Alluka begins, but she falls silent when Killua gently puts his hand on her shoulder and shakes his head.

“It’s not safe for us to go with them any further. It’s dangerous enough that we met up with them now. Illumi is going to go after them as soon as he’s able, but he won’t bother if we’re not with them in the first place. I just. Wanted to let them know we were safe. For now.”

Alluka takes this information surprisingly seriously, turning it over, before she huffs with all of the self-possessed grace of a fourteen year old girl and crosses her arms. “That’s dumb and we should just stay with them.”
Killua rubs his face. Leorio has a moment of intense sympathy, because he absolutely understands the trials of trying to herd someone headstrong, followed swiftly by schadenfreude. How the tables have turned! (Okay, so it’s entirely possible that Leorio is enjoying this a little too much, but no one can actually blame him, damn it.) But still, Killua has Leorio pegged when he said Leorio's insides were soft and gooey. With a sigh, Leorio relents and says, “We're just worried about you, Killua. You shouldn't be traveling on your own.”

“If I have Alluka with me, it won't be on my own.”

Leorio searches Killua's face for several heartbeats. He can't find any hint of nerves, of any indecision and he's probably too damn old to be fussed with some kid's problems like this without there being some weird creep factor, but fuck that. Two teenagers traveling alone with a semi-murderous asshole on their tail sits wrong with him. Leorio isn't just going to let that lie, but he's not about to force Killua to come along if he doesn't want to either. But if this is Killua being self-sacrificing, trying to not get the rest of them in trouble...

Well, damn it, Leorio's gotten in a knife fight before. He can handle Illumi.

Probably.

(Maybe.)

“Allright,” Leorio says, pushing himself up from the booth. “I'm gonna go to the bathroom real quick, and then I can argue with you about this more.”

A hand catches his elbow. “Hey, Leorio, can I talk to you for a sec?”

Leorio slows and turns, raising an eyebrow at Killua. He blinks, looks around at Gon—who is talking eagerly to Alluka- and Kurapika—who only cocks his head curiously back at him- before meeting Killua’s eyes. “Sure, brat, what's up?”

Leading them out of earshot of the booth, Killua waits until they're sequestered near the bathrooms before he speaks, taking a deep breath before he begins. “I need you to teach Alluka how to take her medicine.”

Well, that’s a bit of an odd request. Leorio raises an eyebrow. “What kind of medicine is it? There’re only certain kinds I'll be able to teach her, depending on what equipment she needs—“

“I got her all the equipment. It's just. They’re injections.” And Killua looks a little uncomfortable here. Leorio tries his best to project that whole “trustworthy and confidant” vibe he has going for him. He doesn't know if it works, but Killua doesn't stop for too long. “I’m only talking to you about this because Alluka asked me to, I need you to understand that, okay? She has her prescription and everything else in order. The family didn’t stop her from seeing a doctor, they just kept her from actually getting the medicine. And from learning how to do it herself.”

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“I don't like needles,” Killua says, eyes suddenly and terrifyingly blank.

Leorio makes a series of uncomfortable intuitive leaps of logic regarding what he knows of Killua’s family and home life and his mouth flattens into a thin line. Jeez, at the rate he's going, he's going to
need entirely new crowns on his molars by the time he starts med school. Maybe he should see about getting a retainer or something. Anything to cut down on the damage he's doing clenching his jaw this much, because damn it, the more Leorio learns about Killua's family, the less he likes them.

Still.

If there's a member of Killua's family to like, she's sitting in the booth right over there.

“How often does she need to take them?” Leorio asks, gently. Leorio scrubs the back of his neck, looking over at where Alluka, small and dark, sits and lets out a quiet sigh. “Yeah, I mean, I know how to teach her, so if she isn't completely comfortable doing it herself for a while, I can help out, but you're right, she should start learning now. I can handle it.”

That awful blankness washes away, and Killua smiles at Leorio. “Every other week. She’s a quick learner, so you might just need to be on hand after the first shot?”

And Leorio salutes lazily. “Can do. Now, you do realize that you aren’t gonna get away from us with just this right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Killua says, cagey.

“Damn it, brat, you had us worried half to death. You were invited on this road trip, and your sister is more than welcome to come along for the ride too.” Placing a hand on Killua’s shoulder, Leorio squeezes gently, aiming for reassuring as he makes sure his touch remains light. “We’re not going to let your family come after you again.”

Killua’s mouth twists, stubborn.

Lord save him from teenagers who think they know best. Leorio was never this much trouble as a kid, he’s positive. Minus a few misdemeanors here and there, and there’s still the matter of the knife fight and various other scraps, but what’s a sealed court record between a few friends? Still, Leorio sighs. “You can’t tell me that Illumi won’t try and make trouble for you guys too. There’s safety in numbers, and if you disappeared again, Gon would just chase you, and we would chase you, and really, I’m not up for another cross-country game of tag. You need to be able to relax. Alluka deserves to know she’s safe.”

That last sentence does it. Killua folds like a house of cards. It’s like he can’t stop himself from darting a glance across the restaurant at his little sister, blue eyes softening as he watches her laugh.

Leorio leans back, tucking his hands into his pockets, satisfied. Innocently, he adds, “Plus, Gon can’t hold your hand more if you run off on us.”

The bright red stain of a blush scrawling across Killua’s face is absolutely worth the kick he gets, and Leorio retreats to the bathroom laughing.

Half an hour later finds them piling back into Leorio's faithful car, as Leorio reworks their whole luggage system into something that can accommodate the new addition of Alluka's duffel bag and Killua's backpack. He closes the hatch with a sigh. It's going to be impossible to see out the back window, but he can already hear the laughter from the backseat as the kids arrange themselves into something approaching comfortable, and it makes him smile. Worth it, he supposes, for that alone if
“Are you three going to be alright back there?” Kurapika is asking as Leorio gets in the driver’s seat. “It seems a little cramped.”

“Nah, we're good,” Gon says, but he's half on top of Killua anyway, so really, his opinion doesn't count for much, Leorio figures as he pulls out of the parking lot and heads back towards the highway. Where should they go now? South, he figures. Since they're already in fucking California, they might as well reap the benefits.

“Yeah, we'll be fine. It'll just be a bit cozy. Really, the question is, how are you doing?” Killua asks, an odd emphasis on the words. Something about them makes Gon perk up, take notice, turn his attention, intensely, to Kurapika, as both of the boys regard him with the sort of focus Leorio usually sees them reserve for pranks, or competitions between the two of them.

Kurapika looks at Gon then at Killua, quizzical. His eyes widen the tiniest amount, a realization. Then, something Leorio hasn't seen in years happens. It’s like his face locks down, shutters falling into place, wiping his expression clean, and when he speaks, his voice is threateningly even. “I’m doing just fine, thank you.”

Woah, woah, woah. What just happened there?

“I am tired, just as Leorio is also tired, but I am fine,” Kurapika continues, overcareful and precisely enunciated.

Killua lifts his hands, spreading them non-threateningly, but the widening of his eyes and quirk of his eyebrows speaks to how much he doesn't believe that. His mouth twists to the side. “How...” and here, Killua looks between all of them, suddenly uncertain. “How long have all of you guys been driving? Have you even stopped to take care of yourselves? Or like, sleep, or something? There's no way Leorio could've made it here all on his own. And Gon didn't start calling me until like eleven yesterday.”

“Conveniently, Leorio isn't the only one who can drive.” Kurapika's voice is dry enough to crack the tableau. “But to answer your question, no, we haven't exactly slept.”

“Why the fuck not? I mean, I wanted you guys to come get me, but I really wasn’t expecting you to be so close behind. You guys didn't have to rush or anything. I was- I am fine.”

Alluka frowns. “No you weren't.”

Leorio snorts as he hears Killua sputter a weak denial. Alright, it's official, Leorio has a new favorite member of the Zoldyck family, and it's definitely Alluka. Come on, kid, try harder.

“You never like it when you have to come home, especially when Illu is there,” Alluka continues. “He's meanest to you.”

“Meanest?” Leorio asks. Every potential answer sours his stomach, an unwelcome twisting that only worsens when Alluka regards him through the rearview mirror with solemn, too-serious eyes.

She nods. “Meanest.”

“He's not always that-“ Killua cuts himself off, then shakes his head, white hair flying around his face. “No, it’s just. I can handle it. It’s no big deal. Besides, we aren’t there anymore, and Dad said he’d take care of Illumi.”
“I thought your father wanted you home,” Kurapika says.

“I thought so too, but he was just upset that I left home without saying anything apparently.” At Leorio and Kurapika’s shared look, Killua shrugs. “Dad likes that I’m showing independence. He just prefers for it to be independence that he can predict and accommodate instead of me running off in the middle of the night after punching my mother.”

“You-“

Mouth twisting, Killua looks away, towards Alluka, like seeing her will settle him. “It’s a long story.”

“It’s really not.” Alluka reaches out and puts her hand on Killua’s, smiling gently. “Killua’s a good big brother, and he looks out for me. The rest of the family has their own ideas about pretty much everything. He’s never listened to them, not completely, and definitely not after he met Gon, and that makes Illumi angry.”

Leorio looks at her through the mirror. “Not your dad?”

“Dad gets angry differently. Besides, he’s out a lot. Illumi and Mother take care of things at home, so really, Illumi raised us more than our parents.” Alluka’s mouth cuts to the side, one of Killua’s favorite expressions on another person’s face, and seeing it makes Leorio smile despite the grim subject matter. One of her hands comes up to drag through her dark hair, fingers catching on the occasional tangle. “I don’t think he’s done a good job, though. And something’s changed.”

“Something?” Leorio echoes, and he shares a concerned look with Kurapika.

Killua lets out a tight sigh but he nods. “Yeah. Illumi’s been acting different. It’s part of why I wanted to get out of the house so badly. But I don't know why. It makes me nervous.”

That fact sits between them silently for a few minutes before Gon drags Killua and Alluka into a more lighthearted conversation and Leorio keeps driving. The long stretch of road falls away below their tires, the traffic silver and glinting in the sunlight. After an hour, Leorio feels himself unfocus, eyes growing heavy, and he shakes himself. “First hotel I see, I'm stopping at.”

“Please,” Kurapika says, sounding as tired as Leorio feels.

He stays true to his word, pulling into a motel about another half hour later, feeling like he just coasted there on the last of his energy. Fuck, but Leorio's tired. Kurapika disappears inside the lobby, and Leorio leans back in his seat. Exhaustion weighs on him, settling behind his eyes with a dragging warmth. Kurapika had better hurry up in there because if he takes too long, Leorio knows he’ll fall asleep right here. He’d totally be able to. He's warm, vaguely horizontal, with the worst of the crackling tension dissipated with Killua's reappearance. Perfect recipe for sleep.

Something jostles his seat.

“Hey, Leorio, when are you gonna ask Kurapika out?”

Damn it. Even the words make Leorio's heart clench, and he rubs his face with a sigh. “Gon, I love you, but I don't really want to talk about it right now.”

“Wait, so you did?”

“I didn't say-“
“You absolutely did. Did he say no? Why'd he say no when you guys like each other so much?”

Fuck, of all the times for the kid to not get the hint. Leorio doesn't open his eyes. “Gon...”

“Hey it's cool, Leorio just needs a few tips. Leorio, you gotta open up to him. Talk to him. You gotta give him the succ,” Killua says from the backseat.

Oh god.

“Do you know what the succ is, Leorio? An old man like you probably doesn’t know what a meme is-“

“I know what a goddamned MEME is, you mouthy brat!”

And Alluka bursts out into peals of laughter just as Kurapika comes back. He blinks at her, one eyebrow twitching up, before he looks at Leorio.

“Do I want to know?”

Alluka hiccups her breaths in. Chokes out, “The succ.”

A beat. Kurapika closes his eyes. Inhales slowly and shakes his head as he sits down. Leorio jerks himself upright, scrubbing at his face violently. “No, I didn’t want to know. What are you talking to these kids about, Leorio?”

Wounded, Leorio points at himself. “Me? I didn’t start- This wasn’t- I didn’t start talking about this! Killua did!”

“Sure, blame it on the kid. Very mature, Leorio.”

“Kurapika!”

“Room six-twelve, Leorio. Park and let's go.”

It’s absolutely surreal to wake up in the middle of the afternoon, the edges of golden light inching in around the curtains and lighting the room with an indirect glow. Leorio’s eyes don’t want to fully open, which he blames on general exhaustion and the crusty grossness around his eyes. What time is it? Should he get up? But he’s so fucking comfortable, and gravity is a comfortable weight pressing him into the glorious softness of a hotel bed, and he doesn’t actually want to move. His limbs are heavy.

And also.

Leorio cracks an eye open to confirm, blinking a few times to clear the haziness of sleep. But sure enough, gold is lit with gold and the warmth that he feels is familiar and welcome as it tangles in his chest.

Kurapika’s head rests carefully on his shoulder.

Carefully, Leorio licks his lips. His mouth is dry, tasting of stale saliva and something that died. Gross. God that's disgusting.
“You have graveyard mouth too?” a hoarse voice asks, and Kurapika shifts off of his shoulder enough to smile, wry.

“Yeah. Sucks.” Good going, Leorio, keep it to the monosyllables. Definitely a good way to get yourself in Kurapika's good graces. It's quiet between them, and Leorio squints, trying to figure out why that's weird. “Kids?”

“Downtown. They're being tourists. I dropped them off after you passed out.”

“Was tired.” Two syllables. Very nice. He's working his way up in the world.

Kurapika laughs, the noise short and fond. “You fell asleep as soon as you laid down with your clothes on. I think we could tell.”

“Do we have to go get the kids?”

“Not yet. They'll call when they want to be picked up.”

Leorio grunts, affirmative, and the careful gravity between them settles again, pulling him back into the half-welcome haze of semi-sleep. They breathe together. Leorio listens to the quiet whisper of Kurapika's breath, the shift of his skin against the sheets. And then Kurapika rolls over to look at him, eyes wide and features indistinct in the semi-dark. “Did you find what you were looking for?” he asks, and Leorio turns his head to look back.

Well that's a bit out of nowhere. It takes him a moment to recall the conversation he and Kurapika had in Philadelphina at the start of all of … this. He searches for something in Kurapika’s face. Really, he's not sure what he's looking for. A sign, maybe. Something. But instead, finding nothing, Leorio lets out a long sigh, tension bleeding out of his frame until he’s finally sunk back into the hotel’s mattress. Leorio rubs his head, careful of the tenderness behind his eyes and the way nothing feels quite real yet. “Honestly, I don’t think I ever knew what I was looking for in the first place. Life isn’t like a movie, after all, so it’s not like this is going to wrap up with a perfect climax and denouement.”

“You don't think anything's changed?”

Unbidden, Leorio thinks about the smile on Killua’s face, the way he lit up in Gon’s arms, the ease his expression has taken now that they’re back together again. He thinks of the quiet new presence of Alluka in the backseat of the car. He thinks, even, of Kurapika. Of the warmth of an earring in his palm and the quiet tension that has sunken like molten gold through the cracks. The new ways he is learning to navigate the uncertain space between them. Leorio opens his mouth. Closes it.

There’s so much to say, and so few ways to articulate it.

But he has to try.

“It's only been two weeks,” he says, and the time seems both immeasurably close and unimaginably long. Like it was only yesterday that they had left the Boston area and yet so much has happened. They're in California, for fuck's sake. Two weeks ago, he had said that he was never going to go to California, and they ended up here anyway.

“Just over, yes,” Kurapika agrees. Like he understands all the things Leorio can’t or won’t say.

Fuck, and that's just it, isn’t it? Kurapika does understand the thoughts that Leorio can’t bring himself to say most of the time. Kurapika knows Leorio, and that’s why-

Damn it, that’s why Leorio’s going to ruin everything again, as the words flooding up in him
override the itchy static of anxiety, breaking out of his throat.

“Are you ready for it to be later yet? Because I’d really like to know why you thought I was straight.”

There’s a tense, unhappy silence. The whir of the air conditioning is the only noise.

And then Kurapika sighs. “I suppose I did say we’d talk about it. Leorio, you thirst over women more loudly and vocally than anyone I’ve ever met. What was I supposed to think?”

“That the few times I mentioned how attractive other men are weren’t just outliers?”

His mouth twists. Leorio’s eyes catch on the movement like iron filings to a magnet. “I thought you were being considerate. Of me.”

“Kurapika, are you really trying to tell me that you never noticed how I looked at you?”

Shit.

Fuck, okay so he definitely didn’t mean to say that out loud, but *fuck it*, Leorio’s sticking to his guns. A good thing too, because Kurapika full-body flinches. He sits up, and Leorio immediately misses his warmth. His shirt, where Kurapika had rested, is rumpled, creased, and he can see the red lines of mirrored marks on Kurapika’s cheek even from here.

