

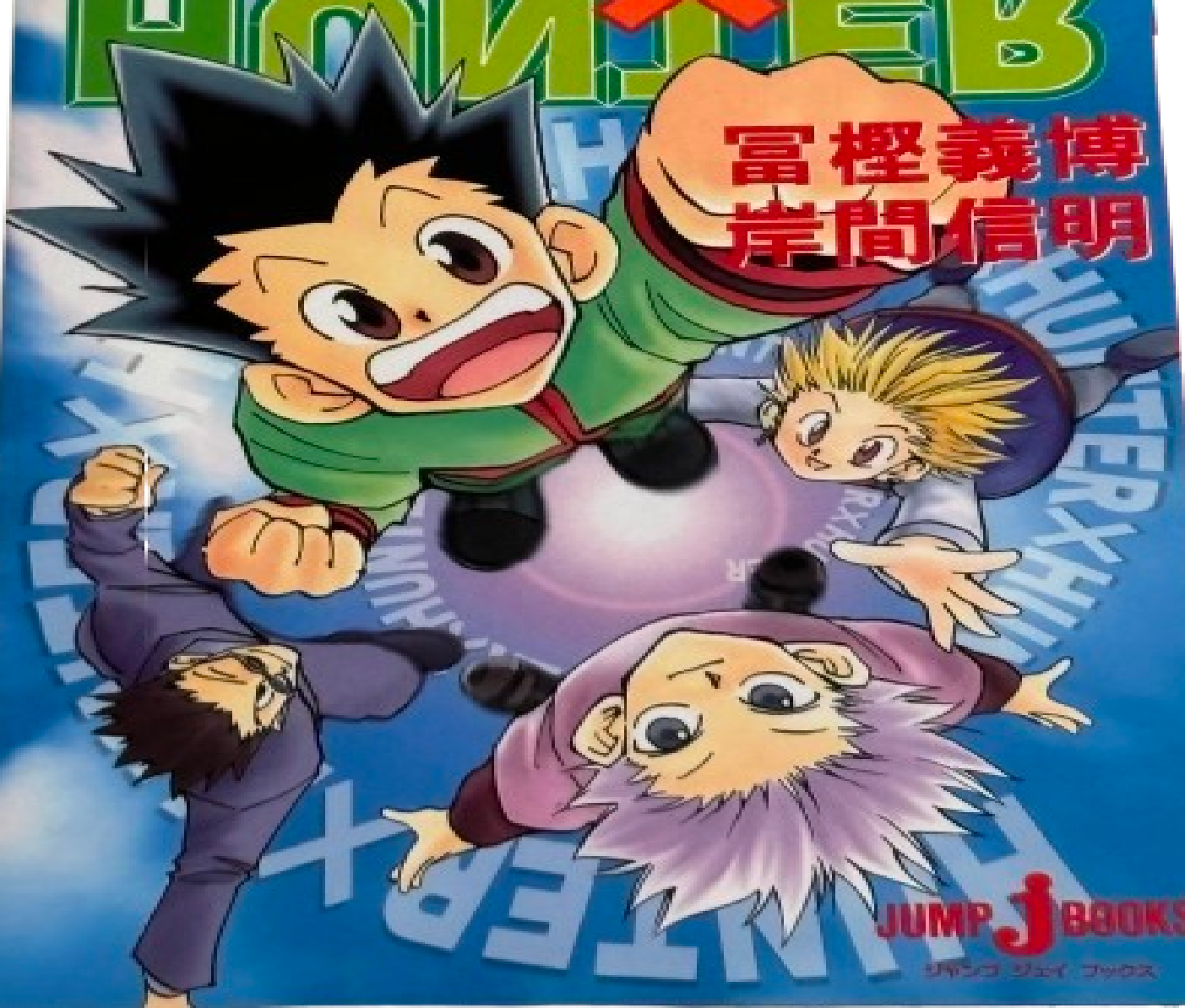
Hunter X Hunter Jump #1

HUNTER

ハンター × ハンター

HUNTER

富樫義博
岸間信明



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PROFILE

ゴン

父親のようなハンターになることを夢みる少年。
いつも釣り竿^{つりざな}をもっている。

クラピカ

同胞を殺した盗賊団を捕らえるため、ハンターをめざす。
感情がたかぶると、眸^{まなこ}が緋色になる。

レオリオ

お金目当てでハンターになることを宣言している。
一見、怖^{こわ}そうだが……？

ヒソカ

ハンター志望の一人。
狂気の奇術師。トランプを操る。

キルア

暗殺一家のホープ。ゴンとは対照的に、
父親に反発してハンター試験にのぞんでいる。

ジャン・イル・ブラッドリー

試験会場にむかう船で出あって以来、
ゴンに影のようにつきまとう謎の人物。

PROFILE

ゴン

Gon

A boy who dreams of becoming a Hunter like his father.
He always carries his fishing rod.

クラピカ

Kurapika

Aiming to become a Hunter in order to capture the thieves who killed his comrades.
He is usually calm, but once emotional, he becomes fearsome.

レオリオ

Leorio

Declares that he wants to become a Hunter for money.
At first glance, he seems selfish... but is that really the case?

ヒソカ

Hisoka

One of the Hunter hopefuls.
A mad magician who fights using playing cards.

キルア

Killua

The prodigy of a family of assassins.
Rebelling against his father, he takes the Hunter Exam alongside Gon.

ジャン＝ルイ・ブラッドリー

Jean-Louis Bradley

A mysterious man who has followed Gon like a shadow ever since they met on the exam ship.

Episode I — Departure

Hunter...

Gon first heard that name before he had even turned four years old.

Now that he was twelve, there were some memories vaguely shrouded in a sepia hue, but there were also scenes that had been burned vividly into his memory.

In the small village at the top of the mountain of Gon's birthplace, Whale Island.

On that day, there was an annual festival being held. Old Tenryu, who had the experience of travelling the seas of the world as a sailor, had gathered Gon and the children of the village together and said the following, as if a little drunk.

—In my long life, I have only once encountered a Hunter.

Old Tenryu's back was round when he sat, and he stroked a beard that was nearly long enough to reach below his stomach. And his thin eyes shone while nearly buried amidst wrinkles.

—We informally called this island "Snake Charmer Island."

It was a small island that you could circle in just two days, and yet it was a beautiful island with an inlet surrounded by coral and gentle waves. The island residents were very friendly, and the girls were all lovely.

But ruffian pirates came and landed there. The residents cried and shouted in fear, each trying to be the first to escape.

There was no distinction between women, children and the elderly. A hideous sight indeed. And it was then that it happened...

"Just like the wind..."

A single Hunter appeared.

He held something like a club in his two hands, wielding it as if it were part of his limbs...

"And all alone, he..."

...drove the pirates back to the sea.

While further details surrounding this incident had fallen through the gaps of Gon's memory...

“He appeared like the wind, and then he was gone, just like the wind...”

...an impression of these people, called Hunters, was powerfully engraved into his heart.

*

As he grew older, Gon learned that Hunters had a number of specialised professions.

Just like in Old Tenryu’s tale, Hunters who specialised in ‘hunting’ wanted persons and heinous criminals who defied the law were called ‘Blacklist Hunters.’

Aside from them, there were ‘Ruins Hunters’ who were involved with the excavation and preservation of ancient ruins, ‘Treasure Hunters’ who searched for buried treasure and sunken ships, ‘Contract Hunters’ who were hired to protect the personal assets of major conglomerates, and even more strange ones, such as ‘Gourmet Hunters,’ who in order to deepen their knowledge of the world’s food, wandered to the ends of the world in search of rare delicacies and ingredients.

In any case, it was said that out of the hundred thousand, no, one million Hunter applicants each year, it was only those who passed a severe exam who were given the license by the Hunter Association, and publicly recognised as a Hunter.

The Hunter Association did not belong to any country, and yet was still a great organisation that was recognised all over the world. If one carried a Hunter License, there was no place in the world you could not step foot into.

They were an organisation people trusted on a level far above the police forces of any nation.

And then...

There was an ‘encounter’ that would bring about a decisive change in Gon’s life.

*

It was the time of year when the south wind blew from the sea as if to bypass the island, and the rainy season was about to end, and Gon had become nine years old.

‘Whale Island’ is a large, rather featureless island without any intricate shorelines.

When you gazed at it from the sea at a distance, it looked like a whale spouting water while resting, hence the name.

Near the centre of the island, there was a looming, active volcano that jutted out like a chimney. And it was called Chimney Mountain.

No matter which direction you looked at it from, Chimney Mountain had the same shape. The heat during summer was severe, but winter wasn't much better, as it snowed on the mountain top.

Due to the heavy rainfall during the wet seasons and snowfall at the mountain peak in winter, waterways that harnessed the abundant river flow had been developed.

Gon's village also used rafts with simple sails for travelling and transportation of goods.

If you followed the current down to the mouth of the river, you would eventually reach the port where large boats were docked.

Gon's father and mother had both passed away during a terrible accident shortly after he was born.

The horse that had been pulling their wagon had gone wild, causing them to plummet to the bottom of a ravine.

Only Gon, still a suckling babe held tightly in his mother's arms, had miraculously survived without a scratch, or so he had been told.

And so Gon was raised by Mito, the younger sister of his mother, and his grandmother.

Gon had eyes that seemed to move constantly and brim with life. He had more curiosity than anyone when it came to the unknown and new.

...Why are eyes in the front of your head? It is so you move straight ahead.

Like that, things that Mito had taught him from before he could even remember became a part of Gon's personality.

Gon saw things with not just his eyes, but all five of his senses.

The whisper of the wind, the warmth of the sun, the murmur of a creek, the scent of soil, the glimmer of a starry sky and the words spoken by the green trees. Gon understood them all. It was not something he had been taught, but rather his own nature.

When he looked up at the sky, several clouds the colour of thin ink were drifting without seams.

Gon was fishing, as had recently become part of his daily routine, at a swamp located in the centre of a dense jungle swarming with palms whose leaves resembled large, spread-out bird wings, and thorny ferns.

There was an old banyan tree in the centre of the swamp, and Gon's favourite spot to sit was between the gap of branches that took the shape of a hand cupping spilling water.

From this spot, he was granted a view of the swamp from one end to the other.

This swamp had also been connected to the sea a long time ago. That was what Old Tenryu had told him. But the Chimney Mountain had erupted (it was said that the mountain looked even more like a chimney while smoke rose viciously from the crater), and the lava had formed a dam in the waterway, resulting in this swamp.