“I thought-” he starts, stops, but Kurapika won’t look him in the eye when Leorio sits up too, just at some nebulous point over his shoulder, and Leorio—

-needs that connection right now. He needs to know that Kurapika isn’t running away from him again. He moves, deliberately, until Kurapika meets his eyes. “And I don’t appreciate the insinuation that I only asked you out because you’re not super manly and I mistook you as “close enough” to a girl.”

“That was … I didn’t mean to say that,” Kurapika admits. “It was impolite of me.”

“You’re damn right it was. You know that I wouldn’t just do that to you, right? You know that I wouldn’t use you like that.” He doesn’t know why this is so important to him, but it is, it is. Kurapika has to understand. Leorio should just leave well enough alone at this point, but he *can’t*. “This isn’t the first time I’ve thought about asking you out.”

That, somehow, is what makes Kurapika drop his eyes. His hands clench into fists in the sheets. “Then hopefully, it will be the last.”

Oh.

Leorio closes his mouth, drawing his lower lip in with a sharp sound. “If the choice comes down between having you as a friend and dating you but possibly ruining everything, I'm going to pick being your friend. You know that, right? That I'd rather have you in my life period. If you … If I made you uncomfortable, I'm sorry. You can tell me so. You don’t have to hold yourself back from me. I can handle it. I can handle you.”

“I am not an object that needs *handling*, Leorio,” Kurapika bites out, brows firm and drawn.

Leorio rubs his forehead. “That’s not—“

“It’s what you said. Don’t backpedal now; I don’t have time to watch the world go in reverse. And
“Don’t try and distract me from what this is actually about. I don’t care if you sit there and insult me-” a lie, and one Kurapika knows as well, from the derisive curl of his lip, “-but I’m not going to fight you about it right now. I’m trying to actually talk about this.” And then a thought, strange and terrible, occurs to Leorio, and he lowers his hands to the sheets, fistimg them tightly. Tight enough to leave marks behind. “Did you turn me down because you think you’re somehow not -I don’t fucking know- not good enough to have a relationship?”

And Kurapika, beautiful with fire snapping in his eyes, lifts his chin. “I don’t think, Leorio, I know I am.”

Leorio can’t breathe past the way his heart twists. “Why do you always-”

“Always what, Leorio?”

“Always push people away like that? Kurapika, I know you. I’ve been your friend for these last four years. I’ve seen you in the middle of studying, I’ve seen you stressed as hell, I’ve seen you happy, I helped you hide those four creepy-ass dolls around Professor Izunavi’s office and watched you tell him there were five and I saw how fucking gleeful you were about getting one over him. I know you. I have seen you this entire time. I have-” and Leorio swallows, his throat tightening. He choke out, “I have fallen in love with you all the while. It’s not-. I know you have your concerns about this-“

Kurapika snorts, contemptuous.

“- but I want to give this a chance. I want to try, at least. If you don’t like me back, that’s one thing. I can’t change that and I’m not going to pressure you into a relationship, but damn it, if you think that you’re somehow sparing me or saving me or something, stop. Give me a good reason why you don’t want to give this a shot.”

“I…” Kurapika drags his hands through his hair once, twice, then winces, jerking away from his own hand, and Leorio sees. A glitter of red, caught in his hair, because Kurapika must have forgotten to take his earring out before they napped together.

Leorio reaches out before he even thinks about it. “Hold still,” Leorio says.

And wonder upon wonders, Kurapika does. His face cocked just the slightest bit to the side, his steely gaze still fixed on Leorio, past his hands and what he’s doing. Kurapika is holding himself still, even when the backs of Leorio’s knuckles brush his cheek. The red gem is cool against his skin, and he very gently picks soft gold strands of hair away from the short silver chain, smoothing them down.

They are very close.

Leorio’s lips part, and, unbidden, Kurapika’s eyes dart down. Back up.

There’s a banked heat between them. Leorio’s heart rate picks up, stuttering and stumbling its way to a full sprint, because despite their argument, Kurapika isn’t backing away. Kurapika’s breath, too, comes just a bit faster. His eyes are intent and he’s the one who sways forward on the bed and lifts himself up with one hand around the base of Leorio’s neck just as Leorio leans forward and-

Stops.

Leorio is intensely aware of the gentle heat of Kurapika’s breath against his skin. They are… unimaginably close, achingly close, and there is nothing stopping Leorio from moving forward
except his own reservations, the fact that he wants Kurapika to want this and Leorio can’t give him another reason to back away. Not here, not now, not with this barest amount of space between them.

Kurapika lets out a strangled noise. Not quite a whine, not quite a groan. Quiet and despairing all the same. “You can’t just-”

And Kurapika cuts himself off, shifting towards Leorio again with a furious press of his mouth. Not quite. Not all the way, but there, there, there, into the space where every word is a breath, where their heartbeats are more audible than anything else in the world. It’s electric, agonizing.

“Can’t just what?” Leorio asks. He gets immediately distracted by the way the very edges of his mouth traces across Kurapika’s, the soft brush of skin, the thundering tempo of “finally, finally, finally” that gallops through his veins, because here and now, the dam has fucking burst. Just a little more. Leorio reaches out to ground himself, finding Kurapika’s hip and pulling him closer across the bed. Just the tiniest amount. Closer and closer.

Helplessly, like it’s an answer all in itself, Kurapika says, “Leorio-” and-

Kurapika’s phone goes off.

The noise shatters this small, shared moment like taking a wrecking ball to a glass house. Kurapika leaves the bed before Leorio even realizes what’s happening, and his skin is chilled in the absence of another person. He almost reaches out, wanting to pull Kurapika close again, but.

But.

Leorio lets his hand drop, pushes himself out of the bed, starts unbuttoning his shirt to change at least that before they have to go pick up the boys, and tries not to let the staggering, overlarge pounding of his heart dizzy him too much. He pulls on a fresh shirt, already feeling a little better, and steps forward when Kurapika lowers his phone.

“Kurapika,” he starts, but-

Stops.

Kurapika is turned away from him, hands clenched, shoulders tight enough that Leorio’s hurt in sympathy just looking at him. He is a line of tension from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. With a sickening twist, Leorio takes another step, closing another small amount of distance, and the twist gets worst when Kurapika flinches. Shit. Shit, he messed up somewhere. His skin still tingles from where it brushed against Kurapika’s, where their mouths were almost, almost, touching, but. Now, aware of a new, uncomfortable tension, Leorio can’t help but feel as though Kurapika is slipping through his fingers with every moment.

He takes a deep breath. “Let’s not keep the kids waiting, okay?”

“...Alright,” Kurapika murmurs. Still tense, but less so now, though he flinches away from Leorio as he holds the door open, stands with a careful distance between them, does not look at him. His eyes are shadowed.

And that is all.
do you feel the way I do (right now)

Chapter Summary

He just.

Wishes he knew how to help Kurapika. Even if Kurapika's terrible mood is his own problem and his own problem alone, Leorio still wants to lighten his load and the corners of his heart still open to worry. There's nothing he can help, though. Not with Kurapika avoiding him the way he has been the last few days. Not when Leorio is most likely the source of the problem itself.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! So ya girl finished NaNoWriMo successfully this year! Congrats to me!!! And so, in celebration, have this mess of a chapter.

Fair warning, there's a fair amount of talk about depression and suicide in the abstract here in this chapter. A lot of the dialogue is paraphrased from some personal situations I've been in, but yeah, there's. I mean, there's some stuff. If it's too hard to get through, feel free to message me on tumblr or twitter and I can summarize or provide an edited copy of this that avoids the worst of the content.

Keep an eye out for the next chapter towards the end of december/early january. I'm riding of the hype of finishing NaNo successfully, plus the lovely encouragement from the Leopika discord, so I bet I can get the next one done soon. I'm sorry if this is a bit of an incoherent mess.

Don't worry, we're not done yet.

Chapter title from "Distance" by Christina Perri

The silence in the car on the way to pick up the boys is a heavy thing. It weighs on Leorio's tongue, tangling up all the fears and wild, desperate hopes that fill Leorio's lungs.

Kurapika almost kissed him.

There is no denying that. Leorio remembers it like a physical presence on his skin, tingling and aware of all the ways they could have and didn't touch. Kurapika almost kissed him, and it was only the phone call from Gon that interrupted them. Of all times for Kurapika to be attentive to his damn phone. Leorio gnaws on the inside of his lip, hands flexing and unflexing on the steering wheel. There is no denying the way that Kurapika leaned into his space, his eyes darting down. Kurapika was free to back up at any time, and still he allowed Leorio to pull him closer and closer, to dare to put his mouth so close-

But Kurapika is as still as a statue beside him now and there is no trace of the helpless desire Leorio
had gotten a glimpse of.

Hell, Kurapika hasn't so much as looked at Leorio since they left the room. His discomfort is plain to see, strung along the tension in his shoulders to the way his hands are clasped together in his lap, tight around each other, blanching around the silver rings on his fingers. It hurts Leorio to look at, puts him off balance. He doesn't like it. He doesn't know what to do about it either, though.

Finally, Leorio clears his throat. “You could have stayed in the room if you wanted to,” he says, quiet and hoping the thread of uncertainty weaving through his voice is less apparent to anyone else than it is to him. “You didn't have to come along.”

Kurapika is silence for a length of time that has Leorio's skin crawling, skittering and uneasy. But finally, he sighs. “I know, Leorio.”

And that-

That's fucking it.

That's all he gets, as Kurapika falls silent once more, returning his gaze to the window and the darkening highway beyond, and Leorio clenches his mouth shut with enough force for his jaw to fucking ache. Fine. Fine, whatever, if Kurapika wants to be sullen and taciturn about this as he fucking does sometimes, then Leorio can weather him.

Weather him and think, constantly, of that moment of shared breath, but he's tough. He'll survive. Leorio has had his heart broken before and come out only stronger for it.

He'll survive.

The kids chatter constantly when they clamber into the car, and Leorio welcomes the sudden influx of noise, hanging his preoccupation like a coat on the hook by the metaphorical door, focusing right now on their enthusiasm and jumbled words and like that, he's able to smile at their kitschy triumphs, the odd discoveries they've adopted to bring with them from whatever stores they popped into. It's just when there's a bare, empty breath, he looks over at Kurapika and his breath stutters again -again -again. His heart pounds and his palms sweat and a whole host of other romantic cliches that have Leorio biting the inside of his cheek hard enough that he tastes iron.

But.

Leorio cannot get the way Kurapika flinched when he came near out of his head. His heart breaks in degrees, wondering when he lost Kurapika's trust of being a safe person to be around, wondering if Kurapika thinks Leorio is the type of person who would hurt him, and he can't- he can't bring himself to wonder who taught him to be afraid, but his thoughts keep circling back around to it.

He has to stop.

The kids are going to notice if they haven't already.

He has to get over it.

At a stoplight on the way back to the hotel, Leorio allows himself a count of three to feel it all. He allows the heartbreak and uncertainty and anger to storm within him, allows his uncharitable thoughts and fantastical what if's to take full rein and flood him fully. He was so close. Still, he can feel the touch of Kurapika's breath, the helpless way he said Leorio's name like it was full of the world itself.
One.

Eyes closed, Leorio experiences every aching moment of it. Every what might have been. What if Kurapika had kissed him? What if Leorio had been the barest bit bolder? Would they be sneaking little smiles at each other right now, planning on getting the kids a second room or at least planning some time alone together? Would Kurapika be blushing? What would his lips have felt like, tasted like? Would Kurapika kiss aggressively, or would he let Leorio take the lead?

Two.

Why did he have to pull away? Why did he look so hurt? If he wanted to kiss Leorio, why didn't he agree to get dinner with him before? Is Leorio somehow not good enough for anything more than a few moments of physical passion, not holding up to Kurapika's impossible standards? Leorio loves him, Leorio loves him, surely that much is worth a shot. But Kurapika had said no, and Leorio believed him. He couldn't not. So why did Kurapika seem so scared?

He doesn't, can't know.

Three.

Leorio breathes out, proud of how steady it is.

“Green light, Leorio,” Kurapika murmurs.

Oh how he fucking wishes. Leorio opens his eyes and drives.

This is what comes of that burning near-kiss:

Nothing.

They don't talk about it. Kurapika refuses. He doesn't let himself be alone around Leorio ever. He sticks to the kids like a shadow, saying hardly anything but always present. He insists that Alluka have one bed to herself, so he takes the floor while Killua and Gon pile into the other half of Leorio's bed, and that-fuck, that takes a toll on Kurapika almost immediately. He isn't sleeping as well, and he's difficult to wake when he does manage to sleep. The naps that he takes in the car become more frequent, as Kurapika dozes off with a finger tucked between the pages of *Leaves of Grass* more times than Leorio keeps accurate track of. It seems like every time he looks over, Kurapika has nodded off again, the purple sweeps under his eyes growing deeper and deeper.

Leorio doesn't know what to do. He just doesn't, and the uncertainty kills him. It feels like the ground is crumbling beneath his feet, like Kurapika is slipping further and further away as a chasm opens between them.

He wanted this trip to bring them closer together.

Given his history, Leorio should have known better than to hope for the best. The world is callous and cruel and full of unpleasant surprises. Of course, this would be no different.

They drive away through California, all the way to Vegas, and the city's lights are almost enough to put this behind them except for how Kurapika emerges on the other side even more exhausted and
silent than before. Every word pulled out of him is snappish and ill-tempered, until even Gon stops trying, stung and hurting.

It makes for a tense atmosphere, that's for damn sure.

Unmanagble, and Leorio forces himself to focusing on driving.

"Leorio, can you please do something about Kurapika?" Killua snaps a few days later, the red ground of Arizona stretching in so many directions around them. "He's being an asshole."

He doesn't know where to start with that, honestly. So he settles on a shrug. "I'm really not the best person to talk to about that."

"You're the only one he'd say anything to."

"I'm the reason he's in a mad mood in the first place," Leorio shoots back.

"Then fix it," Gon says, like it's that easy, like Leorio can just repair what's broken between him and Kurapika with a sidelong glance and a gentle word. "He looks so tired."

Leorio sighs, looking over at Kurapika's slumped form, leaning against the railings of this particular outpost, his golden hair whipping around in the wind. Alluka is next to him, the only one truly safe from his outbursts, but they don't seem to be speaking. Leorio wants to go over, slide his hand into the divot of Kurapika's waist, tuck himself close and hold on forever, but he can't get that flinch out of his head.

Eventually, he just says, "I don't want to hurt him again."

"You're not the one hurting him, Leorio." Gon's voice is serious, his face even more so as he, too, watches Kurapika. "That's all his fault right now. But maybe, you might be able to convince him to stop that too."

Silence falls, and Leorio drags a hand through his hair. "You have a lot of faith in me."

"I believe in love," Gon says simply.

Leorio reaches over, scrubbing his hand through Gon's upswept hair. "Yeah, you would, you corny little fuck."

But resolution doesn't do anything for the silence that remains, a stone wall between Kurapika and everything else. And resolution does nothing to calm the clamoring of Leorio's heart.

Anxiety is a familiar taste in the back of Leorio's mouth as they stop somewhere in New Mexico. Kurapika's been in a particularly waspish mood today, so they hadn't stopped even once, and he's paying for it now. His fucking knee is killing him, and he can't feel his palms pretty much at all. He hobbles up to the hotel room, depositing his bag in the corner. He hears Alluka, Killua, and Gon
chattering to each other, something about the pool and one of the restaurants nearby and the clarity of sunset over the landscape when the breeze is wicking away the sweat from your brow. Aimless, wandering talk the way kids always do, increasing in volume more and more and-

Kurapika snaps, “Can any of you be quiet for two goddamned seconds?”

Leorio inhales sharply. He can't-. His mind has flash-fired straight to anger, his temper poorly leashed, and he can't fucking do this right now. He has to get the fuck out of here before he loses it at Kurapika for being a piece of shit to the kids for no reason.

“Yeah, screw this,” Leorio mutters under his breath. Then, louder, “I'm going to get myself a soda. I'll be right back up.”

When he leaves, Leorio takes care to catch the door so it doesn't slam, even though the want, the desire, to make so much noise, to slam and rattle and shake until something breaks, fills him from the ground up.

Every step down to the small shop by the front desk is less and less angry. The act of walking, even as slow as he has to go with his damn knee locked up the way it is, helps dissipate the worst of it, until Leorio is just. Empty. Drained and bitter with it. He lets himself poke around, weighing the merits of picking up a few snacks too. Maybe some of the little packets of Aleeve too, because some naproxen really can't go wrong in helping his damn knee.

He just.

Wishes he knew how to help Kurapika. Even if Kurapika's terrible mood is his own problem and his own problem alone, Leorio still wants to lighten his load and the corners of his heart still open to worry. There's nothing he can help, though. Not with Kurapika avoiding him the way he has been the last few days. Not when Leorio is most likely the source of the problem itself.

(It's awful, it's selfish, but it's times like these where Leorio wishes that Kurapika would just ask to go already. If he doesn't want to stay, then the least he can do is leave Leorio to mourn his broken heart in peace so he can pretend everything is on an even keel when he returns home. But he won't leave, and there’s a deeper, more selfish part of him that likes that even more.)

Behind him, there's the clatter of running feet. Leorio turns his head to see who it is as he grabs a Pepsi.

Alluka.

Alluka, her shoulder's heaving as she skids into the store, eyes wide.

“Leorio,” Alluka says, breathless.

The hair on the back of his neck raises, a preternatural gift for sensing dread raising its ugly head. Leorio sets his Pepsi back in the fridge. “What's wrong, princess?”

“It's – Everyone. They're fighting. It was a- It was just a mistake, but. It's bad, Leorio, it's going to be so bad, I couldn't- please, you have to-”

Leorio doesn't wait to hear the rest of it. Damn it. Of course. He leaves them alone for two seconds and they're already at each others' throats. Relaxation and fantastic head! That's all he wanted, damn it. That's literally all he asked for, and now he can't even get a fucking soda without the world exploding. He takes off, Alluka following hot on his heels.
He hears the shouting before he even reaches the room.

“-is none of your business!” Kurapika snaps, furious, teeth bared. “Get your fucking hands out of my belongings!”

Before him, Killua and Gon present a united wall, if a shell-shocked one, hands clasped tightly together, their shoulders back and chins high. Killua's face is drained of color, but there's a combative gleam in his eye that Leorio doesn't like. “We didn't mean-”

“I don't care what you meant.” Kurapika takes a single, threatening step forward.

He draws himself up short when Leorio moves between him and the boys. It's like sense floods back into fierce gray eyes, though the high flush of anger doesn't fade. Kurapika makes a noise with his tongue, crossing his arms as he looks away from Leorio, from the boys, his mouth set in a scowl.

“Take Alluka and get out,” Leorio says over his shoulder.

“Leorio-”

Interrupting, Leorio does not take his eyes off Kurapika. “Now, Gon. Both of you, go.”

Killua tries, “Leorio, I-”

“We'll talk in a bit. Go. I'll call you when it's safe to come back.” Leorio takes a deep breath, loosening the buttons on his wrists and rolling up his shirt sleeves. “Don't worry. Just go.”

He can feel Killua searching his face, but he doesn't dare stop watching Kurapika's shaking form. Whatever the kid is looking for, though, he must find it because Leorio sees him nod out of the corner of his eye before he drags Gon past Leorio on his way to Alluka.

Gon grabs Leorio's wrist. “I wasn't looking for this. Alluka has the same kind of phone he does, so I was just looking for a charger cable.”

Leorio blinks, confused. “Okay?”

“Just. I wasn't looking for what I found.”

“And what did you find?”

“What they found,” Kurapika grinds out, his voice glacier-cold and harsh, “is none of any of your business.”

But, wordless, Gon presses a small object the length of Leorio's palm into his hand and then leaves, following Killua and Alluka.

The door closes with a click. Leorio gathers himself, establishing his presence and boundaries in this room full of tension, as he curls his fingers over the cylindrical object Gon passed him, as he raises it up before his face.

As he reads the dosage and name of an anti-depressant prescribed to Kurapika on an empty medication bottle.

“Give that back,” Kurapika orders.

The air is still. Kurapika hauls in a huge breath. Leorio’s face prickles, a shiver that travels from there down his neck and shoulders, a cold rush of realization, of synapses, firing and connecting the dots.
His irritability, his mood swings, how hard it’s been to get him to eat or wake up. It adds up. All of it does. Down to the daily alarm and everything. Leorio doesn’t know, exactly, why Kurapika is so upset, but Kurapika's pride always has its way of running amok at the worst times.

“Oh Kurapika,” Leorio says softly.

Shakily, Kurapika's fists clench at his sides before he holds out one, palm up, expectant. “Give it back, Leorio.”

Hesitation isn't even an option. Leorio feels bad enough about reading, about knowing what the medication is in the first place. Leorio offers the prescription bottle to Kurapika, wary of the heavy tension filling the air. “This doesn't change what I think about you, you know.”

“Doesn’t it?” Kurapika says bitterly, taking the bottle from his hands. “It changes everything, don't lie. You're already looking at me with pity in your eyes.”

“Compassion and pity are two very different things, Kurapika.”

“Not from here they aren’t.” Kurapika lets out a tight sigh. “Are we going to keep dancing around this, or would you like to just get it over with already?”

Leorio levels him a patient look, drawing on the deep well of calm within him, and then he spreads his hands, open, inviting. “I don't want to make assumptions.”

“You already know.”

“Spell it out for me, then, Kurapika.”

Flatly, Kurapika says, “I've been medicated for depression for the last three years. My prescription ran out a few days after we started traveling. I grabbed the fucking- wrong bottle before we left, so I'm. This.” And here, his words start stumbling, as Kurapika's voice grows thick and he refuses to lift his gaze from the corner of the room, like looking at Leorio is too much. “Again. All I want to do is sleep and die. A sucking black hole of what used to be a person that you should honestly stop wasting your time with. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Leorio shakes his head. "That's not- Kurapika, that's not true. That's not what you are."

"Yes, it is! It's all I am, it's all I'll ever be. I'm not good enough to live, much less have friends or anything else, and I'm just. I'm so fucking tired, Leorio."

He lets out his breath as a sob. Kurapika’s arms wrap tightly around himself, clutching and holding tight, like he’s not safe enough to touch anything else, and god, that’s. That’s unacceptable. Leorio lurches forward, awkward and feeling too-large for his skin. He reaches out.

And Kurapika lets Leorio fold him into a hug.

Kurapika presses his face, hot with tears, against Leorio's shoulder, and it's all he can do to hang on and hold him close. Leorio doesn’t know what else to do but to stroke Kurapika's hair and keep him tucked tightly against him. He rocks back and forth gently, presses the barest contact of his lips to Kurapika’s temple. Leorio hums under his breath. His voice isn’t anything remarkable, but he’s been told before that it’s raspy and soothing, so he’ll hedge his bets and just hum a lullaby or something to try and calm Kurapika down.

“It’s so hard to wake up sometimes,” Kurapika says, broken and small, and Leorio’s throat is tight. “I don’t know why I bother waking up when everything is just. This. All the time. Sometimes it’s
better, but it’s always waiting for me the moment my concentration breaks and- Leorio, there’s so much I want to do. There’s one thing I have to do. And instead all I can think about, day in and day out, is how much I want to die.”

“Kurapika, don’t.” But Kurapika has built up so much steam now. His shaking shoulders firm, his palms going from pliant against Leorio’s chest to clenched fists.

“This is it, Leorio! This is who I am. I waste your time, I lead you on, and this—” he pushes Leorio’s arms off him, rough and uncaring and beautiful even with tears streaming down his face, grey eyes bright and red-rimmed. “This fucking disaster is who I really am. Beneath every lie. This is all there is to me. I’m a worthless waste of space who got my entire family killed. You don’t need this.”

“Don’t say things like that.” God, Leorio wishes Kurapika hadn’t stepped away. He feels cut adrift. Useless, like this. His hands are still outstretched, reaching for Kurapika even now.

“You can’t fix me, Leorio. Nothing can fix what’s broken in me,” Kurapika spits. “This isn’t Hollywood. You can't just heal me with the power of your love, or whatever. I'm not here to be your little project.”

God, Leorio just wants to grab him and shake until sense falls back into place. He knows it won't help, he knows, but the urge is there in the phantom pressure on his palms, the false conviction that he could reach out and settle something. Drawing a deep breath, Leorio strangles the urge, shoves it down like stepping out of the way of a train wreck as he bites and wrestles back every unkind word that would be easier to say that the right ones. He meets Kurapika’s stern, tired eyes. Says, “Kurapika, this isn't about me wanting to date you, this is me caring about you and wanting to see you alive and well and my friend for the rest of my life.”

That, at least, gets his mouth to click shut.

Finally. Leorio rubs his brow, carefully picking out what he wants to say. “You've had depression the whole time I've known you, Kurapika. You haven't changed as a person. You deserve to live and to have good things in your life. You’re strong, strong enough to have already reached out for help with a condition that's killed so many people. Why do you think any of that would make me want to give you up?

"It's. It's always here, Leorio. This is never going away. It's always going to be waiting."

"I'm a doctor, Kurapika. Or at least I'm going to be. It may not be my specialty, but I do know how depression works," Leorio says, as gentle as he knows how. "I don't expect it to magically disappear, as nice as that would be for you to never have to struggle with it again."

Kurapika rubs his elbows, holding himself tightly. "This isn't- Leorio, I don't want to make this your problem."

"This isn't a problem for me. If you want to take time to take care of yourself, that's a whole other matter, but this isn't." Leorio sighs, scrubbing the back of his head. "It's not a deal-breaker for me. I still want to date you, but. That's not important right now."

"I think it's still important," Kurapika murmurs, under Leorio's next words.

He covers the awkwardness with a large shrugs. "And besides, you said you didn't like me the way I like you, so it's a moot point.”

Kurapika lets out a quiet noise. “That's not- I lied.”
Alright, Leorio couldn't have heard that right. Stammering, he says, “What?”

And Kurapika reaches out, grasping Leorio's shirt as he folds his fingers carefully into the fabric.

Leorio's heart beats against the inside of his ribs.

“I lied. When I turned you down. I couldn't. There was so much that you didn't know and it's safer if you still don't know, but you keep finding out anyway. I just, I like you so much, Leorio,” Kurapika admits like the words hurt him to keep in any longer, his fists clenched, wrinkling the front of Leorio's dress shirt. “You're so good and I like you so much. I don't- I couldn't stand myself if I hurt you.”

“You can not-date me all you like for any reasons you have, except that one,” Leorio says. His words feel like they're coming as though from a distance, because Leorio isn't sure this isn't a dream.

(Kurapika likes him? So… he hadn't been wrong? At all?
There's still a chance?

And his heart, thick and heavy with sympathetic emotion, pounds anew with uncertain, desperate hope.)

Startled, Kurapika looks up. “What?”

“You can tell me anything and I'll accept it unless you even try to imply that you're not dating me for my own good. I can make my own mistakes, Kurapika. I can be hurt and walk out of it bleeding but alive and okay, and you don't get to decide that you don't want to date me for my own sake. You can do that for yourself, but not for me. Don't make my decisions for me. I don't have much to offer for someone as amazing as you, I know that.”

"This isn't about-" Kurapika cuts himself off, frustrated. “I'm not amazing.”

Squaring his shoulders, Leorio holds up one hand. He holds Kurapika’s gaze, steady, even though it's the most awkward moment for extended eye contact. Everything in him wants to run away, but here, Leorio finds a kernel of determination. "No, no, hear me out. Okay? I'm broke, I'm going to be in school forever and when I get out of it, I'm going to be in an incredible amount of debt; I'm short-tempered and rude, but here's the thing, Kurapika: I think you are one of the most incredible people I have ever met. You are driven and focused and incredibly funny when you stop being so uptight. I light up whenever I'm around you. You make me want to be better, to do better, because anything less than that is unacceptable. And you can't stop me from loving you. You can't stop me from worrying about you. I already do. I have. I will, until I get over this, and even then, I'm not going to stop worrying. I'm your friend, and honestly, I'm very, very good at worrying. It's what I do."

Leorio reaches out, uncertain of his welcome, to trace Kurapika's cheek. The skin is soft under his hand, and Kurapika does not move away. Leorio draws a deep breath. "I don't have much to offer, aside from a place in my heart. And it's already yours."

Kurapika's eyes flutter shut. He turns his face, just the smallest amount, into Leorio's hand. “Leorio, you can't just say things like that.”

“Why not?”

“You make me want to kiss you,” Kurapika admits in a rush of hot breath. “And I don't know what to do about it.”
“Hey, Kurapika?” Leorio asks, breathless. “I have a suggestion.”

“Yeah?”

“I think you should just go ahead and date me. Then we can kiss anytime.”

Kurapika's hands cup his face. Fiercely, Kurapika says, “Fine, yes, yes, you insufferable-“

Leorio has enough time to blink before shaking lips find his own. Skin, wet with tears, slides against his mouth, Kurapika's mouth half-open already, drawing in trembling breaths against Leorio's lips, and Leorio has half a mind to set his hands on Kurapika's shoulders and push him away. He touches Kurapika, intending to do just that, but. Kurapika rests his weight, trusting, against him, leaning into the contact. Heat spreads through him, centered from his chest. He wants so much. He wants to push Kurapika away, to make sure this is what the other really wants, but he also wants to just keep going.

And Leorio is not a strong person.

With a quiet groan, Leorio gives in, tilting his head to the side enough to slot his mouth against Kurapika's. It feels good. Better than good, it feels right somehow, and Leorio pulls Kurapika closer, moves their mouths together as Kurapika shivers and raises up more on his tiptoes, sliding his arms around Leorio's neck.

It's-

So much of what Leorio has wanted.

A tongue swipes against his lips, and Leorio opens without a second thought, chasing Kurapika's tongue back into his mouth, following it with a bite on the lush curve of Kurapika's lower lip

Back, and back, and Leorio goes easily, letting Kurapika lead him just a little, even as he smooths his hand down Kurapika's neck, gentling him, grounding out some of the anxious energy that curls around Kurapika like a vine. He turns the desperate, hungry motions of their mouths into something softer, gentler, though no less consuming. Every inhale Kurapika takes is tinged with a noise too soft to be a whine, too needy to be anything else. Leorio sighs into him. He is ablaze, tingling from head to toe, every atom of his body aligned on Kurapika's axis.

Kurapika presses forward, more and more, and Leorio finally pulls his mouth away long enough to say, “Woah, Kurapika-” Interrupted by a kiss that Leorio returns before trying again, “Hey, Kurapika, shh, slow down-”

“Please, Leorio, please,” Kurapika moans.

And damn.

Damn.

Kurapika saying that -almost begging- does things to Leorio's reptilian hindbrain that are frankly unspeakable. It takes a herculean effort to remember everything that came before, and Leorio runs his hands through Kurapika's hair, gentle, pulling them both out of the moment a little. “Kurapika,” Leorio says, rough, “sweetheart, I need you to slow down. This isn't a good idea right now.”

“No, no! Nothing like that. We’re both a little emotional right now, yeah, and I definitely don’t want this to be something you throw yourself into and then hate yourself for in the morning-“ and
Kurapika’s eyes flash. Nailed it. Unfortunately. Leorio squashes his inner sigh. He can be disappointed about that later, while he’s consoling himself in the bathroom. This is way too important to screw up. “-and besides, I just don’t have supplies for anything more than kissing, and I’d rather slow down before I do something rash.”

Kurapika blinks. “Supplies?”

Leorio raises an eyebrow at him, wry. “If you think I’m going to do anything without lube-”

“Oh my god, no.” His nose wrinkles, an adorable expression of distaste. Leorio laughs, and after a moment, Kurapika laughs with him.

It peters out after a moment and Kurapika settles back in Leorio’s lap, making himself comfortable instead of anything more. He loops his arms around Leorio’s neck, busies himself with looking somewhere around Leorio’s collarbones. Fond, Leorio mirrors the motion, grasping his own wrists behind the gentle slope of Kurapika’s back. He can hardly believe that he’s able to do this. That he knows what Kurapika’s weight across his thighs is truly like.

“The only way I’m doing anything more than this is if we’re dating,” Leorio says, steady and sure.

There is no hesitation before Kurapika nods. “I meant it when I said yes, Leorio.”

“I just- I wanted to be sure.” Leorio squeezes him gently. “You said no, before.”

Kurapika is quiet. Then, “I don’t get nice things, Leorio.”

“Am I a nice thing?”

“Don’t fish for compliments. It’s not a good look on you.”

Leorio grins, pleased, nuzzling into the soft curve of Kurapika’s neck. He smells really good here, a mix of his skin and his conditioner, and Leorio breathes him in, is allowed to breathe him in. His lips against Kurapika’s skin, he murmurs, “I’m gonna take that as a yes.”

“Can we still...” Kurapika begins again after a moment of shared silence.

Leorio runs his hand down Kurapika’s side. He daringly slides it beneath the thin barrier of Kurapika’s shirt, touching the warm skin beneath with greedy fingers, and when Kurapika only shifts to allow it, he begins smoothing his palm across Kurapika’s sides. Marveling at the simple fact that he’s even able to touch at all. “I dunno,” he murmurs, cheeky, kissing his way up Kurapika’s jaw to the carmine teardrop of his earring, “can we?”

He leans in-

…and his phone chirps, a text message tone.

Leorio starts. He mutters an apology to Kurapika before he half-stands, bracing Kurapika easily with one hand to the blond’s lower back to ensure he doesn’t fall as Leorio digs his phone out of his pants pocket. Above him, Kurapika grumbles half-heartedly, voice more interested than upset, thighs clenching around Leorio’s hips to keep his place.