It was not very large, and yet it had a depth so that even if several adults stood on top of each other at the bottom, they would not be able to reach the surface. There was no gradual slope leading from the deep water to the shallows.

Instead, from the very edge where one peered in, the shoreline jutted out abruptly, carved away like butter sliced with a knife.

Under the green surface of the water that shuddered endlessly with small ripples, it was said that the giant 'Master' lurked.

This 'Master' was originally a great fish that lived in the sea, but according to old Tenryu, 'It was left behind in this place when the Chimney Mountain erupted.'

However, the people of the village did not have much faith in old Tenryu's stories.

After all, though suspicious shadows had been seen below the water's surface, no one had actually ever caught such a thing, let alone seen it with their own eyes.

This spot was also much too far from the sea, which did not help the believability of the tale.

Still, Gon believed Old Tenryu's words.

And he thought about how he would one day catch this 'Master' with his own hands.

A wind blew, as if to wrap around Gon's body, and waves rose on the water's surface. It was too early for sundown, but darkness was starting to tinge the sky.

Mito had made him promise to return home before sunset.

Though it was still a little early, Gon collapsed his fishing rod, placed it in the bucket beside his lone catch of the day, and climbed down from the old banyan tree. His catch was a trout marked with golden stripes.

A lukewarm breeze brushed past Gon's legs, as if trying to lift him off the ground. The wind was thick with moisture, weighing heavily in the air.

During this time before summer, the forest was usually a vivid green, and yet it seemed to have faded into a dull grey monotone. And before he knew it, he could no longer see Chimney Mountain.

It was so sudden that Gon felt the sensation of goose prickles along his back as he, bucket in hand, was about to bid farewell to the swamp. His five senses were telling him that something unknown existed there now.

As Gon turned around, there was a pale flash of lightning over his head.

In the next instant, Gon saw it.

The shadow moved slowly under the rippling surface of the water.

...It was the Master.

Indeed, the Master of the Swamp was there. As Gon gulped, the giant black form of the Master disappeared once again, deep at the bottom of the swamp floor.

The wind grew stronger then, and Gon felt like a fish, struggling to avoid being whisked away by a sudden current. The sky was cloudy, as if about to burst into tears at any moment.

Hoping to take a shortcut, Gon chose to pass through a grove of snake beeches, where the branches twisted and coiled in intricate patterns.

The excitement of having witnessed the Master continued to rush through Gon's body. The sight of what he had just seen a moment ago. He recalled it in his mind over and over again.

Because of this, his attention was becoming scattered.

As Gon leapt over a fallen, dead tree that was half buried under soil, he felt a sudden pain in his left shoulder, as if being scalded by hot water. And at the same time, his vision swam in the air.

The smell of dirt filled his nostrils as Gon fell to the ground on his back.

Amidst the familiar stench of dust, Gon detected the hot breath of a beast, and while still on the ground, he retreated on his elbows.

Enraged and with an ash-white mane, the bristling foxbear stood.

It was an adult female (Male foxbears had a golden sheen to their coat when they reached adulthood, and their claws are also sharper), and about three times Gon's height.

The foxbear growled threateningly with a voice that echoed in the pit of your stomach. And then she straightened her rounded back, gathered strength in her shoulders, and took one step forward.

Strangely, Gon did not feel afraid.

To be precise, Gon could not understand why this foxbear was so angry.

“Wh...why are you so angry?”

Turning his thoughts directly into words, Gon asked the foxbear.

With her gums bared, the foxbear unleashed a loud sound from the depths of her throat, and then her bristling mane shook.

Just then, Gon saw that behind the female foxbear, there was another bristling figure. It was about the size of a pup and growling, ‘Fuuu...!’

However, it lasted for only a moment, as the giant shadow of the foxbear enveloped Gon’s body.

For the first time, fear crept chillingly up his spine.

As Gon closed his eyes, he felt a rush of wind in front of his face.

Just as Old Tenryu had said, the person had appeared in front of Gon, ‘like the wind.’

“A foxbear and her cub, huh... It’s regrettable, but a giant beast who has harmed a human must be...exterminated. That is the rule.”

Gon’s body froze at the sounds of the windblades erupting from the guardless cane sword.

This was the first time in Gon’s life that he had encountered a Hunter.

The man had deep blue eyes like a waveless sea, and with one attack of his cane sword, the giant foxbear was defeated.



Even Gon could tell that with a single hit, the man had targeted the vitals and killed the beast so that there would be no need to deal a finishing blow.

He was saved.

As the thought occurred, tears welled up in his eyes.

Gon pulled himself up from the ground in order to thank the man.

“Tha...”

But the rest of the words were blown away from his lips. The man’s open hand had struck him just above the jaw, and Gon went flying even farther than when he was hit by the foxbear.

But in spite of how hard he had been struck, his lips were not torn, and his nose wasn’t bleeding. All he could feel was the warmth of the man’s palm that remained. It was a strange sensation.

“It’s currently the season where foxbears raise their young. Surely you understood what would happen if you stepped foot into Snakebeech Forest at such a time!”

The man said with a slight trill as he glared at Gon.

The tip of his cane sword hovered over the fresh claw marks on the beech tree, left by a foxbear.

“Did your father not even teach you that much?”

The man spat while pulling down the dark red hunting cap over his eyes.

“It’s been a while since I’ve killed in such a distasteful way.”

“...I don’t have a father...”

Gon muttered as he turned his eyes away from the man and to the foxbear cub that cried in a high-pitched ‘Miii...mi...’ while clutching onto its mother.

“My father died. My mother too... It was an accident right after I was born... I...have only ever seen father and mother’s faces through photographs.”

The man’s blue eyes shifted slightly beneath his hunting cap.

“...I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Thank you for helping me.”

The man took out a gourd from his breast pocket and tossed it onto Gon's lap.

"Put that on. It's an antibiotic. It smells terrible, but it's effective."

The foxwolf cub continued to poke its mother's corpse with its nose and cry 'Mii, mii...'

With his unsheathed cane sword in hand, the man stood in front of the cub.

Perhaps understanding that he was the cause of its mother's death, the young foxbear's fur bristled as it let out a ferocious growl at the man.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Put it down."

The man's answer was simple and clear.

"It is a baby that still needs to be breastfed. If left alone, it will just die of starvation anyway. And even if it somehow survived, it now bears hatred over the death of its mother. There is a danger that it will attack humans once it grows up."

The man stood in front of the angry, bristling foxbear cub and held his cane sword right above its head.

The blood and fat it had just absorbed from the mother a moment ago were now dripping down onto the cub's fur.

"Wait...!" Gon said quickly as he slid between the two and then picked up the foxbear cubs in his arms.

The cub resisted with wild thrashing, its claws sharp against Gon's chest. And it bit into the shoulder that had not been wounded.

Gon gritted his teeth, bearing the terrible pain as he held the foxbear cub tight without any intention of letting go.

"Fu...!" Gon felt the foxbear cub's breath on his neck.

"Even if it is young, you'll be finished if you lower your guard and it bites your carotid artery."

"I'm fine...!"

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm going to raise it!"

“Impossible. Foxbears can’t be tamed by humans.”

“That’s not true!”

With tears in his eyes, Gon glared angrily at the man.

The moment their gazes met, Gon saw a flash of hesitation in the man’s eyes.

It was not at all the reaction he had been expecting.

Instead of striking Gon, or even glaring intimidatingly, he took a step back as if staggered.

Gon noticed that the foxbear cub had stopped moving in his arms. For a moment, he thought that he had been holding it so tight that it was suffocating, and he frantically loosened his hold and looked down.

Gon’s face was reflected within its red eyes. The foxbear cub was quietly still in his arms.

Not only that, but it stuck out its coarse tongue and licked the scratches it had inflicted earlier.

The man's expression went from that of surprise to understanding.

“Surely...could it be... Your... Your father’s name. Was it Ging?”

Ging...Ging Freecss. That was the name of Gon’s father, according to Mito.

Why did this man know his father’s name? Gon could not help but find it strange.

With both surprise and wonder, Gon looked at the man with a dumb expression.

“Old man. Do you know my father?”

The man also looked at Gon. While subtle, he seemed to have nodded a little.

“Ging... Mito...the aunt who raised me, said that’s the name of my dead father.”

“ ... ”

“Hey...”

As if to interrupt Gon...

“Your father is still alive.”

...the words, which, after some thought, the man had intended to keep to himself, were now muttered as if accidentally spilt.

For a moment, Gon was unable to grasp the meaning of the words.

It took considerable effort for him to understand, but slowly, like the blood coursing through his body, the words circulated.

And when Gon finally understood, he looked up at the man with a questioning gaze, and large droplets like rain poured down.

“My father...is alive?”

As Gon swayed under the aftershock, the man’s words brought on further shock to his ears.

“I am Kite. A humble Hunter.”

“Hunter?”

“Surely even you know what a Hunter is. Only one in a hundred thousand pass the Hunter exam every year. Sometimes not even one. It might be odd for me to say this, but acquiring a Hunter license is the highest honour that all the money in the world can’t buy.”

The man...Kite continued to talk one-sidedly, as if completely uninterested in the unsustainable shock he had just given the nine-year-old Gon.

“Ging... As far as I’m aware, he’s the greatest Hunter in the world.”

Intense shock and emotion, indescribable with words, pierced through Gon’s entire body at once.

Gon was overwhelmed by a feeling, as if he were levitating and drifting off into the air. Or perhaps it was more like being endlessly dragged down to the depths of the ocean floor by a great wave.

“My...my father...was a Hunter?” Said Gon, finally managing to tear his tongue away from the top of his mouth.

But he could not stop his voice from shaking.

“My father is alive... My father...! But...why did Aunt Mito lie...”

Gon was confused, and the words came out of his mouth just as he thought them.

Indeed, Mito and his grandmother had told him this.

—Gon, your father and mother passed away right after you were born, after they lost control of a carriage that fell into a ravine.

They had said...

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have told you that then. However, this might also be what fate wanted...”

Had I not met Ging, I would surely have been dying in the back alley of the slums right about now, said Kite.