“What have you two killed each other yet, or can we come back now? Alluka wants to swim in the pool and her phone is still dying,” Leorio reads. “If you don’t answer in five minutes, I’m assuming you’re either dead or desperately need help, so I’m gonna kick down the door, fair warning.”
Shit, he had absolutely forgotten about the kids.

From the look on Kurapika's face, he isn't alone in that, and Kurapika buries his forehead in Leorio's shoulder. “Damn it.”

“Let me make that call real fast and see what we need to do and then we can let the kids back in, yeah?”

“I'm still angry at them,” Kurapika says.

Leorio hums, tapping his fingers idly on the divot of Kurapika's spine, trying, still, to quell the happiness welling up within him that he even can. His hands are on Kurapika. Kurapika is in his lap, mouth red and eyes dark from kissing him. Kurapika is his boyfriend. “I know, but they weren't trying to snoop. And they talked to you about it instead of sneaking around trying to talk to me instead, right?”

“Only because I came in and confronted them. And they still dragged you into this.”

“I think they needed to. Gon and Killua are mature kids, but they're still sixteen. Finding out one of their friends has depression is uncertain ground for everyone, especially when they both look up to you so much. They probably weren't expecting you to explode at them, either,” Leorio says, chiding. “That was pretty out of line.”

Kurapika makes a soft sound, but nods. “Yeah. I know. I just. It all got to be so much. And this- this doesn’t fix my medication issue at all, because. I do need those. I can’t- I can’t keep being like this.”

Leorio drops a kiss against Kurapika’s soft hair, just because he can, because it makes Kurapika shiver and press closer to him. “Then how about I make this call while you take a shower, kinda reset yourself a little and decide what you want to say to them. I have some ideas as to what we can do about your meds, alright? Kids first. The pharmacy will be a whole other argument.”


“Hey.”

And Kurapika stops in his reluctant journey off Leorio's lap, gray eyes open and curious.

Leorio smiles. “I'm right here with you, alright? We’ve got this, together.”

For a long moment, Kurapika doesn't say anything. Then, he smiles too, the expression small and half-hidden and completely true. “I suppose we do.”
"Has he killed you yet?" Killua asks, voice crackling through the phone. "Because if he has, you need to tell Gon that I totally got dibs on all your stuff."

Leorio tries to not grin but it's a lost cause from the get-go. "If I was dead, do you really think I'd be wasting my time calling you of all people, brat? I'd be haunting the fuck outta someone. Also, thanks for assuming that I'd just die without a fight."

There's a pause. Then Killua asks, "Did you kill him? Leorio, do we have to hide a body? I know some tricks that dissolve bones, but we gotta move before the blood sets into the carpet too much."

"I didn't kill him either," Leorio hisses. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he sighs fondly. Useless. Why does he even bother keeping either of these kids around? They're just more trouble than they're really worth. Still, even this isn't enough to tamp down the happiness bubbling up in him every time he even so much as looks at the bathroom door, where Kurapika is taking a shower. "Look, we talked things out. He's calmer now, so you guys should come back upstairs."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"He won't yell at Alluka again, will he?" is what Killua asks, but Leorio hears the reservation in his voice and translates that directly to "he won't yell at me either, will he?" and lets out a long breath.

"He won't. I'll make sure of it if he starts, but he shouldn't yell at all."

Killua snorts. "Damn, you really did kill him."

"Oh fuck off."
Leorio hangs up and fiddles with the phone in his hand, turning it on and off again with little mind to actually use the damn thing. His mouth tingles. His body can still recall the weight of Kurapika in his arms, across his lap, swaying sweetly up into him, and the low hiss of the shower fills the space between his pounding heart. Leorio is hyper-aware of every place they touched, and he puts his own hand on his chest just to try and force his breath to catch. Like, seriously, damn, he’s kissed people before. He’s done a lot more than just kissing some people. None of those people have been Kurapika before today, and even though it feels silly to think of it as different somehow, it is different. It feels as though it wasn’t merely a kiss. It was a resolution of chords. The ache of a stretch finally relaxing into a low warmth. The slide from deep night into breaking sunrise and bright day. Something wondrous and beautiful for all its commonality.

He’s been paying too much attention to Kurapika’s poetry lately, it seems.

“Leorio?”

Jeez, he hadn’t even noticed the water turning off. How long has he just been sitting here and playing with his phone? Leorio looks up at Kurapika, and the greeting on his tongue dies in the face of his pale, shaking hands, clenched tightly in the folds of the towel draped over his shoulders, the tense line of his jaw. Standing, Leorio goes to him, awkward and hovering. “Hey, you alright?”

Kurapika’s eyes are fixed on the door. “Are they mad?”

Leorio blinks, brows furrowed. Slowly, gently, he says, “No one’s mad at you, Kurapika. Maybe a bit spooked, but no one’s angry. Why do you think they might be?”

“I just went off the handle over… over nothing? They probably hate me for yelling and being a total-“ Kurapika fumbles for a word, shakes his head, and Leorio reaches for him because he can now, cautiously offering his hand for Kurapika to take. He ignores it, or doesn’t see it, clenching his “Fucking bastard to them, and I don’t blame them. Why wouldn’t they? I’m awful and petty and a fucking. Black hole of a human being-“

“Hey there, woah-“ Leorio starts, but Kurapika, trembling and staring into a dimension Leorio can’t see, doesn’t slow down.

“I’m not worth it, Leorio. I’m just not worth anyone’s time or attention because, at the core of it all, this is- This is who I am.” He makes a gesture, shrugging wide, helpless. “This is all I am.”

Leorio takes a deep breath. Considers this with all the words held like marbles in his mouth. Nods, lowering his hand. “You know, Kurapika, can you do me a favor?”

The noise he gets isn’t the most enthusiastic, but he’ll take what he can get.

“For just a moment, fuck the shut your mouth,” Leorio says, solemn.

Kurapika blinks.

Then snorts, one hand flying up to cover his mouth and the smile that threatens its corners, and his grey eyes return from the middle distance to meet Leorio’s gaze. “You just-“

“I know what I said.” He hadn’t quite expected the laughter, but he’d take anything that backed Kurapika away from that yawning, terrifying ridge of thought where Leorio could not follow. Sometimes, a little absurdity can go a long way.

“You completely messed that up,” Kurapika laughs. “Who says things like that, Leorio?”
“Well, since I just said it, me. I say things like that. So your mouth. Fuck. The shut. It up.”

The burst of laughter is louder this time, and when Leorio reaches out, Kurapika meets him halfway, threading their fingers together and squeezing. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“It made you laugh so it doesn’t have to.” Leorio squeezes back. “And you’re more than what you think, okay? I like you plenty, and the kids like you too. Don’t decide other people’s emotions for them. Nervousness about how this is going to go is okay, but it’s not a good reason to self-flagellate.”

Kurapika slants him a wry look. “I have some news for you.”

“I know it’s hard to resist the urge to, but not actively encouraging the impulse can’t hurt,” Leorio says, just as the door opens. Gon pokes his head in, as unafraid as ever, and his eyes light up when he spots Kurapika. He doesn’t feel the way Kurapika’s grip turns vicelike, clamping down on his fingers; Leorio soothes Kurapika with a comforting sweep of his thumb, gripping back equally hard as Killua and Alluka come in too.

There is a silent tableau, the kids across the room from the arguable adults (who are less adults and more also-overgrown-children with slightly more life experience, in Leorio’s opinion, but these things can be difficult to define and if he wants to get that technical, he’ll have to stop calling them ”the kids” in his head), before Alluka steps forward. “Kurapika, I’m sorry for going into your bag.”

“You don’t have to apologize;” Killua starts, but Kurapika shakes his head.

“It’s alright, Alluka. I… Shouldn’t have snapped the way I did.”

Snorting, Killua crosses his arms across his chest. “Yeah, what the fuck was that all about?”

Leorio coughs. “I should go to the- privacy, you know,” he stumbles, waving a hand, uncertain of his welcome. “So you guys can talk about this.”

A light touch on his arm stops him, and Leorio looks down at Kurapika. A soft, uncertain smile that Leorio is helpless to return before Kurapika’s fingers twist in the fabric and tug, a gentle motion. Leorio follows its bidding, leaning over to allow Kurapika to kiss him. Quick, dry, and chaste. But even that much floods Leorio’s veins with heat. He coughs, looks sideways at the kids.

The grin on Gon’s face is fit to split his damn face in half.

Killua, notably, looks between Kurapika and Leorio, his mouth twisted to the side

“You don’t need to leave on my account, Leorio,” Kurapika says. He takes a deep breath, steeling himself before facing the others again. “Hey, I’m … sorry for snapping at you all. I didn’t-. Well. I meant to. But you didn’t deserve it.”

Gon shrugs easily, accepting this without a fight, because Leorio’s little cousin is the best. He sits on the bed, pulling one leg up. “Sorry for digging through your bag without asking.”

That’s Alluka and Gon mostly defused, but Killua is still tense, shifting from foot to foot as he studies the wall somewhere around Kurapika’s shoulder. His eyes flick to Leorio every once in a while, brows furrowed tightly. “… So what, is that supposed to be it? A pair of “sorrys” and then we move on?”

“No.” Kurapika rubs his forehead, squeezes Leorio’s hand again, as though to gather strength. “No, I owe you an explanation. I haven’t been my best for … most of this trip and this last week especially
has been hard.” That statement stands, unanswered, as Kurapika searches for words and Killua waits to hear them. “More or less…. You found the medication I take for depression. I reacted badly. It’s… not something I like sharing about myself, but it is a facet of my life I cannot escape.”

Almost gently, Killua says, “Kurapika, you think we don’t know anything about depression? I- I have more friends with mental illnesses than without. It isn’t a big deal.” He must see the pinched look on Kurapika’s face that draws and holds up his hand. “Wait, no, that’s not exactly it. It is a big deal, but it’s not… bad? Like, I dunno. I still like you and want to be your friend, so it doesn’t… make me hate you. Or something like that. You’re still Kurapika. You were a dick for yelling, but I still like you.”

Gon darts forward to hug him, and Kurapika, startled, lets go of Leorio’s hand to allow it. Gon’s voice is muffled in the center of Kurapika’s chest when he speaks. “I was just really worried that you would be mad.”

“You still shouldn’t be digging around in other people’s stuff without permission,” Kurapika admonishes, but he strokes the short hairs at the back of Gon’s head, holds him tight, adjusts his arm for Killua to come in and hug him as well. And again when Alluka divebombs the hug party, laughing quietly.

“Are you going to be okay, though?” Gon asks, surfacing from the hug pile. “The bottle we found was empty.”

Kurapika looks at Leorio who shrugs and steps forward a little. Leorio says, “We’re working on that.”

Three hours of being on hold and swearing at the state of medical care in this fucking country later, a grumbling Leorio escorts Kurapika to the nearest Walgreens to pick up a single, innocuous orange bottle.

“Stop whining, Leorio,” Kurapika says, heartless as ever. “Be grateful that I still had a refill left on my prescription.”

“I am grateful, I’m also-“

“Mad at the establishment, yes I know.” Kurapika pats him on the chest, his eyes amused. “You’re going to be a menace with a sliding scale payment system, aren’t you? Poorest doctor ever.”

“Yeah well, the poorest doctor with the healthiest patients maybe,” Leorio grumbles, shoving his hands in his pockets. Kurapika’s faith in him, misaligned though it may be, settles his feathers at least a little, and he jerks his chin at the bottle indicatively. “You good to start those again?”

“Tomorrow at lunch, yes. I’ll be pretty dizzy the first day, so if we could take it slow.”

Leorio shrugs. “We don’t have to go anywhere tomorrow. See how you’re feeling the day after, alright?”

And Kurapika smiles up at him, a tender and cautious thing as the sliding doors close behind them, as Kurapika carefully winds his fingers between Leorio's and squeezes. “Alright.”
It’s not that easy, of course. If declarations of love and affection could solve anything regarding mental illness, Leorio would have confessed the moment he even had a hint of what was up, and the strength of his love would provide enough serotonin and dopamine to keep Kurapika on a constant happy-cloud. It’s just not that simple, no matter how much anyone wishes it so. But now, when Kurapika’s gaze goes a bit distant a few days later, when his shoulders droop and he listlessly stares out the window instead of reading, Leorio can reach over and offer his hand to hold. Now, Leorio can touch and support instead of hover.

“Don’t you need both hands on the wheel?” Kurapika asks, caressing the back of Leorio’s hand. He does not move to take it, nor to move away.

He shrugs. “When I do, I’ll let you know. But I’d really like to hold your hand right now.”

Ignoring the gagging noises from Killua (and giggling, courtesy both Gon and Alluka) in the backseat, Leorio wiggles his fingers indicatively. Kurapika raises an eyebrow, but Leorio can see the sweep of pink over his ears and the bridge of his nose as Kurapika sighs and gives in and slides his fingers between Leorio’s. Leorio lifts it and kisses the back of his hand.

In the rearview mirror, Leorio spots Gon looking at Killua speculatively. He hides a smile against Kurapika’s skin and keeps driving.

They’re maybe an hour and a half into Texas, driving south on I-45, the Dallas skyline looming high around them, when Killua and Alluka slam their hands against the window and Leorio has a heart attack in miniature.

“Leorio, pull over,” Alluka says, eyes wide.

“What?”

Killua speaks quickly and without pause. “Listen here, you useless geriatric piece of shit, that’s a fucking In-n-Out. In fucking Texas. That’s my life, my soul, my blood itself, I’ve been going through withdrawals man, it’s bad. I need a Double-Double animal style with animal style fries and pink lemonade stat.”

“You were literally in California last week! We’re not even to the hotel yet-“ he starts protesting, but trails off when Alluka gives him the world’s softest, most pleading eyes. The girl bypasses Gon’s by a mile and Leorio is weak, damn it.

“Screw your hotel, my life is at stake here.”

Leorio trades a look with Kurapika, but signals to move over anyway.

The things he does for these damn kids.

In-n-Out is extremely, blindingly white on the inside, and Killua’s head almost blends into the
background as he bounds up to the register, excitedly explaining all the different options to Gon. The menu overall seems pretty simple, so Leorio disregards it entirely in favor of watching Kurapika, caught by the flash of red near the curve of his throat and how much he’d like to put his mouth there.

“Leorio, eyes up here please,” Kurapika says, but he’s smiling.

Leorio scrubs at the back of his head, embarrassed. He’s still very new to being actually in a relationship, and as it turns out, boundaries are ill-defined and hard to negotiate, even when you’re trying your best, and Leorio never feels more clumsy than when he’s making a mistake. “Sorry, does it- is it bad? Me staring this much?”

Kurapika hums under his breath as they step up behind the kids. “I didn’t say that. I don’t mind you looking at me. You’ve always stared.”

Boldly, Leorio hooks their pinkies together, and Kurapika allows it. He doesn’t want to push for too much PDA, not in Texas of all places, but this much seems alright. “And this?”

“I wouldn’t let you do it if I didn’t want it, Leorio. This is fine too.”

After they sit, the three teens crowding into one half of the booth while Leorio puts one arm up behind Kurapika, to allow him to sit closer without actually touching, Kurapika pulls out a book, placing it on the table for a moment. Alluka peers at it, curious, and Gon watches both the book and her. Killua, on the other hand, pays attention to precisely none of them, carefully weaseling fries out from Gon’s basket and into his mouth, and when he sees that Leorio has spotted him, Killua only locks eyes with him, slowly continuing to eat the fries.

Not his basket, not his problem.

“That’s a different book,” Alluka says, pointing at it. “Did you finish your other one?”

Kurapika turns it over in his hands, fingers smoothing across the red cover and the wilted flower depicted on the front. The title, Rose, is traced by his fingertips. “Yes I did,” he says finally. Then, almost nervously, cautious as though he’s revealing himself to be vulnerable, “Would you like to hear one of the poems in here?”

Alluka gasps, delighted. “Please?”

Kurapika clears his throat as he thumbs through the pages, coming to a stop on one titled “From Blossoms,” where Leorio can see it over his shoulder. He begins.

“From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.”

There is a solemn quiet.

Then Gon squawks, finally noticing Killua’s determined theft of his fries, which immediately
distractions Alluka’s attention from them. The three are immediately lost to a laughing squabble, and
Leorio grins at Kurapika.

“Bad time for poetry?” Leorio offers, and Kurapika sighs, resigned. He closes his book, narrowly
missing a spatter of food landing where the open page had just been, and quickly tucks it off to the
side before it can be threatened anymore.

“Apparently. There’s no accounting for taste, though.”

After they finally drag Killua and Alluka out of the small slice of their homeland and back onto the
highway towards the hotel Leorio’s heading for, Killua bemoaning the loss of his “culture” the entire
way, Leorio looks over at Kurapika, idly reading the poem again, and asks, “Was this another of
your mother’s books?”

Kurapika smiles, tracing the edge of the page. “Yes. The poem I read earlier was another of her
favorites, and mine as well.”