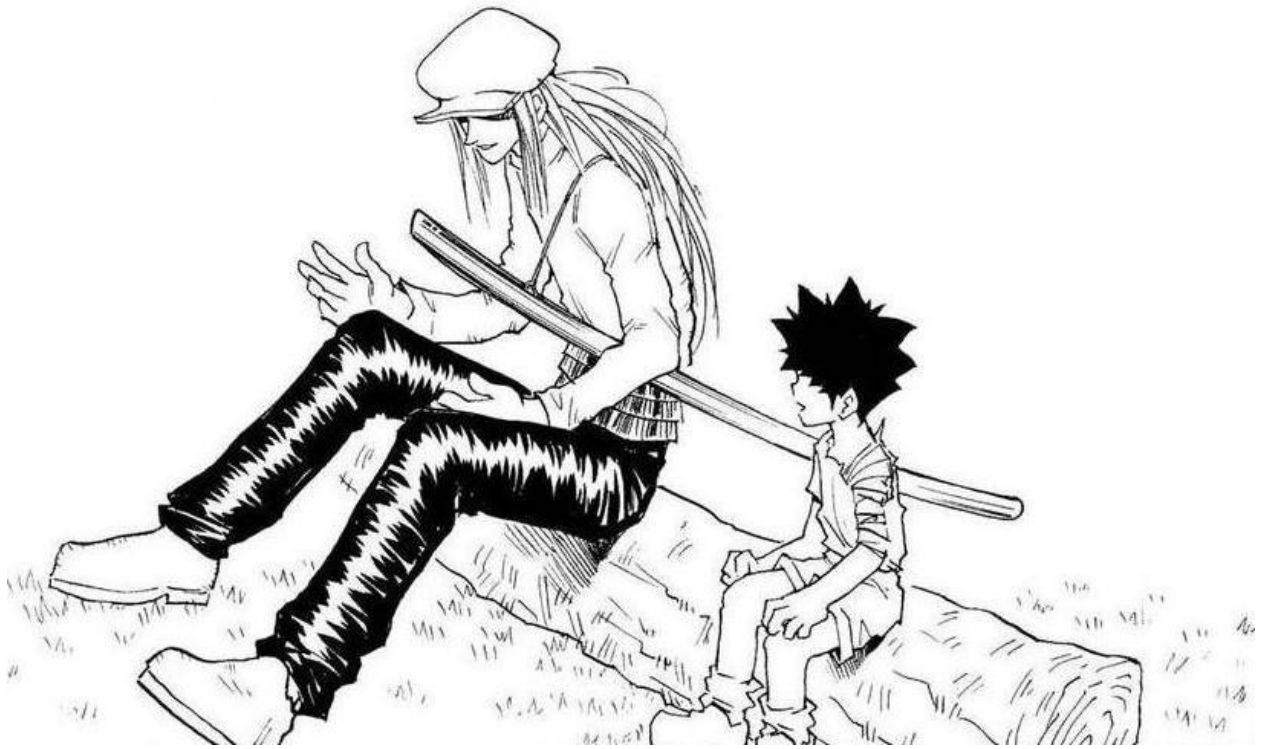
While listening to the tale of how Kite and Ging met, Gon fed the single trout he caught to the foxbear cub. The foxbear cub accepted the food from Gon’s hand without a hint of hesitation.

With no regard for the rain coming down on him, Kite continued his story about Ging.

The discovery of the ancient Lurka Ruins, the establishment of the breeding method for the Two-headed Wolves, the excavation of the Congo Gold Vein, and the destruction of the Nitorilo Pirates...

Gon learned for the first time that all of these and more were the achievements of his father, Ging the Hunter.

And to cap off that story, “I’ll tell you one extra thing. You are able to take the exam when you turn twelve years old. But how you spend your time up until then is up to you.”



The wind became stronger, causing the trees to creak loudly, and rain fell around and created a white, silk-like curtain between Gon and Kite.

It felt as if, left alone, his body would wander out from his body, and Gon had to use all of his strength to keep it in.

He then realised that Kite's silhouette was closed off behind the curtain of intense rain and wind, and he could not see him anymore.

"A good Hunter tends to be liked by animals before they know it. Apparently, they can smell those qualities in a person. It looks like you're one of them. I suppose we will meet again one day. I'll look forward to it..."

He left with those words...

*

Gon hid the foxbear cub behind a tree in the grove, then ran straight for his house through the storm, which was raging fiercer than ever.

There was a hint of blue that remained in the sky, and the ink-like clouds drifted to the north from the south. The unravelling, twisting clouds looked like living creatures themselves.

The oils dripped from Gon's face as he was hit by the rain, and mud splattered all around him.

Occasionally, lightning would strike overhead, causing Gon's shadow to rise clearly on the ground. He had walked down this wild road many times, but the scenery felt completely different now.

When Gon reached the slope of the hill, he saw the lights of the village houses below. They flickered and wavered in the wind and rain, dim and uncertain.

He rushed down the slope almost as if sliding. The ground had turned into a stream, the rain having beaten down every flower and blade of grass.

In no time, he reached the front of the house. Mito was standing by the open door. It looked as though she had been waiting there for a long while, or perhaps she had only just stepped out.

Gon, still struggling to catch his breath, walked toward her.

With the light from the house behind her, he couldn't make out Mito's expression. But from where she stood, Mito could see Gon clearly.

"How did you get that scratch?"

There was a hint of reproach in her voice.

"...I tripped and fell in the forest..." Gon said with a smile.

But just as he realised that this was a terrible excuse, the door was slammed mercilessly in his face.

"Aunt Mito!"

Behind the door, her voice rang as if to push him away.

"I will not allow lying children into my house!"

Such lies would not work with her, Gon thought.

"You didn't get that scratch from falling. If you don't tell me the truth, then you'll be spending the night outside!"

"Alright, alright, Aunt Mito...!"

"So you are going to tell me the truth?"

“Yes.”

The door opened once again, and Mito stood in front of Gon with her arms crossed. The shawl around her hair and shoulders was drenched. As was the floor right under the door.

Apparently, she had been standing there for quite some time and waiting for Gon’s return.

“I found a foxbear cub that was separated from its mother, and it scratched me when I tried to catch it.”

It was half a lie and half the truth.

Mito stared at Gon, the wrinkles between her brows unmoving.

However, it did not last for long, and she returned to the smile she usually greeted Gon with.

“...Very well. Come inside then.”

Mito moved to the side.

Gon walked past her and entered the house as drops of water dripped from his clothes. Mito quickly pressed a dry towel over him from behind.

And like that, she roughly scrubbed his hair and face.

“The bath is ready, so go ahead and get in.”

His grandmother said while carrying a simmering pot of stew from the kitchen.

*

“...Hey, Aunt Mito...”

After finishing his stew, Gon mustered up the courage to bring it up.

“My father. What was it that he did?”

The small sound of being caught off guard poured through Mito’s mouth.

Both Mito and his grandmother’s hands paused while scooping up their stew. He saw their eyes meet.

“What did he do... Just ordinary work.”

Though she still had stew left, Mito picked up her plate and stood up as if to move away from Gon’s gaze.

“I’m done.”

“Wasn’t he a Hunter...”

The plate of stew fell from Mito’s hands as she headed towards the kitchen.

“Oh, dear...”

While showing no signs of having heard Gon’s question, Mito picked up the pieces of the broken plate.

“Hey, Aunt Mito. My father was a Hunter, wasn’t he?” Gon said, as if attacking a fleeing enemy.

Mito kept her back towards him as she wiped the floor with a rag and replied in an annoyed voice.

“No, he wasn’t. That’s ridiculous.”

She said without even glancing back at him. Her downward shoulders seemed stiff, as if to reject any further questions.

“I see...”

“Your father worked as a travelling merchant. He was constantly travelling everywhere, so he was hardly ever at home... My sister, your mother, was always waiting quietly for him while sitting on that rocking chair in the attic and knitting. I would think that I could never do what she did. I don’t know what put that idea into your head, but he had nothing to do with Hunters...”

At the corner of the staircase leading to the second floor, there was a ladder leading to the attic room. The door to the entrance was locked, and until this year, Gon had never seen inside.

Though, due to snippets of conversations between Mito and his grandmother, he had an idea that it used to be his father and mother’s room...

“Sorry, I’m going to sleep early tonight... It’s probably from getting wet by the rain, but my head feels heavy. Please take care of the rest, mother... Gon, you better get some sleep too, or you’ll catch a cold.”

Mito put the shards of the broken plate into the bin and retired to her room in the back.

“Um, grandma...”

“I’m sorry, Gon. But it will have to wait. I still have some mending to do after cleaning this up.”

His grandmother said as she got up from her chair...

*

Three years passed after that day.

Gon had reached the age of twelve, just as Kite had said back then.

News that this year's Hunter exam, set to be held on Dolle Island, was approaching had already reached Gon's ears.

During these past three years, Gon had spent his time endlessly training his body. These days, there was no one in the village who could match his agility and quick reflexes.

In particular, his running speed and athletic ability stood out above the rest.

As for power, Gon was able to win one out of three sumo matches against Konta (the name Gon gave to the foxbear cub), who had grown into an impressive adult beast in three years.

Now, he was able to throw Konta, the chief of the forest, whom the animals obeyed, so it could be said that he had more than enough right to take on the Hunter exam.

The problem was how he would bring this up with Mito.

"I'm just going to tell her, Konta. If I talk to her properly, even Aunt Mito should understand."

Gon said while lying back on Konta's big belly near the swamp, hands behind his head, staring up at the endless blue summer sky.

*

"You're going to take the Hunter exam?"

When Gon brought it up after dinner, Mito glared at him with a severe expression. It was only for a brief moment, but Gon saw a hint of hatred appear within those eyes.

However, they were quickly covered by the veil of resignation and sadness. And then Mito sat down in her chair as if the strength had left her.

She seemed to have aged over a decade in just a few seconds.

...Aunt Mito knew. That one day, I would say this...

And because of that, every single word that I'm going to say now will hurt her feelings. They are going to crush her heart. Gon thought as he gulped.

“So you...did know after all. About Ging...” Mito said while still looking down.

His grandmother gently put a hand on Mito’s shoulder.

“These last three years...while watching you, I had a feeling that you would say it eventually.”

“I want to become a Hunter and find my father. Please understand, Aunt Mito...”

With her head still down, Mito bit her lip and looked at Ging’s photo on top of the mantelpiece.

“Well, you are his child, after all.” She said with a sigh.

Her voice was tearful.

“But, why...”

Mito clutched onto the hand of her grandmother as if pleading.

“I know that it can’t be helped. Because even if I can replace your mother, I cannot be your father.”

Indeed, Mito had been like a mother to Gon. If anything, he had only ever seen his mother in photos, so he saw her more as Mito’s older sister.

It was no wonder when he thought about it. From the moment he was born, through learning to stand, to speak, and eventually to run, he had always listened to Mito’s lullabies while being cradled in her sweet-smelling arms.

Even if he had a different birth-mother, he had never missed her or felt his heart throb with pain over her. However, it was different when it came to his father.

This father, who people said had similar eyes to him. Gon wanted to know what kind of man he was.

Ever since Kite had told him that his father was still alive somewhere in the world, Gon had spent his nights yearning to meet him, like a parched throat longing for water.

Becoming a Hunter meant following the path that his father had walked. It wasn’t logical, but he had a feeling that by doing it, he could get closer to the place where his father was.

And by taking the Hunter exam, he would be taking the very first step on the journey of finding his father. Of course, he did not know if he would pass or not. However, Gon meant to try as many times as he had to.

“Try and understand him. Besides, we have no chance of stopping Gon.”

At her mother's words, Mito covered her face in the backrest of the chair.

Outside, a nightjar cried in the distance.

After a long silence, Mito opened her mouth.

"Alright."

"Thank you, Aunt Mito... I..."

As Gon tried to continue, Mito raised her head and stopped him.

"However, there is a condition..."

"A condition?"

Mito's mother parroted in place of Gon.

"You have to catch the Master of the Lake within a week. You should be able to do that if you intend to become a Hunter. If you cannot do it, then you should give up."

There was a power in Mito's words which suggested she would not accept any other conditions.

To catch the Master of the Lake, which may not even exist. And within the limited time of one week...

For Gon, it was not a condition that would be considered favourable.

However...

Three years ago, on that stormy day, Gon had seen a shadow that appeared to be the Master of the Lake.

"Fine. I'll show you by catching the Master of the Lake."

Gon looked at the photo of his father and mother on top of the mantelpiece, and then he grabbed his fishing rod and dashed out into the twilight.

Gon's battle had begun.

*

He refined the bait, strengthened the rod and tackle, and cast the line into the swamp, day and night, without a moment's rest.

Ever since that day three years ago, he had not seen it even once, but Gon strongly believed that the Master existed.

However, three days passed, and when the sun had set on the fourth day, there was still no shadow beneath the water's surface.

As he was using a large hook and float for the Master of the Lake, no other fish would take the bait either.

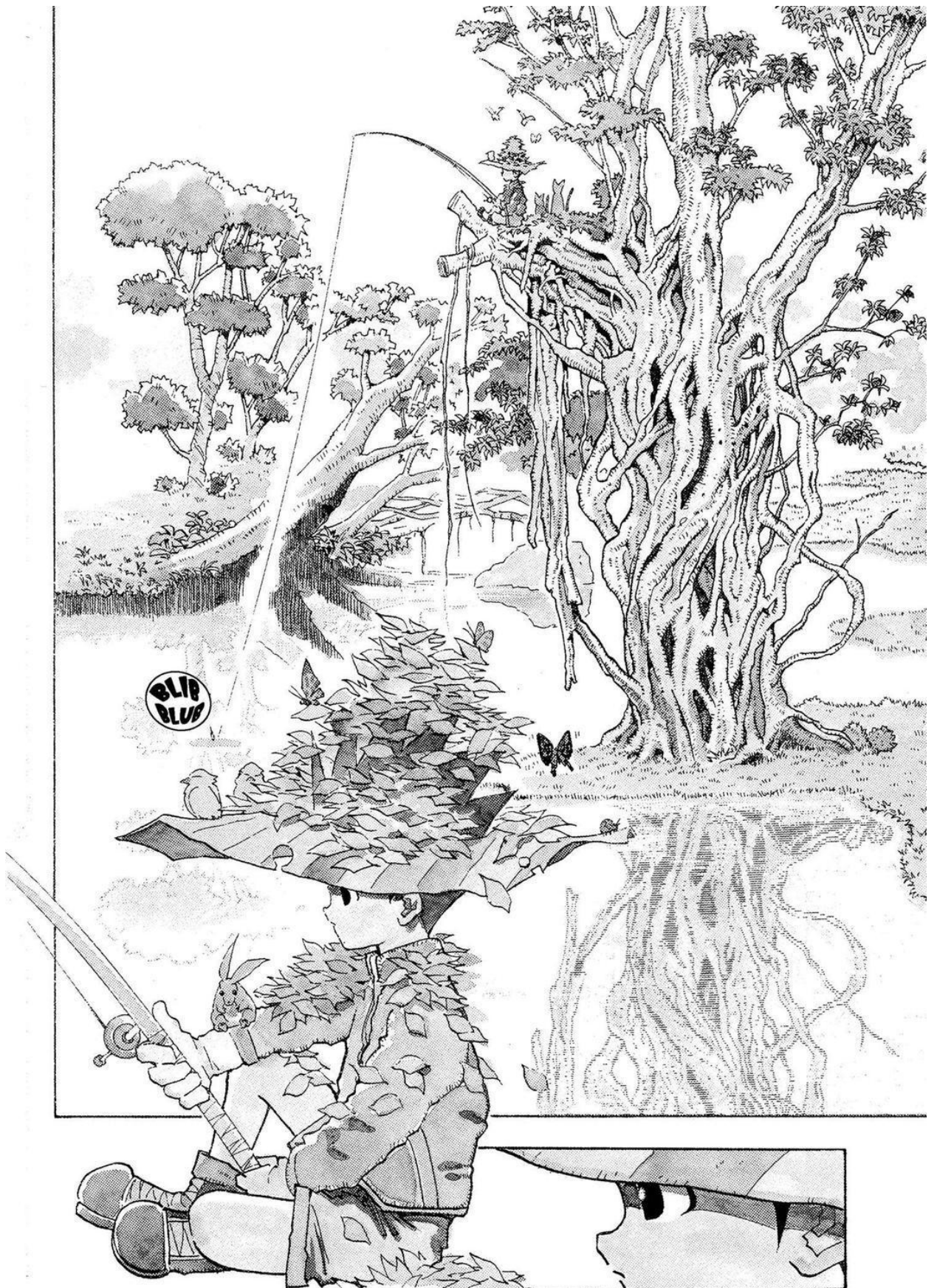
The float was perfectly still on the wrinkled surface of the water, and time continued to pass with unbearable boredom.

Still, Gon did not allow his concentration to waver.

When he slept at night, he would have dreams of catching the Master.

He would feel the weight through his hands that tightly gripped the fishing rod, and then the silver scales would glitter as the Master rose and broke through the surface of the green swamp water.

And just as his joy had reached its peak, he would always wake up.



And then, early morning of the sixth day...

The fishing rod that was about as thick as Gon's wrists finally shuddered and bent in the air.

Gon, who was sitting in his spot at the banyan tree, was almost sucked in towards the swamp at once. But he desperately dug his heels in with all his might.

It was heavy. As if he had caught the great earth itself.

The fishing rod curved into a big arch, and the line quivered tightly.

Gon steadied his breath and, one by one, wiped the sweat from his hands onto his trousers. Sweat was also pouring from his forehead like a fountain. He had to wipe it with one side of his shirt so it wouldn't get into his eyes.

And then it happened. After the Master stopped moving for a moment, its overwhelming power was unleashed.

The fishing rod snapped quickly at the root, and only the memory of the Master's weight lingered regretfully in Gon's hands.

Gon's disappointment was great.

...Even this fishing rod was not enough...

Mito's promised deadline was fast approaching. Today or tomorrow, he had to find an even more durable fishing rod and catch the Master.

Do not become the kind of person who can't keep their promise.

Mito's words, which Gon had been taught since he was young.

It took a terribly long time for him to regain himself. However, standing still would not solve anything.

He spent the rest of the day searching the grove for bamboo that could be used for a new fishing rod.

He could not find any that satisfied him, and even Gon, who always tried to think positively about everything, couldn't help but feel down.

"So you failed again." Said Mito by the door, as Gon returned to the house earlier than usual.

"..."

Gon didn't feel like replying as he silently leaned the new fishing rod against the door and walked past Mito. It was as if a heavy tiredness was eating away at his body.

"What happened to the fishing rod...?"

"It broke."

"Did you hook the Master?"

Gon nodded, and then he took an apple from the basket on the table and bit into it.

"Well, it's no wonder. It is said that not even five of the biggest men were able to pull up the Master of the Swamp." His grandmother said consolingly.

Mito looked outside once as if to search for something, and then closed the door with her hand behind her back.

"If only you would finally give up."

"No! I'll definitely catch it! We made a promise, Aunt Mito!"

"Yes. But it will be a whole week after tomorrow. And so if you can't catch the Master of the Swamp, then you must give up taking the Hunter exam."

"I know! This time, I'll catch it for sure!"

He was starting to think that letting the Master go after finally hooking it had been a grave mistake that could not be undone. He was mad at himself for underestimating the Master's power.

"The problem is the fishing rod. If only I had one that was more durable..."

As Gon muttered, Mito opened the window, allowing her hair to flow in the wind as she spoke in a monotone voice.

"Since you're back so early and have nothing to do, you should help around the house... How about cleaning up the attic?"

"Huh...?"

Gon froze while biting into his apple and looked up at Mito. She continued to look outside and did not turn to him.

"But, Aunt Mito. The attic is..."

Up until now, Gon had been strictly forbidden from entering the attic.

Mito removed the attic room key from her neck, which she had worn as a pendant, and placed it on the backrest of the chair.

“Finish it today, Gon...” She said with her back turned towards him.

Her voice sounded muffled.

Gon was about to say something, but his grandmother turned to him with a meaningful look.

Just go without saying anything.

That was what her eyes said.

Gon took the key from the backrest of the chair and inserted it into the keyhole. Then he turned it to the left and heard a click as the lock opened.

There was a faint scent of flowers. The room was neatly organised, and there was a flower pot filled with yellow wildflowers under the skylight.

It was clear that Mito or Gon’s grandmother was always cleaning the place while he was gone.

Gon stepped inside and scanned the whole room that was illuminated by the light from above.

The bed, wrapped in a clean cover with flower patterns, the desk made of durable cherry wood, and the rocking chair, which, according to Mito, his dead mother would sit in and knit as she waited for his father’s return.