“I liked it too,” Leorio blurts, and Kurapika must hear the “I like you,” that’s definitely buried in
there because his smile turns a bit fond as he pats Leorio’s knee.

“I’m glad. Keep driving.”

What follows is a moment of Leorio’s impulse absolutely taking control. Daringly, Leorio puts his
hand on Kurapika’s thigh, fingers following the inner seam of his pants idly in gentle, repetitive
motions. He can hear Kurapika’s breath hitch, the way it stutters as his touch trails higher, then
release as it retreats, barely audible over the rumble of the road. Really, he shouldn’t pay it as much
attention as he does but every minute shift is magnetizing, drawing Leorio’s focus like a compass to
ture north, and he can’t stop.

(Well, that’s not fair. He absolutely can. But he doesn’t want to, and really, isn’t that the bigger
issue?)

“Leorio,” Kurapika says with no real intent. “Careful.”

Leorio bites back a smile. “I’m not doing anything.”

A hum. “You’d better keep not doing anything.”

Behind them, the kids chatter, Gon and Killua’s breaking voices punctuated by Alluka’s clear tones
as they excitedly talk about- something. A game, Leorio thinks, that Gon and Killua play together
that they’re planning on bringing Alluka into as well. It sounds fun, for all that he doesn’t understand
half of what they’re going on about.

Fuck, he is old.

Old, but with his hand on Kurapika’s thigh, so overall, Leorio’s counting this as a win. He finally moves his hand when their exit comes up, nearly half an hour later.

Tellingly, Kurapika has not turned a single page.

“What are you doing?” Killua asks suspiciously as Leorio passes him and Gon one set of keys and conspicuously keeps another set for himself.

Leorio sniffs. “Getting two hotel rooms, not that it’s any of your business.”

Killua’s eyes dart from Leorio to Kurapika with an unholy gleam of comprehension that Leorio would pay money to never see again. “Ohhh I see, you want some alone time with your boyfriend,” he singsongs, because he’s literally asking for death. Alluka shoves him along to their room, rolling her eyes the whole time, and Gon just. Gon fucking gives him a thumbs up and Leorio hates him. Hates these little gremlins that have come along and made him feel embarrassed about his totally normal libido in regards to his excessively attractive boyfriend.

Kurapika raises an eyebrow when Leorio mentions two separate rooms but only nudges him with his shoulder before looking away, biting down on a pleased smile.

“I need to run to the store for just a second, but uh… See you up in the room?” Leorio says, thumb catching on Kurapika’s belt loop, stroking the curve of his hip. The magnetic push-and-pull of their skin is unbearable, Leorio wanting to touch, to consume, to live with his skin never parted from Kurapika’s, and he has to breathe through the want and focus on Kurapika’s lips, the words they form. The words themselves.

Taking the key from him, Kurapika’s eyes sparkle with mischief. It’s such a good look, seeing him snarky and almost flirtatious instead ofcoldly furious, that Leorio can’t help but smile. “Yes, I’ll see you there. Have fun shopping.”

Condoms and lube are a combo purchase that Leorio has made before, but there’s something sleazy about picking them up in a hotel lobby’s store that has Leorio’s neck hot, embarrassment and anticipation clawing up his insides. Leorio studiously does not meet the eye of the clerk as he forks over a twenty. The clerk, who has almost certainly seen worse, doesn’t seem to care either way as they pass back Leorio’s change and the bag holding his purchases with hardly even a blink and barely a word.

Thank god. If he had to make small talk, Leorio probably would have just immolated right there on the spot.

When he gets to the hotel room, Kurapika is already lounging on the bed, fingers idly tracing aimless patterns in the duvet. He looks. Divine. Lit gently, intimately, by the low golden hotel lights, and Leorio’s heart skips a beat before starting again, slow and deep. Something like anticipation rolls over him.

Kurapika smiles. “So a hotel room just to ourselves? What on earth could you be planning here,
“Well, I had some thoughts,” Leorio says, moving to stand between Kurapika's invitingly spread legs.

“Did you? Were they about poetry or something else?” Kurapika asks, trailing touches up Leorio's chest, his shoulders, winding his hands behind Leorio's neck to pull him down for a kiss. "I have my suspicions, Leorio."

“Oh to take what we love inside?” Leorio recites cheekily, leaning down to mouth at Kurapika’s neck, and he gets swatted on the arm, chuckling the whole time.

“Naughty, Leorio,” Kurapika chides, even as he tilts his head to allow the attention to his neck, sinking warmly into Leorio’s grasp. Leorio makes a sound that’s probably agreeable but is more distracted by the skin beneath his teeth than anything else. He presses back, just to see if he can, and Kurapika goes, smiling up at Leorio, his hair spread across the hotel pillowcase. Archly, he asks, “Enjoying yourself?”


“Somehow, I’ll survive. I’m sure we’ll manage together. From blossom to blossom to impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom,” Kurapika says against his mouth, and then the two of them don’t say much of anything important for a long while.

Killua looks them over the next morning over breakfast judgmentally, nose wrinkling.

“Gross,” he declares. “Disgusting. Blocked, unfollowed, neither of you is free from sin.”

“Kissing is absolutely something adults in relationships can do, you know,” Leorio says primly. Killua’s eyes dart down to his neck pointedly. “You should tell Kurapika to aim a little lower if he wants your shirts to cover the hickeys he leaves.”

“You assume I want his shirts to cover them,” Kurapika says, serene and confident as Leorio slaps a hand over his neck like he can find the offending mark by touch alone. “Maybe I’m making a statement.”

“Gross.”

Gon holds up his hand, palm towards Kurapika, who sighs but smiles as he high-fives Gon. "Come on, Killua, be happy for them! They're in love."

"Are we planning on going anywhere today?" Kurapika asks, turning his face into Leorio's shoulder as the kids chatter.

Leorio hums, resting his cheek against Kurapika's soft hair. "We don't have to, no. Are you feeling okay?"

"Not really. I think... I'm getting a migraine."
"You think?" Leorio echoes, shifting to examine Kurapika's admittedly wan face. Frowning, he wishes there were some external signs of an oncoming migraine, something he could definitely diagnose, but other than the pinched look around Kurapika's mouth, the way his eyes seem to try to avoid direct light, there isn't much he can go on besides Kurapika's word. Which is more than enough, mind, but Leorio's training to be a doctor, damn it. "I'm sure no one will mind sticking around here an extra day, if you want to go lay down? There's a few museums nearby, and Gon's always ready for the pool."

As if summoned by the word, Gon whirls towards them, eyes sparkling. "Pool?"

"See?"

"Truly remarkable," Kurapika says, wincing just a little. His hand comes up to his left temple, pressing in, and he sighs. "I'm sorry, Leorio, I just-"

Leorio waves him off. "You don't need to apologize. Come on, let's get you up there safe and sound. See you all at the pool a little later?"

The three kids nod, Alluka flashing him a huge grin.

After checking with the hotel that it was okay to extend their stay another few nights, Leorio tucks Kurapika in and leaves him with a bottle of water and a few soft kisses before making his way to the hotel's pool. Interestingly, Gon is sitting off to the side, watching Killua and Alluka play in the water with an inscrutable look on his face. Something between fond and distant that has Leorio approaching him instead of the water.

"Gon." Leorio sits next to him, offering the kid the second bottled water he picked up at the vending machine. "How're you holding up?"

The curious stillness holds Gon steady, even as he blinks, turn towards Leorio. The motions seem almost an afterthought, Gon caught in a contemplative distance. These moods don't come over Gon often, but Leorio's seen it happen enough to not be completely phased. After a moment, Gon takes the cold bottle and nods. "I'm alright."

"I expected you to be in the water by the time I got down here."

"Mm. I kind of just... wanted to sit for a little."

"Fair. I imagine even you need a break from Killua every once in a while."

That makes an interesting expression cross Gon's face. "I don't think I'll ever need to take a break from Killua."

Leorio whistles lowly. "That's quite the declaration. So when are you gonna ask Killua out~," Leorio teases, prodding Gon in the cheek. "I think you two would work so well together, it's a miracle that you guys haven't managed it yet."

Gon bats his hands away, sputtering, energy returning like color to his continence. "It! There hasn't really been a good time, okay? And... I don't really know how. To ask"

"How? You just kinda... do."

"Le-o-ri-o, what if he says no!"

Leorio shrugs. "Then things are a little awkward until you guys find your even keel again. He
hitchhiked his way across the country just to see you. You really think something like asking him out would irrevocably ruin things?"

“No, but. I don’t want things to change, either.”

“Except that’s not quite true either, is it?” Gon looks up at him, mouth twisted and a grim resignation to his eyes, and Leorio pats him on the shoulder. “It would be alright for things to not change for a little bit, but eventually something’s going to change whether you want it to or not. That’s the way of things.”

“Says the guy who had a crush on Kurapika for three years and said nothing,” Gon mutters mutinously, but he seems somehow resigned. Leorio pats him on the shoulder again as Gon takes a deep breath, in and in, slow, and then lets it out in one dizzying huff. “I should say something. So I can know, sooner rather than later, and get to fixing things if they need fixing.”

“And if things don’t need fixing, then you’ll have more time with him. It’s a win-win plan.”

“What if I do something really stupid?” Gon asks in a quiet voice. “What if it ruins everything?”

“What if you do nothing and it ruins everything anyway? It’s a road trip, Gon. Be brave. I did something stupid and it worked out for me.”

Gon wrinkles his nose. “Endless optimism is kinda annoying when you’re trying to be scared of something, isn’t it?”

Leorio laughs, clapping him on the back. “A bit, sorry. Look, what I’m trying to say is: you and Killua are close. And you’ll recover if he turns you down. It’ll be better to know than to not know.”

Gon turns this over, staring at the bottle between his hands. “Leorio, we have to go back home soon, don’t we?”

His tongue is thick in his mouth. Leorio looks down at his hands. Flexes them. Threads them together at the fingers, rolling his thumbs around each other in soothing circular motions. Then he nods, mouth pressed into a thin line. “Yeah. We’re getting close to being done with this trip, I think. We can’t just leave Mito’s house empty all summer, and I can’t afford hotel rooms forever.”

Gon is silent as he thinks. His stillness surprises Leorio; usually, it’s hard enough to get Gon to stop. It just makes times like these even more alarming, when all his energy turns inwards. Perhaps it shouldn’t be startling. Gon burns his brightest after giving himself a moment to set his feet properly, standing tall under any adversity thrown his way. Sure enough, Gon nods firmly, his mind made up.

“Alright, that should be fine then.”

“Should it?”

“Yeah. We’ll figure it out, Killua and I.” Gon grins widely up at Leorio, his teeth a flash of white in his brown face. “You and Kurapika have already figured it out, haven’t you?”

Leorio sputters a little bit. “You saw us kiss this morning.”

“Yeah, but like. That’s kissing. There’s kissing and then there’s knowing you’ll stay together.”

“Then… Fuck, damn, kid, that’s heavy shit. Don’t just throw that on me!” Leorio scrubs at the back of his head, frowning. Come to think of it... “Besides I… don’t know what he’s planning on after this.”
Gon tilts his head. “He’s staying in Mito’s house for the rest of the summer, isn’t he?”

“After this summer, though. I don’t know where he’s going to law school.”

“You'll make it work,” Gon says with the sure knowledge that he's frequently capable of. Leorio laughs a little, nudging him. Funny how their roles have reversed over the course of this conversation.

"Endless optimism."

"Yeah," Gon agrees, setting the water bottle on the table. "Anyway, I'm bored with this now. I have more important things to do instead of moping. Cannonball!"

"Don't run by the pool, you-"

"Absolute madman!" Killua crows as Gon surfaces from his massive cannonball, pushing his dark hair away from his face. Killua swims over, grinning. "What took you so long? We were just about to go drag you back in."

Alright, Killua has this now, and Leorio isn't about to give himself a heart attack worrying anymore. Not deliberately, anyway. Pointedly turned away from the ruckus the brats are making, Leorio dunks himself in the pool for an untold amount of time, letting the chlorine and cool water soothe some of the aches from the road that have set further into his muscles than he thought possible. It almost, almost, makes him glad to know that they'll be stopping soon.

Almost, except for the still unspoken question of Kurapika. Closer, now, than he was before, but held all the more delicately. Precious and cradled for fear of loss.

This is too morose for the pool, damn it. Leorio submerges one more time then leaves it for the kids to enjoy. By the time he's back in the room, chilled from the walk, Leorio's back is tight, shoulders hunched and tense as he overthinks everything again and again and a-fucking-gain. But then, there is Kurapika. Asleep and breathing quietly, and Leorio's weak. He's always been weak, and desperate to hold onto anything that he can, anything that even for a moment lets itself be his. Leorio slides into bed. Carefully, he loops his arm around Kurapika's hips, drawing him into the curve of Leorio's body, burying his face in Kurapika's warm, soft hair.

His thumb traces a gentle circle on Kurapika's skin, slower and slower until, drawn in by the comforting scent of Kurapika's skin, Leorio drifts into the mid-dark of sleep, warm all along his front, and only warmer when fingers slide between his own in the moments before he succumbs completely.

Holding and held close, and hoping that it will be enough.

Chapter End Notes

The extra "press me to your heart", happens after the end of this chapter. Be warned that there's sexual content in that extra, as much as I'm trying to keep the main story clear of that. I'll probably add another with Leorio and Kurapika's first time together, but that'll be later. Love you guys
how i love your smile

Chapter Summary

Gon gives him a look. “Two weeks ago, you were telling Killua and me to butt out of your business.”

Primly, Leorio says, “No, two weeks ago, Kurapika was telling you to butt out of our business. I listened to you, and now we’re dating.” He gives Killua an evaluative glance and pats Gon on the shoulder. “Look, you know how to take no for an answer. I promise you won’t ruin things between you. Knowing is better than not, right?”

Chapter Notes

For the last day of Leopika week 2018, I give you! An update!! congrats, i'm so tired.

Title comes from "The Empty Bottle" by Archive, which is a great song I love it so much

A warm weight presses Leorio down across his waist and on his shoulder, and the sight of Kurapika's golden hair first thing in the morning is no less awe-inspiring than ever. Leorio's breath catches, and he has to force himself to let it go. His eyes catch on the flyaway strands of hair, the careful light sweep of Kurapika's lashes across his cheeks, the subtle part of his lips. Lips that Leorio has kissed.

He grins. That's never going to get old.

But as sweet as it is for him to keep staring at his boyfriend - (his fucking boyfriend) - while he sleeps, mother nature is an impatient bitch who has a vice grip on his bladder. Carefully, Leorio extricates himself, mindful of the little murmur Kurapika makes when he has to be moved. It's a truly pitiful sound, one that makes Leorio want to curl up and stay in his warmth forever and sure maybe Leorio's only heard the sound for a few days but that time means nothing to the inexorable determination of Leorio's heart. It grows attached at the slightest hint of tenderness whether Leorio wants it to or not. Leorio knew he was a goner the moment he found Kurapika asleep in their shared study room three weeks after they first met and his heart clenched, when Kurapika brought him coffee to share a week after that, when he said yes to this roadtrip three years later.

Okay seriously, he needs to stop being mushy, get up, and piss.

By the time he returns, Kurapika has unconsciously and viciously stolen his way onto Leorio's abandoned side of the bed, leaving his own open and Leorio takes absolute advantage of this to sneak back under the covers and find the warmth he left behind. There's a bubble of lingering heat that Leorio slides into, tucking his legs up behind Kurapika's knees (and jesus, he knows he has it bad when the fact that their leg hair rubs together makes him grin like an utter sap), and Leorio presses a gentle kiss into Kurapika's hair. His boyfriend.
His depressed boyfriend, who may or may not even be staying in the same town as he is once they’re done with this trip and is categorically bad at answering his phone or messages even when Leorio has him pinned on a five block radius.

Leorio lets out a sigh. It’s too damn early for these kinds of thoughts. Shoo, he thinks irately, spooning up against Kurapika as though that will stave them off. No one needs this kind of negativity when a hot blond is in their arms, shoo shoo.

That... works about as well as he expected it to.

(Which is not at all.)

"You're not subtle, you know," Kurapika says, his voice a low husky rasp. Leorio twitches, and Kurapika looks over his shoulder to meet his guilty look with a heavy-lidded stare. The corners of his eyes are crusted over. Leorio even thinks that's cute, which is honestly kind of disgusting and he's starting to really weird himself out now.

"What do you mean?" Leorio asks instead of anything embarrassing. He can control himself out loud at least. For the most part.

Kurapika rolls over, grumbling under his breath even as he stays close to Leorio. "I can feel you thinking from here. It's not quiet." He touches Leorio's face with gentle, uncoordinated fingers. "What's wrong?"

Shaking his head, Leorio is careful not to dislodge the tender touch. "Nothing, I'm just. Overthinking things. As usual."