Though this was his first time seeing them, they felt strangely nostalgic to him.

Gon saw an old caramel trunk sticking out from under the bed.

As it was the most natural thing, Gon pulled it out. The trunk was about as wide as the desk and closed with a leather strap.

In the centre, there was a triangle with two Xs, the brand of the Hunter Association that Gon recognised.

—It was his father’s trunk.

Gon traced the lines of the brand with his finger. To him, it was like he was touching his father’s hand.

“This was your father’s and my sister’s room.”

When he turned around, Mito and his grandmother were standing there.

“This is where you were born, Gon.”

“I was the one who delivered you.”

“Here. I was...”

There was no way that he could have remembered it, but it felt as if the scene was flashing before his eyes.

Though no one had used the room for over a decade, the warmth of his father and mother remained. It was as if the love between them was enveloping him now, and his chest grew hot.

It was then that Gon realised that his desire to learn more about his father was simultaneously one and the same with the feeling of love he had for his mother.

“While no one on the island knew about it, Ging was a Hunter. He would go out on long journeys and then suddenly return. While he was away, my sister was always terribly lonely. Seeing my sister like that made me hate Ging. What is so important about being a Hunter? I wondered...”

“Hunter...!” Gon muttered deliriously.

“Though Ging was like that... My sister continued to forgive him until her dying breath...”

Once again, Gon muttered.

“Hunter...!”

Mito looked at Gon as if it were Ging himself standing there, and spoke accusingly.

“He abandoned you when you were just a baby...!”

Strangely, he was not terribly shaken by this. Compared to his father’s achievements as a Hunter, which Kite had told him about, this seemed like a small thing.

“He was not here when you were born, either. Or when my sister had that accident... I...I hate Hunters...”

“But...”

“ ... ”

“What kind of job...is so important that you abandon your own child?”

Mito’s face had the sadness and resignation of someone who was crushed.

“Being a Hunter...must be that important a job.”

“Gon...”

Mito looked like she was courageously trying to hold back tears that were about to flow out.

“You really are his child after all...”

The words came out like a sorrowful sigh.

“Open it. Ging’s belongings are inside. He left saying that the day may come that you may need them, and so I was to hand them over to you.”

Gon quickly removed the leather strap and opened the trunk.

Jumbled inside...there were bottles of medicinal herbs, tools such as awls and hammers, ice axes and crampons for mountain climbing. And a single fishing rod.

Gon picked it up out of the trunk and inspected it carefully. It was not very thick, but the flexible rod was polished well from tip to handle. On the tip, there was a large sinker and a unique hook with three prongs.

It would take a lot of arm strength to be able to use it, but it was definitely made for prioritising casting distance and durability.

“Father’s fishing rod...”

He could see the Master of the Swamp rising from the water.

“Aunt Mito, thank you. I’m going to catch the Master of the Swamp with this fishing rod! With my father’s fishing rod...!” Gon said excitedly.

What he had wanted most was now in his grasp.

“I knew it. That this would happen... And I know how it will play out...”

Mito muttered as if to herself, and then she buried her face in her mother’s shoulder...

*

The swamp was filled with fog.

Since last night, Gon was stationed at his fishing spot under the old banyan tree, staring at the water's surface with his rod cast.

The float was perfectly still. And the winds had died.

The swamp had been hot and humid up until a moment ago, but the stale air now felt chilly against Gon's neck and shoulders.

The dawn was fast approaching. The end of the final promised day.

However, Gon was not frantic. The Master of the Swamp would take the bait. His belief in this did not waver even a little.

The morning mist turned orange. And rays of light began to slowly seep through the gaps of mist and pierce through the surface of the water.

Just then, the float was sucked in with a vicious speed, and Gon's fishing rod bent like a full moon.

"Here! It's here! It's here! The Master...!"

Gon desperately held his ground and began to reel it in.

To the right and left, his body swayed. His palms grew hot as he gripped the fishing rod. The more he reeled, the stronger the resistance became, and the water began to whirl.

Still, he could not even see that shadow of the Master yet.

"Come out, Master...!"

With a yank, Gon was pulled forward by his rod. His hands felt like they were burning as pain rushed through him. Still, he would not let go.

His entire body was covered in sweat. Gon managed to stop at the edge of his spot under the banyan tree, and steadied his harsh, laboured breaths that came like the ceaseless pumping of a bellows.

He could not move one step. If he reeled in the line carelessly, it would either snap instantly or drag Gon into the swamp.

—What would his father do? If he were in this situation...?

Just then, Gon thought he heard his father whisper into his ear. No, it wasn't just a voice. He seemed to even see his father leaning over to watch him from behind.

There was another vicious pull, and the fishing rod was nearly torn from Gon's hands. And Gon's body lurched forward.

At the other end of the taut line, the shape of the giant fish appeared.

Without hesitation, Gon lept from his seat under the banyan tree.

And then Gon landed lightly on the Master, who was rising to the surface of the water. He reeled in the loose line and pulled as if holding the reins of a horse while crouching.

The surface of the water broke, and the Master's snout appeared.

With Gon on its back, the Master swam wildly like a rampaging horse.

"I won't let you go!"



HAH!!

GOTCHA!!!

Before he could even finish his words, Gon's vision wavered in midair. The Master had leapt high out of the water with Gon still on its back.

Gon was almost thrown off, but he clung desperately to the Master's dorsal fin. And he never let go of the fishing rod either.

"I won't let go! I'm going to become a Hunter...!" He said, and then his shouting mouth was silenced by swamp water.

It gushed bitterly down his throat and into his stomach. The Master had dived underwater.

He saw a school of small fish scattering up ahead, and the thick layers of sand accumulated on the floor began to rise like a cloud. Perhaps it was the volcanic ash that had rained down when the mountain erupted.

With the green swamp water as a backdrop, it looked like shining particles of light, creating quite a mystical sight.

—Dive, dive! Deeper, and longer...!

Gon's heart leapt with excitement at the challenge of facing the Master...

*

The duel that lasted for several hours had come to an end.

When the sun arrived at the position where it was looking straight down at the swamp from above, Gon and the Master, both completely exhausted, lay on their backs over the grassy shore with their white bellies exposed under the sunlight.

In the village square, villagers who had caught wind of the rumours quickly formed a crowd, pressing in two or three layers around Gon, who had caught the legendary Master of the Swamp.

Old Tenryu was there too. And the friends Gon had played with since he was young...

Also, Mito and his grandmother.

Gon laid the Master of the Swamp, wrapped in a wet straw mat, on the stone pavement at the centre of the village square, then strode directly toward Mito.

"You made a promise, Aunt Mito. Can I take the Hunter exam now?"

Mito looked only at Gon's eyes.

“It was you who taught me that I shouldn’t grow up to be someone who can’t keep their promise.”

“ ... ”

“Fine!”

“...Do as you like.”

Even to Gon, it was painfully apparent that it took everything within her to just say those words.

“Thank you, Aunt Mito...!”

Gon picked up the Master, wrapped in the wet straw mat, and ran in the opposite direction from their house.

“Where are you going, Gon...?” One of the villagers asked him.

“The Master of the Swamp came from the sea a long time ago. And so I’m going to return it to its home.”

Old Tenryu stroked his long beard and nodded approvingly at Gon’s words.

The Master twisted its body once, as if to bid farewell to Gon, and then it swiftly swam downstream and soon vanished from sight.

—The sea is much bigger than the Whale Island swamp. Go wherever you like. Now, you can become the Master of the black current.

Gon muttered silently in his heart, and then he turned around to Konta, who was behind him.

“Konta, while it makes me sad, I have to say goodbye.”

“Kyuui...!” Konta whined sadly.

“I am going to go out into the wide world, just like the Master.”

—In order to find my father...!

As Konta grieved this separation and rubbed his cheek against him, Gon petted his mane silently.

*

The day of departure came.

Gon had set a raft with a sail afloat on the river that led to the port town. It seemed that the entire village had come out to see him off.

“Aunt. Mito, thank you for everything. And you too, grandma...”

“Be safe, Gon...”

“Yes, no words can describe how grateful I am.”

Mito wiped the tears from her eyes and squeezed Gon’s hands firmly.

“I’m sorry, Gon... I lied to you. Ging didn’t abandon you. I won your custody rights from Ging in court...”

“I realised it. That it was a lie. Because you never look at my face when you lie, Aunt Mito.”

With eyes full of tears, Mito hugged Gon tightly. Normally, he would have been embarrassed, but he was fine now.

Gon buried his face in Mito’s chest fondly.

“Your smell, Aunt Mito... I don’t know what my real mother smells like, but you have a motherly smell. I won’t ever forget you, no matter where I go. You are the same as a mother.”

Mito ran her hands through Gon’s hair and hugged him even more tightly. Gon just stayed still, surrendering himself until she was satisfied.

However, this too did not last for a long time.

“Go then. Straight forward. To your path...”

The raft's sail rustled as it caught the wind.

While carrying Gon, the raft rode the river waves and advanced to the centre of the current.

“Goodbye! I’m going to become a great Hunter and return one day!”

“Take care! Gon...!”

“Did you take your stomach medicine! Be careful about what you eat!”

With every wave of the river, the sight of Mito and his grandmother waving on the pier became smaller and smaller.

“Father, I’m going to be a great Hunter. I’m going to follow in your footsteps...!”

The sunlight reflecting off the river waves shone brilliantly...

Episode II — Encounter

People, people, people...

The port was crowded with so many people that he wondered where they could have all come from.

Sailors, merchants, street vendors, prostitutes...

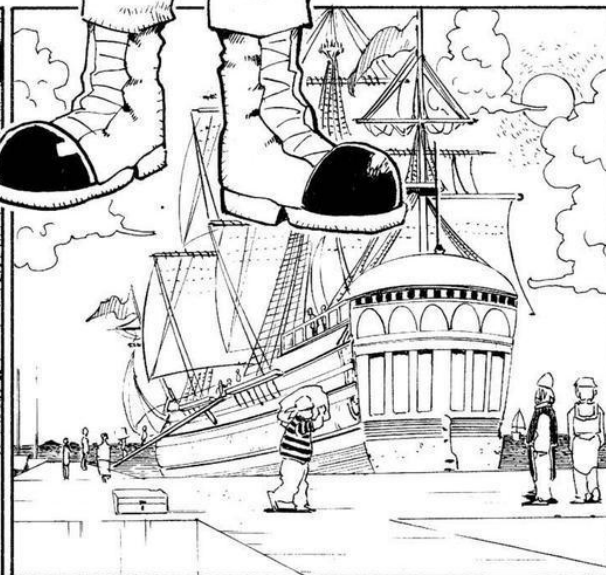
Elders, children, stray dogs, and rough-looking thugs...

From the dusty main streets to the winding, maze-like alleys hemmed in by stone walls, every corner overflowed with diverse crowds of people.

Gon exhaled deeply and then lowered his fishing rod and cloth knapsack from his shoulder to the ground.

In the calm waters of the harbour, numerous small fishing boats and medium-sized sail boats were moored, and the salty breeze brushed against his sun-warmed face.

However, Gon did not see any large ships.



Perhaps the ships bound for Dolle Island, where the Hunter exam would be held, departed from somewhere else.

Gon picked up his things again and stepped out into the main street with its dizzying crowds.

And then he questioned anyone in sight about where the ship for Dolle Island set sail.

“Excuse me, do you know where I can find the ship headed for Dolle Island! Ah, hey, you over there, please tell me where the ships headed for Dolle Island are docked.”

However, not only did no one have an answer for Gon, but they didn’t even stop to listen to him.

They would either scowl with an annoyed expression or ignore him entirely. Most seemed determined to reject any questions from the beginning, and would not even meet his eyes.

“The ship bound for Dolle Island... Ah!”

As Gon stood amidst the crowd, a tall man nearly crashed into him from behind.

No, he did crash into him. However, before Gon realised what had happened, the man was walking in front of him as if he had just passed through Gon’s body.

In that instant, he felt a chill run through his body. It was a sensation Gon had never experienced before.

The man was covered in a pitch black cape that went below his knees, and had a wide-brimmed hat of the same colour that was pulled low over his face.

Long, golden hair streamed from beneath his hat, fluttering with the wind from the sea. But Gon could not see the man’s expression.

As if frozen on the spot, Gon stood there, unable to move a single step until the man was swallowed up by the crowds of people and disappeared from sight.

And then he unleashed the breath he had been holding in.

At a glance, it was just an ordinary traveller he had passed by, and yet Gon was drenched in cold sweat under his shirt.

However, Gon quickly pushed such thoughts from his mind. Right now, he had to find the ship that would take him to Dolle Island.

It was then that a thin man in a black suit, black glasses and striped necktie stood in front of Gon. There was a worn-out leather trunk at his feet as he adjusted his loosened tie.

His eyes then shifted to the side, catching the dazed Gon.

“Hey, old man...”

“O-old man?”

The man shuddered and straightened his back, as if he had touched something hot.

“Do you know which ship will take me to Dolle Island?”

“To Dolle Island?”

“Yes.”

The man looked at Gon with suspicion.

“That’s no place for a little brat like you to go!” He said bluntly.

And then he slung his trunk over his shoulder and started to walk away.

Gon chased after him while carrying his fishing rod and knapsack.

“Wait! You know, don’t you? Tell me, old man!”

“I’m not an old man!”

The man started to walk faster, as if to get away from Gon.

“I said wait!”

As Gon was about to persist, someone suddenly tapped his shoulder in a familiar gesture from behind.

A bearded man with a yellowed turban was stooping down to peer into Gon’s face.

He had distinct, thick lips that seemed to be turned upwards. It was the kind of unforgettable face that would be burned into one’s memory after seeing it just once.

The man in the turban was wearing the kind of tight sleeve clothes fixed with a band around his chest that sailors often wore. The sleeve on the right side was torn at the shoulder, and there was a visible mermaid tattoo.

He smelled heavily of sweat.

“Boy! You want to go to Dolle Island, eh? Well, it’s right this way! I’ll take you there!”

“Huh? Really?”

“Aye, follow me!”

The man in the turban grabbed Gon’s forearm so tightly that it hurt. He tried, somewhat forcefully, to make Gon obey his will.

“U-um...”

“You just shut up and follow me.”

But then...

“Wait right there.”

The man in the black suit, who had been walking away, suddenly stopped and lowered his trunk.

With his back still turned, he glanced over his shoulder and pushed his black glasses up onto his nose.

“That’s an old trick. Pretending to be kind in order to fool some country hick and then selling them off somewhere.”

“Wh-what did you say...!”

As the turbaned man’s lip rose, his yellowed, crooked teeth became visible.

Gon had never seen something so hideous back in his village.

The man in the turban pushed Gon away and swiftly reached into his pocket.

At that moment, Gon saw it.

The black suit, turning around, and the glimmer of a naked blade in the sun...!

Under the unsheathed knife, the clothes of the man in the turban, covered in sweat and dust, were slashed apart with the precision of a hair’s breadth. And like that, the hand that grasped the dagger under his band was exposed.

“Y-you bastard...!”

In spite of the strong words, his hand was shaking.

The man in the black suit calmly adjusted his necktie.

“Disappear.”

The man in the turban let out an unintelligible curse, and then he vanished into the crowd, like a fish swimming against the current. Gon could only hear the swearing as he bumped against the shoulders of passersby.

And then the traffic quickly returned to normal, as if nothing had happened. Likely, these kinds of minor scuffles happened all the time in this town.

Gon bowed his head to the man in the black suit.

“Thank you, old man.”

“I told you, I’m not an old man! In spite of appearances, I’m actually pretty self-conscious about it. Ageing.”

“Well, if you’re as old as you look, then you’re an old man,” Gon said persistently, causing the man to frown.

“...Well, never mind then. More importantly, if you want to thank me, why don’t you give me something from that?”

He pointed to Gon’s knapsack with his chin.

“Ah, this? But it’s just...”

Gon untied the straps and emptied the sack by turning it over.

What scattered onto the ground were the bottles of medicinal herbs from his father’s trunk, a worm-eaten book, and some bread and seeds.

Disappointment appeared clearly on the man’s face.

“What! You don’t have a single thing of value!”

“Yes.”

“Helping you was a waste. I have no business with broke people!”

Straightening his shoulders, the man turned his back and began walking quickly, his long legs stretching with each step.

“Ah! Hey, wait! Old man!”

“I said, don’t call me that!”

“Then what should I call you? I’m Gon...”

“Hmph. Is that right? Sorry, but I don’t go around telling random people my name.” The man said with annoyance, and then he made his way through the crowd of people as if swimming.

Gon trotted after him.

“You know about the ship headed for Dolle Island, don’t you? Tell me! I have to reach it no matter what.”

“No! I’m not telling you anything if you don’t have any money! Look, there’s no reason to feel ashamed. Just run back to your mother.”

The man rushed into a back alley and, after placing his foot onto a scrap basket, vaulted lightly over the stone wall.

Gon followed him without hesitation.

If he let the man go now, he may not make it to the boat in time.

“You can follow me, but I still won’t tell you anything!” The man said as he jumped from the stone walls onto a tiled roof.

He then leapt from roof to roof in an attempt to shake off Gon. However, such games of tag were within Gon’s area of expertise. This was no different from what he had done with Konta and the forest animals every day.

Gon leapt from the stone walls and into an alley so that he landed in front of the man.

“Hah, hah, hah...! You sure are a persistent brat!” The man said with exasperation.

Just then, Gon heard the coarse breathing of several men.

It seemed that the man had not noticed it yet, but within this maze-like alley of complex intersecting paths, someone was fighting.

“Wh-what is it...”

The man noticed the change that had come over Gon.

“There is fighting somewhere.”

“That’s not exactly rare in a place like this.”

“But, there is something strange. This feeling...”

“Strange?”

“Like an overflowing of hatred...”

“You can just sense that?”

“Let’s go and see. It’s over here.”

Gon dashed into the alley immediately to the left.

“Huh. Well, it’s perfect. I finally got rid of him... Ahh! That little brat took my bag...!”

The man’s frantic voice rang behind Gon’s back.

*

At the dead end of the alley where the wind collected, five men were surrounding a boy, though his face was so delicate that one might hesitate to call him that. And there was one other man, who was leaning against the wall limply.

As there was no smell of blood, he was likely just unconscious.

All of the men were dressed in a similar fashion to the man in the turban from earlier.

They were former sailors turned into thugs. Gon could sense their murderous rage as they wielded knives and hatchets.

But they weren’t the source of the presence Gon had sensed. The hatred that would make one recoil was pouring from the blond boy (Gon decided it must be so) they had cornered.

Not only that, but this hatred from the boy was not directed towards the thugs. It was towards a spider, about the size of a fist, that crawled on the stone wall at about a shoulder’s height.

“That’s a venomous spider.” The man said, coming up behind Gon and retrieving his trunk.

From the depths of the boy’s red eyes, burning flames of anger erupted. But though they burned, they were flames that burned in chilling ice.

Gon could see anger, hatred, and sadness all blending together in those scarlet eyes.