"Mmm, you should stop that." Kurapika closes the distance between them, kissing Leorio with an ease that should be startling instead of sweet. The contact starts simple, but Leorio can't help but to slide his tongue against the seam of Kurapika's lips, a poor simulacrum of the motions of their bodies the night before. Kurapika opens for him and Leorio tilts his head, drags his teeth across the soft swell of Kurapika's lower lip. Pulling back, Kurapika asks, “What on earth are you overthinking this early in the morning?"

Leorio pushes his face into the space between Kurapika’s neck and pillow instead of answering. A hand drags up the back of Leorio’s scalp, where he can feel himself going a little scruffy and unkempt after close to a month on the road, his carefully maintained haircut losing all definition without Zepile here to shear it down for him again. It's long enough now that Kurapika can curl his hands into it a little.

"Leorio," Kurapika says, careful with all the syllables of his name.

Leorio sighs but makes sure to pull his mouth free enough to answer clearly. “I’m just worried about going home. Y’know. Future stuff.”

Warm lips press to his temple. “There are better things to think about right now.”

Snorting, Leorio grins. Yeah, he’s face-down against Kurapika with his hand making steadily upwards progress beneath Kurapika’s shirt, feeling the soft skin beneath as Kurapika shifts to allow it. He makes an interested noise and loses several minutes trailing his lips up and down Kurapika’s neck, feeling him shiver.

"Leorio, wait," Kurapika murmurs, and Leorio leaves off his exploration of the sensitive curve of Kurapika's neck to notice his clenched hands, the uncertain cant of his mouth.
It's like being drenched in cold water. Retreating is the work of a moment, giving Kurapika space so that Leorio isn't crowding him. "Is everything okay?"

Kurapika nods, then shrugs, and he refuses to meet Leorio's eyes. "Slow down a little?"

Ah, alright. Leorio feels his muscles relax, and he settles himself back on the bed beside Kurapika easily. "Sorry. A bit much this early in the morning?"

"A little."

"Sorry," Leorio says again. Should he move closer? Should he move away? He doesn't know if he should even touch Kurapika right now, not with how tense he had seemed. But Kurapika solves this problem neatly by grabbing Leorio's hand and putting it on his waist. Obligingly, Leorio strokes his side. "Better?"

Kurapika smiles. "Better."

Leorio scoots in, nuzzles the side of Kurapika’s face. “How’s your head, babe?”

“Mm, I still feel a little off balance. Stuffy, almost?” Leorio can feel the flutter of Kurapika's eyelashes and the wrinkle of his nose as he makes a face. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, but I tried sitting up when you were in the bathroom and that was a bad plan.”

“Migraines are bastards.”

“They really are.” Kurapika kisses him. “Your face is stubbly.”

Leorio grins. “I can shave.”

Kurapika’s eyes are dark as he says, “I didn’t say I minded.”

“Hey, Kurapika?” Leorio asks, suddenly breathless. Heat swarms him, a crawling fire from head to toe.

“Yeah?”

“Can I… is it okay if I kiss you?”

Kurapika’s hands clench in Leorio’s collar and Kurapika’s answer is lost in the press of their lips.

"We should get up," Kurapika gasps.

"I don't know about you, but I'm already there," Leorio says, kissing the wings of Kurapika's collarbones. He absolutely deserves the smack he gets for that, laughing and chasing the movement of Kurapika's body all the way down to its inevitable conclusion.

“Welp,” Leorio says, looking out the front of their hotel at the downpour outside. He can barely see the line of cars parked outside, and sends an uncertain glance down the street. It’s practically a river
with how much water is flowing on it, and he heads back inside, his hands tucked deep into his pockets.

Hooking a thumb over his shoulder, he says, “It’s fucking wet outside.”

“Holy shit, really?” Killua replies dryly, not even looking up from his phone. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Shut up, gremlin. My point being that it’s wet and either we can try to drive through it, or we can find something in town to do.”

Gon raises his hand, waving wildly. “Can we go see a movie?”

“What, so these two can make out in the dark? Pass.”

“Killua!”

“It’s either that or smelling Gon’s wet feet for the next seven hours,” Kurapika says. He ignores Gon’s protest – “My feet don’t smell!!” – and continues with, “I just want to take today easy. A movie and a bookstore sounds like perfect activities, honestly. We can continue on tomorrow.”

They devolve into a discussion, trying to decide where to go and what movie to see, and Leorio sidles over to a now-silent Gon. When it becomes clear that he’s not going to react, Leorio nudges Gon. “What’s up?”

It’s telling that Gon doesn’t even take his eyes off of Killua, clearly caught on the curve of his smile as Killua laughs with Alluka over something. “Nothing, I’m just. Thinking.”

“Thinking? Not your strong suit. C’mon, kid, bolster your courage and just go for it.”

Gon gives him a look. “Two weeks ago, you were telling Killua and me to butt out of your business.”

Primly, Leorio says, “No, two weeks ago, Kurapika was telling you to butt out of our business. I listened to you, and now we’re dating.” He gives Killua an evaluative glance and pats Gon on the shoulder. “Look, you know how to take no for an answer. I promise you won’t ruin things between you. Knowing is better than not, right?”

“Now’s just… not the time, Leorio.”

Killua sneaks a glance at them, clearly watching Gon more than Leorio, something vulnerable in his expression, and Leorio pats Gon on the shoulder again. “That’s okay, Gon. Just think about it. And let’s go see a movie, alright?”

“Hey, Leorio,” Killua says a day later, as they pull into a small motel in the middle of nowhere, Arkansas. “Can I talk to you?”

Oh this’ll be good, Leorio’s sure. He lifts his suitcase and sets it down on the ground, giving Killua a curious look. “Sure, brat, what’s up?”

“Has…” and Killua chews on his lip, glancing uncertainly at the other three as they head inside. “Has Gon been acting weird, or am I just seeing things?”
“Weird how?” Leorio asks, fighting down a grin. He was right. This is amazing. No wonder the kids had looked so delighted all the time while he and Kurapika were figuring their shit out. This is kind of a great position to be in. “He’s always weird.”

“Yeah, but like. Different weird. Weirder than usual. He’s. Jumpy around me. “Killua frowns, glaring down at his hands like they’ve done something to offend him. “Just around me. Like, earlier, I tried to show him something on my game and he flinched and… he’s never done that before, Leorio. Did I do something?”

Leorio shoves his hands in his pockets. “Nah, I don’t think so. Give him a bit, alright? If something’s bothering him, he can come talk to you about it. Or, you can always ask him directly.”

Killua’s mouth twitches to the side. “Yeah, I’m sure that’ll go well.”

“If you don’t ask, you’ll never know.” Leorio’s pretty sure that with how often he’s saying that these days, it’ll start showing up on his body, a testament to how frequently it occurs. Damn kids and their emotional issues. He ruffles Killua’s hair. “Come on, emotional transparency is good. You two are close. You can handle getting a bit deep about some shit, can’t you?”

“Can we?”

“That’s up to you two to figure out, isn’t it?”

Killua snorts. “Can you say anything without it being a question?”

Snidely as he heads up the stairs to their room, Leorio asks, “I dunno, can I?”

“Oh get bent, old man.”

He laughs as he opens the door, letting Killua slip past him. Something catches Leorio’s eyes, and he looks over at Alluka, sitting with her hands folded on the edge of the bed. Her brows are drawn together, an uncharacteristically disconsolate look on her face as she watches Gon and Killua jostle each other, digging in their bags for changes of clothes. Her backpack, slim and half opened, rests on the bed behind her, and understanding comes.

Leorio crouches in front of Alluka. “Hey kid.”

She gives him a wan little smile. “Hi.”

“Everything alright?”

Alluka nods, stubborn, her mouth firming up. “Yeah, everything’s okay. I just…”

"You really don't have much in the way of clothes, do you?" Leorio says with a frown, looking her bag over.

Alluka's hands twist in front of her. "Not... really, no. I only had a few clothes I liked, since…"

Leorio looks up when she doesn't continue, makes another few uncomfortable leaps of logic that conclude with him sending vicious thoughts in California’s direction. Outwardly, he just shrugs, his frown only deepening. "And you didn't have a lot of time to grab what you did like, huh?"

She nods. Her eyes don’t lift from the floor.

Well fuck. "That won't do at all. Come on, your brother likes to dress like he's coming off the runway. Not a compliment, by the way. The least we can do is get you a good sundress."
Alluka's head snaps up. "A sundress?"

"Yeah, something flowy and pretty." Leorio scrubs at the back of his neck. She doesn't have to look at him like that. He's just trying his best, awkward and ham-handed, and damn it, Ging's money can go to something good since the man himself hasn't managed anything decent in his life. Aside from Gon, anyway. "Something you like, anyway. And more than that, too. You probably need shorts. Hell, you just need clothes you like that fit you well. We can go to like, Goodwill or something. Maybe Target even. Just get you some new stuff for you to keep."

"That would be really nice," Alluka says, and it's pretty clear that she's trying her best to not bounce off the walls.

Leorio grins at her. "Go on, then. Get dressed in what you have, and let's tell the boys-"

"Let's tell the boys that we're kidnapping you for the afternoon and they're on their own," Kurapika interjects.

What?

Shooting Kurapika a confused look, Leorio scoffs. There's no reason the brats shouldn't come along too, in his opinion. It's not like they haven't all gone shopping on this trip before, though that's always been, admittedly, souvenir and window shopping only. A little shopping for clothes isn't going to be the end of the world.

Kurapika lets out a tiny sigh. "Leorio."

Oh, that sounds significant. Leorio cocks his head at Kurapika, who raises his eyebrows pointedly and looks between Gon and Killua. The two of them are off talking on their own, having paid almost no attention to the other three this entire time, Gon leaning against Killua's side as he talks about a game on his phone. Whatever shyness he was having earlier clearly isn't present now.

Carefully picking out his words, Kurapika says, "Let's give them a little time to themselves today."

A knot binds itself in Leorio's chest. Sure, sure, let the kids have some time alone. That's fine.

Ah, fuck, who is he kidding. He got Kurapika and himself a separate hotel room barely a day ago for the exact same reason. With a sigh, Leorio acquiesces. "Alright, alright. Hey, brats, get ready to go. You two get to find something to do today."

Gon’s head jerks up, and he stares at Leorio, eyes wide. "Just the two of us?"

"Yup," Leorio says, popping the 'p' sound. "Unless you really want to go with us and take hours and hours shopping for clothes. I'm sure you guys would rather be… outside? Or at least doing something you're both interested in."

Killua opens his mouth, but.

Closes it, his eyes narrowing as he looks between Kurapika and Leorio, and then flicks a short, almost hopeful glance at Gon. Then, carefully, he shrugs. "Alright. Sounds good to me."

Hopefully, that'll be enough. Leorio nudges Alluka with a grin. "Come on, let's go have some fun in a Goodwill. You can try on whatever you like."

Goodwill is, as ever, too brightly lit for comfort, but Alluka takes to it gleefully. Once Leorio starts grabbing shirts and skirts and dresses liberally off the racks and handing them to her to try on, she
gets past the immediate uncertainty and really starts hunting for things she likes on her own, leaving Kurapika to his own devices in the kitschy homeware section.

Leorio pulls out more and more stuff, brightly colored and ranging from “things Killua would wear” and “things normal people think look good”, and he accompanies Alluka to the dressing room.

“Go on, just try stuff on,” Leorio urges Alluka, ushering her into a stall. “I’ll hold things out here, okay?”

“You’re sure you don’t want to look around yourself? I can manage on my own,” she offers.

Leorio shakes his head. “Nah, come on. Let me do this, okay? I have enough clothes. I don’t need to be bringing back even more.”

She wrinkles her nose cutely at him, but disappears into the changing room without more of a fight.

Which leaves Leorio to settle his back against the wall and let out the breath he’s been holding. Something grey and sucking settles around his heart, pulling the good mood out of his falling smile, because he bets Killua and Gon are off having a great time on their own, and with any luck, they’ll have pulled their collective heads out of their asses and they’re busy… holding hands or something.

God, Leorio hopes they can keep their teenage hormones to themselves long enough that he won’t have to find them making out in the back of his car.

Of course, that means they’ll have to start dating first, which means someone’s going to have to make the first move, and it’ll never be Killua. So really, all of this depends on whether or not Gon will be able to bring himself to ask Killua out and-

He needs to stop worrying about this, honestly. Leorio is doing nothing except working himself up.

There’s the soft scuff of a footstep, and Leorio opens his eyes. He spots Kurapika instantly, tension draining from his shoulders at the sight of him, a small bit of warmth growing when Kurapika sees Leorio and visibly perks up, heading over.

“I’m glad you decided to take her out like this,” Kurapika says, coming up beside Leorio. “She seems happy.”

“Yeah. It’s a damn shame she had so few clothes. I can’t believe I didn’t notice.”

Kurapika laughs, covering his mouth with his hand. “I was wondering when your sartorial senses were going to kick in,” he teases. “It was only a matter of time really. How about you, hm? Do you need any more shirts? Terrible ties? Can I convince you to wear a truly heinous pair of shorts?”

“Have you found a truly heinous pair of shorts? I’ll try them on. Double points if they’re a terrible plaid so I can pair it with a hideous striped shirt.”

Another laugh. Kurapika shifts so he’s closer, and Leorio can feel his heat through his clothes, comforting and new in turns. “Alright, now, what’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter? Nothing’s the matter,” Leorio says. He can feel the back of his neck heating up and embarrassment squiggles through his gut because the low ride of dissatisfaction is unfair and he should have better hold of himself already, damn it. Twenty-three years old. Come on.

A quick glance tells him that Kurapika is buying absolutely none of his bullshit. He crosses his arms. “Leorio.”
Leorio scuffs at the ground with one foot. He doesn't even need to look up to see the cant of Kurapika's eyebrow. Embarrassed, he mutters, "I'm kinda jealous that the kids get to be alone and I still have to share my time with you."

"Leorio," Kurapika says again but gently, infinitely fond even if he is going pink at the tips of his ears. "Going out shopping was your idea, remember?"

"Yeah and it was a shitty idea. All I can think about is-" and he cuts himself off, feeling himself flush an ugly red.

Kurapika waits, expectant.

"I just want to have some alone time with you, okay? Things are new and interesting between us!" Leorio hisses. He scrubs at the back of his neck, jittery and too large for his own skin. "It's not a crime to think you're good-looking. Anyone interested in men and who has a modicum of sense would be into you. And I've been holding back these past two years, so part of me wants to just... y'know. Go a bit wild. Just to see if I can."

"Bold of you to assume I'd let you," Kurapika says. He steps into Leorio's space, though, and something pleased has settled into his walk, a confident sway of his hips. His fingers slide up Leorio's tie. Leorio's never been so jealous of a length of fabric before for having Kurapika's hand wrapped around it. "But I suppose I understand the urge."

Leorio settles his hand against the warm jut of Kurapika's hip bone. Rubs his thumb underneath Kurapika's shirt to feel the warmth of his skin, right there. "Do you?"

Kurapika looks up at him, and his eyes are lazy and dark. "I do."

"What about this one?" Alluka asks, slamming the door to the dressing room open. Leorio jumps back a little at the sudden sound. Kurapika's hand drops from his tie and he misses it immediately, achingly, and Leorio takes a half step forward to crowd into Kurapika's space before he reigns himself in and makes sure he stops.

It's a damn cute dress, when Leorio pulls his eyes away from Kurapika. Light and flowy, covered in golden yellow flowers, and Alluka's found some strappy sandals to go with it. He smiles, giving her a thumbs up. "You look amazing."

“Very nice, Alluka,” Kurapika agrees.

Leorio looks down and blinks. “Kurapika, are those chicken shaped salt shakers?”

Defensively, Kurapika clutches them closer. “Yes. I’m getting them, and no, I won’t listen to reason.”

And there isn’t anything to say to that except to laugh, overcome and fond and helplessly in love.

When they get back to the hotel, a practical new wardrobe for Alluka and a new suitcase for her in hand, Leorio opens the door only to stop, eyes wide. He can’t say what has him ducking behind the door, catching it before it closes, but he has a feeling that something’s going on. A feeling that’s doubled by Gon, facing the door with a look like he’s trying to screw up his courage.

(Leorio wonders, briefly, if his own thoughts had been so easy to read in the moments before he caught Kurapika’s hand.)

And then Gon gets a curious set to his mouth. His jaw firms and his chin comes up, and Leorio
gestures at Alluka and Kurapika to stay behind him, watching closely as Gon squares his shoulders, turning around. "Hey, Killua?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we, I mean. Uh. Look, I just. I wanna say that I'm sorry."

Killua blinks, wide-eyed, his head tilted quizzically to the side. "What the fuck for? You didn't actually put your socks in my-"

"No no, nothing like that," Gon says, waving a hand frantically. "No, I, well. I haven't been the friend that I've wanted to be to you on this trip."

"What are you even talking about, Gon?" Killua asks with a laugh, rubbing at the back of his head. "You've been great to me. Honestly. You've... You've been one of the best things to me period, especially on this trip. If it wasn't for you I... I would have just gone back home. I would have never left at all."

Gon frowns. "I... This isn't what I meant to say. Killua, I was really inconsiderate. You've had so many people tell you what to do and how to feel, and I wasn't listening to you. I had just made up my own mind and I was really, really selfish. I shouldn't ever be one of those people," he says, gentle. He reaches out to grasp Killua by the hands, and even from their distance, Leorio can see the gentle sweep of his thumbs. "I get... bullheaded sometimes. I know. But you, Killua, you bring out the best of me. I can be myself because you're next to me. I just don't want to leave you behind either, so when things start to bother you, you have to tell me."

He leans in, resting his forehead against Killua's. Killua, for his part, mostly looks shell-shocked. "Don't... Don't hide. Not from me, okay?"

Oh.

Leorio physically cannot stop the grin spreading across his face as Gon kisses Killua.

Killua makes a tiny noise, his eyes wide, and Gon presses forward because of course he does, and before he can see anything more, a hand wraps around Leorio's elbow and yanks him back.

"Oh Kurapika come on," Leorio whispers as he turns with the motion.

Kurapika makes sure the door closes silently. Arms crossed, Kurapika doesn't budge. "Absolutely not. Give them their privacy. And when they tell us, act politely surprised. That goes," he says pointedly at Alluka, "for you too, miss. We're not going to intrude on their privacy."

Leorio scoffs. "Why not? They intrude on ours all the time."

"False equivalence. Don't be an asshole, not about this." Then, fondly, Kurapika pats Leorio on the cheek. "Don't worry, Leorio, I'm sure you can find plenty of ways to embarrass them as it is. Now come on. We are not going to be those people who just spy on their friends."

Politely, Alluka raises her hand. "Does it count if they're your family too?"

"That makes it worse, dear."

She wrinkles her nose. "That's not what Illumi says."

Kurapika levels her a Look, capital letter and all and says, dryly, "Is Illumi really the kind of person
whose example you want to be following?"

"No, I suppose not."

"But family is supposed to embarrass each other! How am I supposed to give Killua the shovel talk if I can't do this?" Leorio whines.

Kurapika grins, sly. "I said spying isn't okay, Leorio. I never said you couldn't have any fun at all. Shovel talk away, if you think Killua isn't just going to laugh at you the whole way through."

Damn. "You're right. I should just start planning their wedding and eventual children instead."

"No no, that will just make him want to stop dating Gon!" Alluka protests, tugging at Leorio's elbow. "Don't do that, I like Gon! Just leave them alone and be happy for them." Then she grins, sharp. "It'll make it even funnier because he'll be waiting for you to try something."

They look at her with a new respect, Kurapika covering the corners of his smile with his hand. "See, that's a good plan. Now. We go in there, we act politely surprised that they're holding hands, and we take them out for dinner, okay?"

“Can you guys stop whispering outside the door?” Gon asks, poking his head through. "It’s distracting me from kissing my boyfriend."

There’s a distant, strained “Gon,” from Killua as Leorio pushes himself up from his crouch, groaning when his knees protest. He’s bright red and hasn’t let go of Gon at all, only moving to the side to let them all in. Leorio grins.

“Hey,” Leorio says.

Killua looks at him, and he holds up his hand for a high-five.

And Killua, pink and flushed with his hand still twined tightly with Gon’s, looks up at the ceiling. “God, please just mercy-kill me right this instant. It’s the only way.”

But he high-fives Leorio anyway.

Killua regally orders them to go to a seafood place so he can drown himself in cocktail sauce and pointedly doesn’t listen to any of the increasingly off-color jokes Leorio makes about it until Kurapika shuts him up with a pointed hand on his inner thigh, effectively cutting off all circulation to Leorio’s higher thought processes. The kids laugh at him, because of course they do. Leorio doesn’t even bother responding except to flip them all off and laugh as Gon’s voice breaks, squeaking, when he protests. It’s good, and loud, and the food is good, and contentment is a solid, heavy sand in the spaces between Leorio’s ribs.

“Hang on,” he says, dropping a kiss to Kurapika’s temple because he can and pretending he’s still not thrilled because of it. “I’ll be right back.”

He doesn’t really need the cigarette, but he does need the space, stepping out of the restaurant and letting his eyes drift up to the deepening sky beyond the city lights. Just a moment to breathe, shedding the burrs of overstimulation. Things are good. Things are actually really good, enough that
Leorio’s cheeks hurt from smiling and there’s an iron band of pressure around the back of his head from laughing too much.

Out here, the night smells like wet earth, the lingering effects of the rainstorm that proceeded them from Texas to Arkansas, and Leorio breathes it in deeply. It smells like green and growing things around the scent of tobacco. Honestly, if Leorio closed his eyes right now, he could swear that he’s back on Mito’s porch, the forest right behind her house looming over them as Leorio takes a smoke-break from studying. It’s almost disorienting to open his eyes and find that he’s still here. Somewhere new and unfamiliar, and yet home all the same.

Hard to believe so much and yet so little has changed.

(Every day they run out of land to travel across, Leorio knows. They have to turn north, and soon, and head for home.)

Anxiety, the tone-deaf bitch that it is, creeps into him breath by breath. Leorio gnaws on his lip until it’s swollen and sensitive before shaking his head. Damn it. No. Not the time. He’s going to put out his cigarette and turn around and go back inside-

Except-

Leorio turns.

And Illumi, stepping out of the shadows, blocks Leorio’s way back into the restaurant. His deep black eyes pin Leorio in place, and his voice is even, melodic, as he says, “We need to talk.”
didn't have to smile at me

Chapter Summary

(What is this, some kind of action movie?)

Shit, might as well lean into it a little, Leorio thinks as the first rush of adrenaline hits him. He drops the cigarette and puts it out. Exhales in a large cloud of smoke.

“You,” Leorio starts threateningly, stepping forward to jab his finger against the center of Illumi’s chest. Illumi doesn’t even rock backwards, just lets his eyes dip to the offending digit and then back up again, impassive and waiting and waiting and waiting.

“You are gonna leave Killua and Alluka alone.”

Chapter Notes

We Are Winding Down Folks! This generally means that I get even pickier about how chapters are written, so as much as I’d love to say that the next two chapters will be out soon, the most I can promise is "probably before 2019 ends" lmao

also i got involved in the hxh big bang AGAIN so look forward to that come like may/june timeframe! Love you guys lots, thank you SO MUCH for the continued support. Reminder that you can always come yell at me or with me about leopika and other shit at my twitter (@zenellyraen) as I have mostly left the blue hellsite to rot given their recent policies.

Chapter title from "Honeybee" by Steam Powered Giraffe.

“I have nothing I want to say to you,” Leorio says, stiff and firm.

“Oh that’s not true at all,” Illumi replies, his eyes unblinking as they stand off in front of Red Lobster. “You have many things you want to say to me. Just none you think I want to hear.”

Well that’s the first true thing Illumi’s ever said to him. Words boil inside of Leorio, but adrenaline - or its close cousin, anxiety- keep them shaking through his skin instead of out his mouth. It is a force of will that has him jerking his chin over to the side, indicating the side of the building. “Not in front of the door like this. I’m not having this conversation while being a nuisance.”

A slow, deceptively passive blink, but Illumi follows him when he goes.

Around the side of the building. Out towards the empty spaces in the parking lot. Leorio turns around so the last of the day’s fading sunlight is at his back, hikes up his jacket that he’s honestly regretting in this late summer heat, takes a last drag of his still-lit cigarette. This is, frankly, ridiculous, Leorio is forced to admit as he turns to face Illumi in the parking lot. Above them, the “Red Lobster” sign flickers, cutting them in and out of light.
Neither man moves.

(What is this, some kind of action movie?)

Shit, might as well lean into it a little, Leorio thinks as the first rush of adrenaline hits him. He drops the cigarette and puts it out. Exhales in a large cloud of smoke.

“You,” Leorio starts threateningly, stepping forward to jab his finger against the center of Illumi’s chest. Illumi doesn’t even rock backwards, just lets his eyes dip to the offending digit and then back up again, impassive and waiting and waiting and waiting. “You are gonna leave Killua and Alluka alone.”

He pushes with each emphatic word and fails to move Illumi at all. Illumi cocks his head to the side, the fall of his hair whisper dark. “Is it the money?”

“What?”

Illumi sighs. Pushing his hair back, he says, impatiently, “Is he offering you money? I can pay you more to get rid of him.” Refusal flares up like an automatic reflex, something in him horrified even by the implication that Leorio’s in this for money at all. “He’s mine, besides. He’s my family. I can call the police on all of you for kidnapping him and Alluka.”

“Then why haven’t you?” Leorio steps back. “Isn’t it because he has permission from your father to be here?”

A quiet scoff. Leorio hadn’t known how strange the sound would be without any expression to accompany it. “Father doesn’t know what’s best for Killua. I’m the only one who is here to keep him safe and I—”

Safe? Illumi thinks he’s keeping Killua safe? “I don’t think you’re interested in keeping him safe at all. And it has nothing to do with fucking money. The kid wanted to come on a trip with us, so he’s coming on the trip, and just so you know, there’s no amount of money in the world that’s enough for me to let Alluka go back to a home like yours.”

“I don’t care about him,” Illumi says.

Leorio, icily, hands shaking where they’re clenched into fists, says, “Her.”

Illumi waves a hand with a nonchalance that has Leorio strangling back the urge to punch him in the face. “Her, whatever. I want Killua. Give me Killua, and I will leave.”

“Hmm, let me think, oh, uh fuck no?” It doesn’t even need a moment’s thought. No part of Leorio is letting go of their unexpected guest. Killua might be argumentative and bratty, but Leorio loves him the way he loves Gon, steadfast and true to the core of himself, and now that he’s family, Leorio will never let him go.

“Then I will take him.”

Oh yeah, that’s fucking it.

The last thread of Leorio’s temper snaps audibly, and his fist slams into Illumi’s face before he’s even registered that he’s moved.

Illumi straightens. Wipes at his lip almost curiously, before looking up at Leorio with a surprising heat in his eyes.
“You will regret that,” he says mildly.

Leorio spits to the side, putting his hands up in a familiar pose. It’s been a long time since he’s gotten into a fight, but muscle memory doesn’t die that quickly. “Not as much as you will.”

The fight is quick and ugly.

Illumi moves like lightning. Leorio reflexively brings his elbow down, blocking most of the shot to his gut, but Illumi plants his foot on the ground, pivots, and kicks him in the shoulder. **Oh fuck**, Leorio has just enough time to think. Illumi’s foot slams like a sledgehammer against his side, flipping him, and Leorio swears as he catches himself on the rough concrete and pushes himself upright. For all that Leorio is a scrappy street fighter who’s lived through his fair share of tussles, Illumi has clearly been trained in a way Leorio never has. He targets soft spots, the bends of Leorio’s elbows and knees, and it’s only long, long years of rough living that gets Leorio out relatively unharmed, dodging the worst of the blows and diverting the rest.

Most frustratingly, he can’t seem to land much of a hit on the damn bastard.

He jabs a punch out. Illumi catches his arm with almost no effort, and Leorio has enough time to pull away reflexively before realizing how bad of an idea that is when Illumi steps out and **down** and-

Leorio swings with all his might with his off hand-

A hand around Leorio’s elbow yanks him back as Leorio’s ankle explodes with pain and Leorio’s fist collides with Illumi’s face. He struggles against the hold, blood rushing in his ears, until he hears, “Leorio, **Leorio**, **stop**, it’s okay,” from Kurapika. Only then, only when he registers that Illumi is being held back too, does he let himself be pulled back.

Leorio gasps as he swings upright, air tinged with copper and the acrid taste of sweat. “You stay the **fuck** away from my kids!”


“Calm down? **Calm down?** I can’t just calm down and let this-“

“Hisoka, let me go,” Illumi says, piqued. “I wasn’t quite finished.” Then, “Did you bring Killua?”

Hisoka, draped like a pale shawl across Illumi’s shoulders and hips, lets out a low noise that Leorio would probably classify as a purr if it wasn’t so upsetting to consider. “Yes, darling, don’t worry, Killua’s right here.”

What?

Behind him, Killua pipes up. “Yeah, and I’m not going home with you anyway.”

Illumi pulls towards Killua like a compass pulled towards true north, subsiding when Hisoka stops him. His cheek is red and swollen in places. Leorio eyes the marks with satisfaction. “Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m really not. I’m going to finish this trip with these guys, and then I’m going to go home. Alright?”

Leorio jerks against Kurapika’s hold, ignoring the way the pain in his ankle flare, the tight hold Kurapika has on him. “Killua-“

“Shh.” Another hand joins Kurapika’s as Gon comes up even with them. Leorio twitches. Then
notices, for the first time, that a small crowd has formed, murmuring and circling around the commotion. Fuck. They’ve made a big ol’ scene.

“You’ll come home after the trip is done?”

Letting out a low, bitter laugh, Killua nods. “Something like that. It’s more like, if you take me home now, it’s not like I could fight it, right? But the very first thing I’d do is call the police and scream bloody murder until they come over and find everything in our house.

Illumi holds himself very carefully still. He blinks once before speaking. “Is that a promise?”

“Yeah might as well be. You can consider it a threat too. So you, Illumi, are going to let me go, unless you want outsiders being brought into… family business.”

There is a long pause. The crowd that’s formed around them shifts and murmurs, and Leorio feels every beat of time that passes in the throbbing of his ankle, various places around his body hot with blood. Finally, though, Illumi nods. “And then, when this little trip of yours is done, you’ll come home.”

Killua’s gaze darts towards them, flicking over Kurapika and Leorio, lingering on Alluka and Gon. Then he nods. “But only if you leave now.”

“See, darling, isn’t that a plan?” Hisoka rubs his cheek against Illumi and then straightens, letting him go. “Now, we’ll see you later, Killua dear. And the rest of you hopefully never, though Gon, you’re always welcome at my camp again!”

“Not likely,” Gon mutters. His smile doesn’t falter for a second. Leorio loves his little cousin.

They watch Illumi and Hisoka leave, the crowd parting with little more than a murmur. All of the energy seems to have left the bystanders, though Leorio catches a few murmurs here and there about calling the cops.

“We should leave,” Kurapika says under his breath.

“Yeah. Yeah, sorry. I’m sorry about this, Kurapika I just-” Leorio falters when Kurapika steps away, wincing as his weight hits his throbbing ankle.

Kurapika looks at the crowd with an empty expression and burning eyes, and he jerks away from the touch of Leorio’s hand. His jaw is tight. He looks about four seconds from murder the next person who so much as breathes in his direction wrong, so when he says, chillingly calm, “Let’s just go to the car, Leorio,” Leorio doesn’t protest even a little.

“Come here.” Gon steps up to one side of Leorio, Killua a warm brand on the other side, as they try to help Leorio get to the car. It would be a little better if one of them was taller, but Leorio swallows the words back, catching the divot between Gon’s brows, how Alluka’s gaze darts nervously between all of them as she opens the car door for them, the hot clutch of Killua’s shaking hand. Discretion, he thinks to himself as he sits in the passenger seat. Be nice to the kids.

Kurapika, wordless, takes the wheel, waiting for the kids to settle in the backseat before he pulls out, heading back to the hotel.

Gon is warm against his side, bracing him up as they hobble to their room. Leorio lets out a little hiss as he settles on one of the beds, but manages to paste on a faint smile and wave Alluka and Gon off as Killua digs in their bag for a bandage wrap.
“Front pocket of my suitcase, Killua. Don’t forget the clips too. Now just- Yeah, c’mere.” Leorio takes it from him and hisses again as he brings his foot up. Damn. Damn thing is swollen and tender to touch, shooting a white-hot bolt of pain straight up his leg.

“Hey now,” Gon says, kneeling in front of Leorio. “Come on, I know how to wrap an ankle. Gimme the bandage.”

He does quick work of it, wrapping and tucking in the edges the way Leorio taught him to years ago. Experimentally, he rolls his ankle, wincing at the faint tinge of pain, but it’s so much better already. “Thanks, kid.”

“Leorio, are you okay?”

And Leorio softens, the last of his shell of adrenaline cracking open. He lets out a shaking sigh, pushing his hair back from his face, marveling at how steady his hands are. “I’m alright. A bit rattled.”

Very seriously, Gon asks, “Would you like a hug?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I would.”

Gon immediately squirms into his arms, warm and solid and smelling still like stale air and the now-familiar scent of Paladin’s interior. Another set of arms, another weight and warmth, settles against his back, and yet another against his side.

“You didn’t have to fight him for me,” Killua grumbles, voice rumbling alone Leorio’s spine.

Leorio pats the hand that’s over his shoulder. “I didn’t. But I definitely wanted to, so it’s no biggie.”

“You’re not actually going to go home, are you, Killua?” Gon asks, quiet and uncertain. The room seems to hang in focus, waiting for the answer, even Kurapika’s stern reticence fading as he turns, curious.