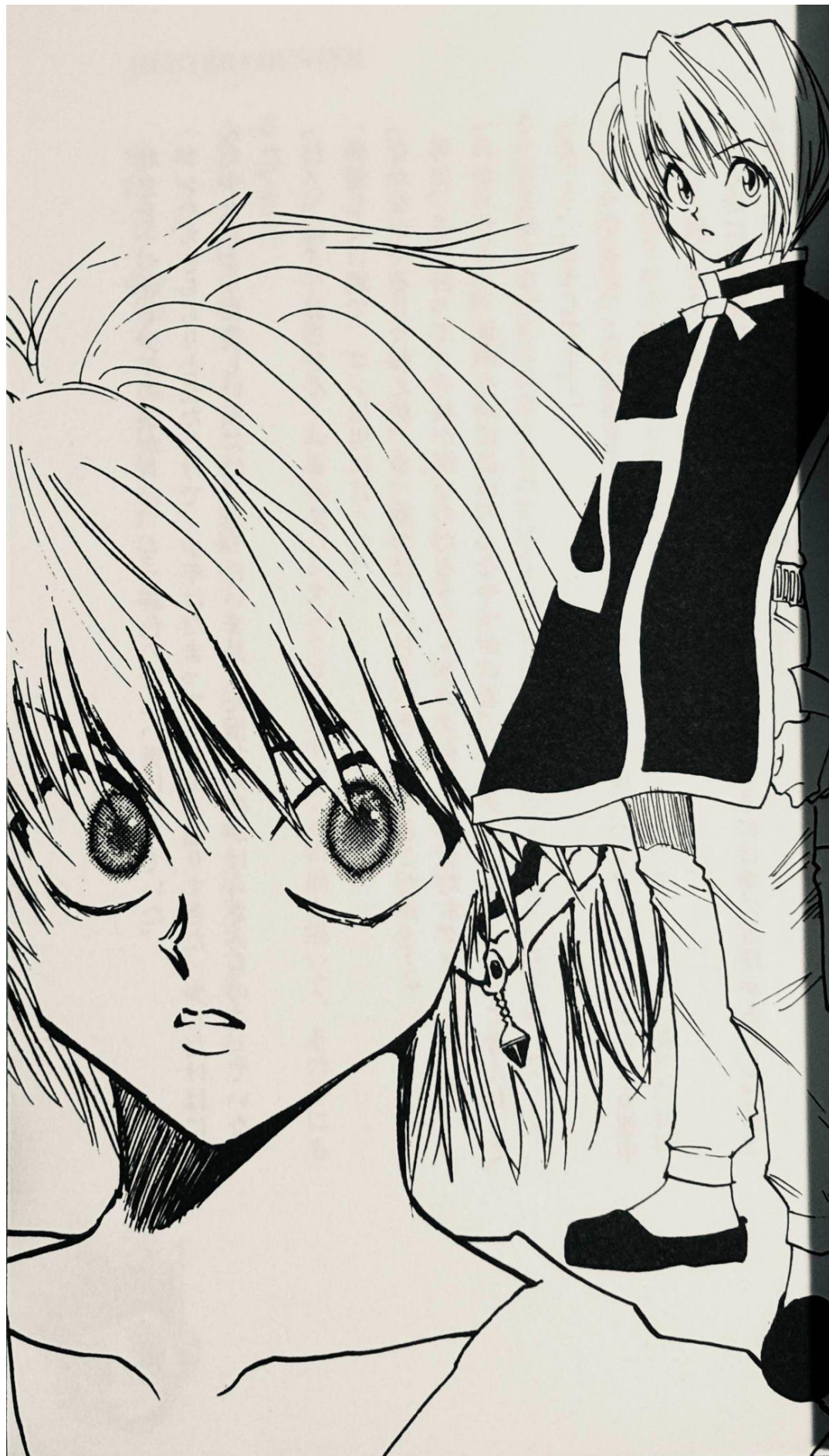
The spider jumped and landed lightly on the boy's shoulder.

Without a second's delay, the boy roughly grabbed the poisonous spider that crawled on his shoulder and crushed it.

He then took a silent step forward and, with a fist still covered in the venom spider's fluids, sent one of the thugs flying into the air.

The rest happened in a flash. Before the men could even react, he had them all lying unconscious against the stone wall with just a single slap.

Gon had watched the boy's movements so intently that he forgot to blink.



The boy let out a single sigh, and the cold scarlet flames vanished from his eyes.

He gave a glance towards Gon and the man, and then walked silently past them. There was a hint of a smile on his face, which was beautiful like a girl's, and not a trace of the hatred from earlier remained.

“Hey! Hey! Did you see that, old man?” Gon asked with excitement.

“Not bad at all. Of course, not quite as good as me...” The man said, straightening his necktie.

It seemed to be a habit of his.

“Well, you understand now? This world is filled with all kinds of people. So forget about being a Hunter and run back home.”

“Uh... How did you...”

“I know. Everyone that wants to go to Dolle Island at this time is someone who dreams of becoming a Hunter.”

“But. I want to, no matter...”

“You’re not up to it. Look here, the Hunter exam can be life-threateningly dangerous. It’s not some game for children to play.”

“No. I’m going to become a Hunter and find my father.”

“Is that so? Well, you have my sympathies. But...no, nevermind. I’ve said all that I can already. Goodbye then...”

The man stooped down and reached for his trunk. But just then...from a crack between the crumbling walls, a small man jumped out and snatched the trunk from the side.

“Ah! Damn it!”

The small man ran at a shocking speed, and he was soon far into the distance while holding the trunk.

“Damn it! You can’t lower your guard for a second here! Come back here!”

From behind the running man, Gon’s fishing rod cut through the air.

The flying lure expertly caught onto the trunk that the small man was holding.

“Hmph!”

Gon jerked the fishing rod back with all of his strength, and then the trunk flew in a vivid arc, and came right back to his hand.

The man looked surprised, and then looked at Gon from head to toe again, as if to reassess him.

“Here!”

Gon handed over his catch of the day.

“Tsk... Don’t think I’ll thank you.”

The man snatched it away as if a thief, and then walked away with long strides.

However, he suddenly stopped after only a few steps.

“It’s the ‘Kaijinmaru.’”

“...?”

“The ship you want. It’s anchored at the pier on the cape’s edge. It departs at 4 o’clock. I don’t want to owe you a debt over something like this. Understand, kid? Now we’re even.”

The man then straightened his shoulders and departed, as if his business there was done.

“Thank you...! Old man...!”

“Don’t call me that! My name is Leorio! Don’t you forget it!”

After winking at Gon, he did not look back a single time.

*

Perhaps it was due to the sense of relief after learning the departure time and location of the ship headed for Dolle Island, but when Gon took a moment to rest against the sun-baked stone walls on his way there, his eyelids started to feel heavy.

There was a two-story house with white walls in front of him, and the housewife was standing outside and hanging up some laundry.

The cleanly washed shirt was blinding to his eyes. As Gon started to doze off, he thought that the woman looked a little like Mito.

...Gon, you've grown so much while you were away... I suppose you won't fit into this shirt anymore. While listening to that voice, Gon drifted off into a comfortable sleep.

He had meant for it to be a short nap of a few minutes, but it was to the distant sound of a gong that Gon woke up, jumping like a fish.

The house in front of him was now dark and casting a long shadow. It must be time for departure.

“Oh, no!”

Gon jumped to his feet and dashed towards the cape.

He descended the slope as if tumbling down, and used the momentum to leap over the seawall. The sandy beach was mixed with fine gravel, and his feet sunk, making it difficult to run.

Further on, a large sailing ship with a hull stained a dark color was tied up at the cape.

On the deck of the ship, a sunburned sailor with a coppery tan was beating a gong. Behind him was a white-haired old man puffing a pipe, who appeared to be the captain.

“We’re setting off! Hoist the sails!”

The rough voice of the old captain, toughened by years of sea winds, echoed across the deck.

In no time, the sailors scurried across the deck as the mainmast caught the wind.

Gon could see that various other men, with their burning ambition to become Hunters, had also assembled on the deck.

He ran to it eagerly.

The Kaijinmaru began to slowly glide across the water.

“Wait! Wait up! I’m going on that ship to...! See!”

While running, Gon raised his Hunter exam application high into the air.

And then...

“Me too! Look!”

Right behind him, the man in the black suit who called himself Leorio, was also running.

“Damn it...! I carelessly took a nap and overslept.” Said Leorio, as he lined up next to Gon. Gon gave him a friendly look and laughed.

“We’re the same.”

“This isn’t a laughing matter!”

As the Kaijinmaru moved away from the cape, the old captain appeared to notice them from the deck.

“You’re late! The ship will not turn around! You’ll just have to swim to us!”

Gon could hear the laughter from the other Hunter applicants on deck as well.

“Damn it...! The sails are fully raised. At this rate, I doubt we can catch up by swimming.”

In the meantime, the Kaijinmaru continued to move away, becoming even smaller.

“Ah, to hell with it! Kid, I’m going to swim!”

Leorio removed his necktie and used it to strap his trunk around his neck. And then he ran towards the sea.

“Wait!”

“Eh?”

Leorio almost stumbled over as he stopped.

“Leave it to me!”

Gon extended his fishing rod and pulled it back for a wide swing.

“What do you think you’re doing with that?”

“Here I go...! Hyaa!”

He cast the lure with all of his strength.

As the lure flew out into the blue sky, it continued to extend its flight distance until it reached the Kaijinmaru and tangled itself around the railing of the crow’s nest under the main mast.

“Hang on!”

“Uh, alright...!”

While stunned, Leorio held onto Gon’s arm.

“Hyaah!”

With the fishing rod flexed to its fullest, Gon kicked off the ground hard and leapt into the air.

“Woaahhh...!”

Leorio shouted with a crazed expression.

They were flying in the air. Just below, the deep blue sea churned with white spray.

Just like the time when he battled against the Master of the Swamp, Gon was uncontrollably excited and thrilled.

In the future, how often would he feel this pounding in his chest?

After flying across the great sea, Gon and Leorio rolled onto the deck of the Kaijinmaru like balls.

“Ouch...”

“Gah... I hit my nose...”

Gon rubbed his buttocks, while Leo held his nose.

It was then that the person who had been leaning against the mast in front of him, offered a hand to Gon.

“Ah...”

He couldn’t help but gasp.

It was that boy with the gentle face and red eyes.

The boy smiled at Gon with soft, guileless warmth.

Gon held onto the boy’s hand and pulled himself up.

The sea wind, completely different from when on land, teased his hair. When it came to him that he really was aboard the ship headed to Dolle Island, Gon's face broke into a smile.

“Heh. Hehehe...!”

Just then, he heard the voice of the captain, who suddenly laughed with amusement.

“Now all of the applicants are present. And I have a feeling the voyage to Dolle Island will not be a boring one! Hahaha...!”

His rough, crackling laughter drifted off on the sea wind...

*

Through the porthole, the sea appeared to touch the sky. And only scattered shards of clouds remained as the world was washed in violet.

It was right before the dawn of the second day after leaving the port of Whale Island.

The two hundred or so Hunter candidates headed for Dolle Island had been packed into a large cabin with bare, splintered floorboards.

It felt less like a cabin and more like a cargo hold. It was in this hot, humid and crowded space that everyone had to secure their own areas to sleep.

Gon saw various people, including those wearing clothes he had never seen before, or who had tattoos on their faces.

With so many people of diverse backgrounds, it would be difficult to remember everyone quickly.

Naturally, Gon found himself taking a spot close to Leorio. And directly in Gon's line of sight as he lay down, the boy with scarlet eyes swayed in the hammock he'd hung on his own.

*

The air in the cabin was stale and unmoving.

Gon woke up in the middle of the night, and though he tossed and turned, he was unable to fall back to sleep. And so he finally gave up and went out onto the deck.

There was no wind, and it was just as hot and humid as the cabin, contrary to what Gon had been hoping. Even the roar of the sea could only be heard faintly.