“Maybe long enough to grab my clothes,” Killua says with a snort. “I’m not staying there again. Not ever again.”

Leorio’s eyes prick at the swell of relief washing over him. They’ll have to figure out the legal logistics of that, but a part of him that had been cold with uncertainty, the sick anxiety of sending a loved one back to such a precarious state, unclenches.

“If Kurapika takes his own direction and sleeps that night, Leorio doesn’t see it.

Leorio sees him in snapshots, waking every time he so much as shifts, a still, silent silhouette in the chair by the window. He’s pale and washed out by the moonlight and the yellow florescence from the street; Leorio knows, logically, that the desaturation extends all across him, but he swears that the glint of his earring is as red as ever, catching his eyes as he drifts between waking and slumber. It shouldn’t be comforting but is. To know that Kurapika stands watch over them. A guardian through
“Leorio.”

A gentle shake of his shoulder. Leorio has the feeling, distant though it is, that this isn’t the first time his name has been called.

Another, firmer shake. “Leorio,” Kurapika says with an exasperated sigh. “Wake up. Wipe the drool off your face, you’re going to miss free breakfast.”

Well fuck, that’s a good reason to get up, isn’t it?

He pushes himself up with no coordination whatsoever, trying and fumbling with his arms until the uncooperative pieces of shit actually hold his weight. When he looks over, Kurapika is just smiling at him, faint and fond, and Leorio wants to kiss him. The desire wells up within him with no direction and no outlet aside from the obvious. Leorio wants to kiss him so much. So he does, still uncoordinated, slopping and off-center, more of a press to the corner of his lips and his cheek than anything else.

“What’s that for?” Kurapika’s voice is barely more than a whisper. Leorio kisses him again, just because he can, a fizzing sort of joy bubbling up when Kurapika turns his head to kiss him back.

“Mmm, I wanted to, so I did.”

“Compelling reason.”

Leorio chuckles, swinging his legs over and regretfully popping the bubble of intimacy around them. “I thought so. S’why I had to.”

And then he tries to stand up.

The noise he makes, frankly, isn’t worth talking about, sharp and pained as a lightning bolt slaps him in the brain the moment weight rests on his ankle. Kurapika is there in an instant, solid and warm as he checks up against Leorio, his hands on Leorio’s chest and hip, urging him to lean on Kurapika.

“Your ankle?”

Leorio nods, hissing a little as he rolls the joint. “Hurts like a bitch.”

Kurapika watches him with dark eyes. “Are you sure we don’t need to stop at an urgent care or something like that?”

“No, no. Just. I’ll stay off it today as much as possible, and if it isn’t better in a few days, I can always stop by the student clinic.”

“Alright, but you can’t drive today.”

Sputtering, Leorio protests, “Yes I can! I’ve driven most the way already, and a little ankle sprain isn’t going to-“

“Come on, Leorio,” Kurapika says, almost gentle. “I’ll drive.”
“Babe, you barely slept. You can’t drive either.”

He shakes his head, and Leorio feels the protest in him dry up, tired and wanting nothing more than to erase the tension still caught in Kurapika’s tired eyes. “If I’m not able to keep driving, I’ll pull over and let you drive. But your ankle is hurt pretty badly and you don’t need the added pressure of trying to drive on top of that, now do you, Mister Future Doctor?”

“That’s Doctor Future Doctor to you,” Leorio grumbles, but it’s a token protest at this point. Kurapika’s right and while he may hate it, there isn’t really anything he can do about it. His ankle needs rest, and that means letting Kurapika take the helm of Paladin, getting them to wherever they’re going next. Well. The specific location where they’re going next, Leorio thinks, looking at his phone where an innocuous message blinks up at him.

Fishing out his keys, Leorio tosses them to Kurapika. “Drive her safely.”

“Don’t get weird at me. Just give me directions and I’ll know where to go.”

“Leorio,” Kurapika says after lunch, eyes narrowing. “Where are we going?”

“Hm? Oh nowhere in particular,” Leorio answers without looking up from the map pulled up on his phone. “Take a left up here.”

The little notch between Kurapika’s eyes gets deeper and deeper as they keep driving, and Leorio hides his growing smile behind his hand. Once they pass a particular combination Taco Bell and Long John’s, Kurapika swears under his breath and shoots an unamused look at Leorio. “Really?”

He shrugs. “You said you used to live around here. It wasn’t hard to get Melody’s address.”

“Of course it wasn’t. You can do no wrong in Melody’s eyes. I think she credits you for my ability to graduate instead of my own hard work.”

“Well, if it wasn’t for me coming in and offering you actual, real food instead of whatever you scrounged out of the cafeteria leftovers, you might have keeled over instead of graduating, so.”

“If you hadn’t taken up so much space in my study room, I would have spent less time arguing and more time taking better care of myself.”

“Bullshit you would have. You probably would’ve studied more and ended up even more undernourished and then where would we be?”

Kurapika’s fingers tap on the steering wheel as he makes the next turn without Leorio having to direct him. “Well, I wouldn’t be here, that’s for certain.”

Feeling oddly bold, Leorio takes Kurapika’s hand, lacing their fingers together as he brings it to his mouth to kiss before letting it go. “Maybe not, but I’m glad you are. I’m glad you’re here. Also,” he starts, just to break some of the tension, “It was my study room, not yours.”

Killua shouts from the backseat, “Can you guys not flirt in front of us, we are children-“

“Your study room???”
That argument carries them all the way through a well-worn neighborhood, Kurapika stopping perfunctorily at each stop-sign by the force of memory more than sight. He catches himself every once in a while, staring at clearly new storefronts or empty lots, brows drawn together.

“Everything okay?”

“Things are just different from how I expected. It’s been a while since I’ve actually gotten to come home, and there’s more different every time.” Kurapika shakes his head as he turns again, slowing in front of a single-story house. He parks the car by the curb, staring up at the house. “I never really know what to expect. It doesn’t feel like home, but there’s no other place that does either.”

Leorio opens the door, stepping around to Kurapika’s side of the car without waiting for the kids to peel themselves out of the backseat. “Come on, dearheart. Your foster mother will be the same as ever.”

Kurapika makes a face that Leorio’s certain isn’t one hundred percent dissatisfied, a little pleased curl to his mouth and eyes. “Dearheart. You sound like an ancient old man.”

“So he finally sounds his age?” Killua yawns.

“I will punt you into next week if you keep it up kid,” Leorio warns, knocking on the door with a quick one-two rap.

Beside him, Kurapika’s hands curl in his soft blue tank top, incongruously shy.

The door opens to reveal a small woman, shorter even than Kurapika. “Hi there, Melody,” Leorio says. “Can we come in?”

“Of course.” Melody smiles, her face lined with delight. The small woman pulls Kurapika into an unhesitating hug, her prematurely grey hair contrasting starkly with Kurapika’s bold blond. Leorio busies himself shifting their luggage fully inside and toeing off his shoes, nudging Alluka, Killua, and Gon to do the same as Kurapika returns and then slowly crumples into the hug. After a hushed conversation, she pulls back and smiles up at Kurapika.

“It’s a surprise to see you here,” she says in her light voice.

“We were in the area and thought we’d stop by,” Kurapika replies, almost sheepish but certainly deferential as he angles his body to indicate the rest of them.

Melody’s smile widens. “Well, I always welcome the chance to see you, you know that. Now, come here, Leorio, let me hug you too.”

Grinning, Leorio bodily lifts Melody off the ground and spins her to her delight.

“Miss Melody, do you have any stories about Kurapika?” Alluka asks, brightly curious.

Melody laughs as Leorio sets her down. “Oh do I ever.”

Kurapika sighs, putting his face in his hands. “I knew it was a mistake to come here.”

Dinner is a lively affair, full of laughter and conversation, but it’s impossible for Leorio to miss the
way Kurapika draws in on himself, becoming quieter and quieter as the meal winds on. He disappears after he clears his plate, a soft-footed blond shadow heading up to his room.

That’s alright, Leorio assures himself. He’ll give Kurapika some time alone, then bother him later. Leorio insists on helping Melody with the dishes after dinner, propping himself up on a stool to take his weight off his ankle. The kids take off to go find fireflies in the neighborhood, phones out and ready to be running around a little after being cramped into a car.

“You don’t have to help, you know,” Melody says.

“I know, but- I guess I’ve just been on the move so much that sitting still is weird now. And I need something to do since, y’know, Kurapika is in a mood.” Leorio lets out a long breath, plunging his hands into the sudsy water in the sink. “Was he like this when he lived with you, too?”

“Moody? Of course. Kurapika is dealing and healing from a lot. He told me you knew the extent of it now.”

Huffing, Leorio scrubs at a plate. “I mean. Yeah. But I guess it doesn’t feel like I’m doing enough. I only found out about a lot like a week ago. And-“

Melody laughs, patting Leorio on the knee. “Can you rest for just one moment? Did you honestly think you would find and solve all of life’s problems on one stray roadtrip? You have your whole lives to work through this, Leorio.”

The back of Leorio’s neck is hot and he doesn’t even have the sun to blame it on. “I mean. No. I wasn’t planning on solving any problems on a road trip. It just kinda… happened.”

Then relax, Leorio. You’ve already done more than you set out to do.” She pats him again, warm and easy and loving. “It’s okay to make sure you enjoy yourself too. Now, go check on Kurapika. He’s brooding up in his room, and I think I’ve dealt with that long enough to tap in someone else.”

Kurapika’s room is a strange snapshot into someone Leorio only sort of knows. He closes the door behind him quietly, wonders if his own room back at Mito’s is as peculiar to Kurapika as this is to him, filled with trinkets and books that Kurapika doesn’t bring with him except as experience. There are a few posters, mostly forest landscapes and a few magazine cut-outs of bands, thumb-tacked to the walls with a lack of regard for the walls. Hanging here and there are a few charms and ribbons, medals for scholarships and trophies piled up on his desk in the room.

And running a finger across their dusty surfaces stands Kurapika, a distant look in his eyes.

“Hey there, babe,” Leorio says, closing the door behind him. “You doing okay?”

Kurapika hums, not looking up from the remnants of his past laid out. “Something like that. I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t be so-“ He cuts himself off, shaking his head. “I’m glad you brought me here. I am. Getting to see Melody again is wonderful, and I’m enjoying myself, but…”

“Depression getting its hold on you?” Leorio asks, sympathetic.

Mouth tight, Kurapika nods. He fusses with a trophy, fingers catching in the engraving. “It’s dumb.”
“It isn’t dumb. It just happens.”

“I don’t know why you still want to be with me,” Kurapika murmurs, and Leorio touches his hand gently, stilling his nervous fidgeting. His next words bubble out of him without even a bit of self-consciousness.

“I love you, that's why.”

Kurapika turns to face him, threading their fingers together. Red rushes across his face, and he blinks quickly, embarrassed. “That's what I don't understand.”

Leorio hums, running his free hand along the gentle curve of Kurapika's spine. “Kurapika, do you love me?”

Blinking, Kurapika cocks his head to think about that statement for a moment, his mouth pressed into a thin line. It's adorable, honestly, how seriously he's thinking about this, and Leorio's heart skips a beat, full of irrational fondness. Waiting doesn’t hurt. The lack of certainty, the fact that Kurapika has to wonder, is almost comforting because it means he's making sure he knows one way or the other instead of hurrying. He waits Kurapika out, letting him turn the idea over in his head until he carefully nods.

“Oh, now, see, I don't understand that.”

A tilt of his head, mouth ticking to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I don't understand why someone as amazing as you loves someone like me,” Leorio says plainly.

“Amazi-” Kurapika cuts himself off, scoffing. “Leorio, don't be ridiculous. You're incredible. You're kind and patient. You're a caring person, who looks out for his friends, and who only wants good things to happen to people.” He leans forward, pressing his head into the curve of Leorio's throat. His next words are muffled, spoken to the space between Leorio's neck and collarbones. “You're gentle, you make me laugh, and you're so handsome, too. You're so wonderful. I... It would be stupid to not fall in love with you.”

Leorio shrugs, careful to not dislodge Kurapika from his shoulder. “Okay, but that's how I feel about you.”

Kurapika blinks.

In the corner of his eye, Leorio can see Kurapika's cheeks slowly redden.

“I think,” Leorio says slowly, attempting to impress the honesty of his words on the shaking form in his arms through sincerity alone, “that you are one of the most incredible people I have ever met. You are passionate and dedicated, not just to yourself, but to your friends as well. You love the people you've let into your life so much, and you're beautiful, Kurapika. You're truly beautiful. Seeing you makes me happy, getting to talk to you increases how good of a day it is all the time. I just. You make me happy. You make me laugh. I like talking to you, as a friend and now as more.”

“I don't.”

“You don't have to agree with what I'm saying.” Leorio gently tugs at a strand of Kurapika's hair, earning himself an irate huff. “In fact, I expect you to not because you don't think of yourself the way I think of you. You’re very mean to yourself.”

“And you're too kind to me.”
And somehow, we'll meet in the middle and make it work, because we love each other.”

Kurapika subsides at that. Then huffs again. "That's gay."

Leorio takes the deflection as the surrender it is at the moment and drops a kiss on the top of Kurapika's head. "Yeah, duh. That's the whole point."

“I swear, if you pull this in front of Melody, I’ll-"

“What, bite me in the ankles? Elbow me in the sternum? Mercy me, how will I survive? Careful, Kurapika,” Leorio says, one hand laid delicately on his chest, “I don’t think my tender kneecaps can handle any rough treatment.”

Kurapika’s eyes flash. “I’m going to make sure you don’t have any kneecaps left to handle anything at all!”

“Oh no, whatever will you do to me? Careful, Kurapika, I don’t want you to hurt yourself reaching-“ and Leorio’s words devolve into a screech as Kurapika wriggles free just to hit him over and over again with a pillow, relentless and beautiful as he gets his satisfaction.

When they’re done tussling, breathing hard from the exertion, Kurapika flops back on the small mattress, allows Leorio to crowd close, his knee slotting neatly between Kurapika's thighs.

And Kurapika laughs, a quiet one-two sound. “Want to know something?”

“Hm?”

“The first time I saw you, the very first time, I thought you were a professor,” Kurapika admits with a sly little grin, and Leorio groans.

“No… No, please no.”

“With the suit and tie and the glasses, I swear. You looked like you could be a young, recent graduate who just got his first job at the university. And my second thought was “I wonder if he’ll teach any of my classes, because that is someone I wouldn’t mind sleeping with to keep my grades up.””

Leorio sputters loudly. Unbelieving, he stares at Kurapika’s face, flushing redder and redder under Leorio’s scrutiny. “You did not.”

“I did. I mean, I wouldn’t have had to at all, my grades are perfect, but I definitely thought it.”

“Do I need to tell you that your grades could use a little extra credit?” Leorio asks, a bit hesitant, a little turned on.

Kurapika’s full mouth twists to the side like he’s trying to hold back a smile. “How dare you imply that my grades were ever anything less than perfect… Doctor.”

Oh.

And then Kurapika is over him, pressed against every available inch, a hot brand of contact as he moves against Leorio. Kisses him, quickly at first, and then lingering down his jaw and neck. One of Leorio's hands comes up to touch his hip. The touch is cautious at first, then possessive, greedy as Kurapika shifts into it, asking for more without bothering to remove his mouth from Leorio’s skin. For his part, Leorio gives as good as he gets. His hand tangles in Kurapika's hair, pulling just enough
to elicit another moan as he tilts Kurapika's face up, to kiss him again.

The slide of their lips, the soft gasps that fill the room, the heat of Kurapika's body atop his own, Leorio's body is lit up, nerve endings tingling as he tries to get more, closer. He wants, so much, to just live in this moment forever, in the almost-frantic desperation of Kurapika trying to get closer. So much closer.

“Kurapika,” he whispers into the dark room.

And Kurapika lifts his head from where he’s aggressively sucking a hickey into Leorio’s neck. “If we’re going to do this here, Leorio, you need to be quiet. These walls aren’t thick.”

Leorio mimes zipping his mouth shut, mutters, “That’s Doctor Paladiknight to you,” and Kurapika’s smile is wicked and challenging as he dips back down to test Leorio’s resolve.

Leorio does not meet Melody’s knowing, amused gaze the next morning. There’s plenty of other things to be busy with, after all, between carrying a sleeping Alluka out to the car and chivvying the boys in after her, all of them drowsy and falling asleep on each other in the blue predawn.

“Is your ankle feeling good enough to drive?” Kurapika asks.

Leorio flexes it, rolling his foot around the joint, and winces as it twinges just a bit. “I think I’ll be okay for a little bit. You can drive this afternoon, though.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

And finally, looking north.

Finally, there’s nowhere else left to go.

Sunrise, a bright pink and red along the edges of the clouds, and Kurapika’s shining hair dyed brassy gold in the light to his right, heart sandwiched between three sleeping teenagers in the backseat, the wheel in his hands, Leorio heads for home.

End Notes

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