The Kaijinmaru had been in the calm since yesterday evening, so that its prow did not disturb the water with even a splash.

Still, the air alone made it much more bearable than being in the cabin. Gon repeatedly took in deep breaths, as if to replace the air that had built up in his lungs.

It was almost frustrating, how the ship seemed to be staying in place. As if it had taken root there.

In search of even the smallest, breath-like wind, Gon looked up at the sails raised over the main mast.

The sails did not sway in the slightest. And the glossy mast bore several gashes, as if they'd been made by a thick-bladed axe.

Suddenly, he felt as if someone's cold breath was moving down his neck.

He could not forget the sensation. He had experienced it in the crowd of that port town.

Someone was in the darkness right behind him.

No, not just someone. All of Gon's five senses were telling him that it was the man in the black cape he had passed in the crowd.

And just like during that time, Gon could not move, as if he was bound up completely.

How could it be that that man was also on this ship...



It was strange that he had not been seen aboard the ship even once up until now. Even though there were many people, it would be too careless to miss someone who was that tall and distinct.

“You have the right qualities, you do.”

The man in the black cape had a voice that made Gon think of fingers moving smoothly over the keys of a piano.

“For a Hunter...”

“...”

“And so, I will do nothing.”

He sensed that the man was rising to his feet in the shadows. There was the scent of blood.

Gon was unable to turn around. Like a ship trapped on a reef.

It seemed like the man was carrying someone next to him. However, Gon only heard the breathing of one man. Perhaps the other person was already dead.

The man dragged the corpse to the side of the ship, and propped it up so that it sat with its back to the sea. And then he pushed the forehead with his finger.

In the corner of Gon’s vision, he saw only the corpse’s feet as it fell into the sea, swallowed by a dawn still heavy with darkness.

“This one was disqualified before even reaching Dolle Island anyway.”

The man stood calmly right in front of Gon. Beneath the wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his face, shockingly clear eyes were fixed on Gon.

He had just killed a man, and yet strangely, there wasn’t a single speck of cloudiness in them.

“You have good eyes. I have never met someone with such good eyes before.”

The man held Gon’s chin, lifting it slightly as he spoke.

Gon could do nothing, not even blink.

“I am Jean-Louis Bradley. Then again, even if you were to search later, you would not be able to find me.”

While Gon was unable to grasp the meaning of those words, the man stepped away and melted into the darkness.

*

As morning fully broke, the Kaijinmaru began to buzz with activity once again.

The Hunter applicants who had been shut up within the cabin now poured out onto the deck.

The old captain and crew emerged as well, busily preparing breakfast and carrying out the ship inspections.

But just as before, there was not a single wrinkle on the sea. It was as if it was one big sheet of blue glass laid out before them.

For Gon, what had transpired only one hour ago now seemed like a dream.

He thought that his own nightmares were toying with him...

However, through conversations held by the applicants during breakfast, he learned that it was unmistakably reality.

They talked eerily about how one of their own had been missing since last night, as if vanishing into smoke.

Gon also went around and looked at all two-hundred of the applicants, but just as expected, he was unable to find the man from earlier.

...Jean-Louis Bradley...

The man had called himself. His voice lingered clearly in Gon's ears.

With the sea perfectly calm, all of the applicants were thoroughly bored.

Some threw their knives aimlessly, while others did pushups to keep their bodies in shape, and some even gambled without ever seeming to get tired of it. But most just sprawled across the deck, idly staring up at the sky or out at the sea with nothing to do.

Time passed languidly, in a way that made one yawn without end.

Gon gave up his search for the man, and switched to fishing at the prow of the ship.

Leorio, who was reading a magazine right behind him, opened his mouth wide and let out a great, unabashed yawn.

“The sun...is blazing.”

Leorio took off his jacket and loosened his tie and collar. Today, he wore a dark blue necktie with a mesh pattern.

Suddenly, a burst of cheerful laughter erupted.

As Gon and Leorio turned to look, they saw the old captain, his pipe clenched between his teeth, and Katzo, the small first mate, walking through the applicants with several sailors in tow, laughing as they went.

The sailors were all giant, muscular men who could hold their own against the applicants, who boasted their own share of rough, intimidating faces.

But as for Katzo, he was nearly the same height as Gon, and his two eyes were not quite aligned correctly.

However, this did not give him an unpleasant appearance in the least. To the contrary, it was part of his charm.

His brisk movements made him seem exceptionally nimble.

Apparently, they were laughing at one of the larger applicants, who had become seasick and vomited over the side of the ship despite the perfectly calm sea.

Katzo then spoke, though he was only half as tall and broad as the muscular applicant.

“He’s all bulk and no guts. To think someone would get seasick in such a dead calm.”

“It happens every time. By the time we reach Dolle Island, he’ll have vomited everything until only skin and bones remain.” The old captain added mockingly, and the sailors burst into laughter.

It was then that Gon saw the applicant who had been throwing his knife aimlessly snort in displeasure at the captain and crew with a ‘hmp...’.

“I think he’s going to do something.”

“What did you...”

Before Leorio could even turn his head to look at the man, the knife flashed in his hand.

The thrown knife then flew through the air towards Katzo’s feet.

But...

Like an acrobat, Katzo leapt lightly into the air, traced an arc, and landed right in front of the knife-wielding man.

It was such a natural movement, as if he had merely moved his body from the right to the left, and so some of the nearby applicants hadn't even noticed.

Katzo laughed in that endearing way that made his face collapse into numerous wrinkles, and then he opened the palm of his hand which was extended towards the man.

There, the man's knife was held.

The knife-wielding man had clearly been caught off guard.

"Can you take it?"

Katzo winked at the man confidently.

The other applicants finally realized that something had happened, and their gazes gathered towards Katzo and the knife man.

However, there was one person who showed no interest in them. The boy with the red eyes. He was reclining in a lifeboat and appeared to be absorbed in reading an old book with a damaged cover.

Now that the others were watching, the man who had the knife knew that he could not back down.

"Tsk...!"

He attempted to retrieve the knife, but Katzo swiftly tossed it from hand to hand. Like a magic trick, the knife moved from left to right, and then up and down.

"Hehe...! What's the matter?"

There was a clear difference in experience between them. Katzo was brushing off the man as if he were nothing.

"Damn it! Quit darting around...!"

The embarrassed man now attempted to hold Katzo down by brute force as he pounced forward. However, it only caused him to be humiliated once again.

Katzo slipped free of the man's arms with ease, darted behind him, and pressed the knife to his throat.

"Underestimate someone because of their size...and you'll get hurt."

He pressed the knife tight against the man's neck. Along with a stream of cold sweat, a drop of fresh blood flowed down his neck.

"That's enough, Katzo." Said the old captain.

Katzo nodded lightly and moved away from the man.

"Alright, knife man..." The old captain said as he moved his face closer and exhaled the smoke from his pipe. "Disembark."

"Wh-what did you say?"

The agitated man sprang up, only to have his arms grabbed from behind by two burly sailors.

"What are you doing! Unhand me!"

But the man's resistance was futile. He could not free his hands, let alone move properly.

"One passenger, heading home."

Katzo snapped his fingers, and then without hesitation, the sailors tossed the knife man off the side of the boat.

After letting out a pathetically loud scream, the man plunged into the sea, head first.

"Be careful of sharks!"

It was only when the man's face emerged from the white, bubbly surface of the water, that Katzo finally threw him a life ring.

The boisterous laughter of the sailors seemed to echo into the sky.

While puffing on his pipe, the old captain regarded the applicants one by one.

"The rest of you better remember this well! As long as you're aboard my ship, you will all obey my rules. And if you don't like it, we'll throw you out without a second thought!"

Katzo and the other sailors smiled, their white teeth flashing.

Some of the applicants sighed visibly, but were otherwise silent.

"Hmph...! So much for being customers." Leorio muttered defiantly, though, in a hushed voice that only Gon could hear. And then he leaned back again, using his hands as a pillow.

“Sharks!” Someone shouted.

Three fins were visible above the water. They were closing in while keeping an equal distance between them based on their size.

The man who drifted in the waves while clutching onto the life ring began to scream. The applicants onboard also looked agitated.

“He’ll be eaten!”

“Hurry up and save him!”

The air was filled with a tangle of voices.

However, the old captain and sailors just stood there calmly.

“Why aren’t they helping him?” As Leorio muttered indignantly next to him, Gon shouted.

“Don’t worry! Those aren’t sharks, they’re dolphins!”

The loud and clear voice made everyone freeze for a moment.

“And how can you tell that?”

“It’s easy. Because the waves behind the tail fin are different.”

“Oh...”

The old captain looked intrigued, and he approached Gon with swaying shoulders.

“How are they different, boy?”

“Sharks have vertical tail fins, the same as fish, and they move them side to side to swim. Dolphins and killer whales have horizontal tail fins and they move them up and down to swim. By the way those waves are forming, it must be a dolphin.”

“If they’re in these waters, they’re probably striped dolphins. They have two white stripes along their sides...” The boy said without raising his face from the book. Even his voice was gentle like a woman’s.

The old captain and Katzo laughed with a ‘Heh...’

“The boy is right. You may have wet yourself already, but I’ve never heard of anyone being eaten by dolphins before, so don’t worry!” Katzo said to the knife man, who was frantically swimming towards the ship.

Three dorsal fins sliced through the waves and then sprang into view, one after another. Just as the boy had said, the twin white stripes trailing from the corners of their eyes stood out brilliantly.

“Amazing! You were right on the mark!” Gon said happily, as if it was his own accomplishment.

The tension relaxed, and a relieved air swept over the deck. In a way, it felt as if the barrier that had existed between the sailors and applicants had now been removed.

“That being said, there hasn’t been as much as a breeze. At this rate, who knows how long it will take to reach Dolle Island.” Leorio cursed the ship that ceased to move.

“No, a storm will come.”

“Eh? You can’t be serious. There isn’t even a single rising wave out there.”

Gon retracted his fishing rod and stood up on the prow. He listened closely to the cries of the sea cranes who danced through the air in a flock as they gathered.

“Because...the air is lukewarm and salty... And the sea cranes are warning each other.”

“The sea cranes? Haha! So you can understand the language of birds, eh?”

“Yes. Well, not all of it.”

“You really think you can fool me? When you go that far, a bluff is no longer funny!”

The old captain stood next to Gon on the prow, and looked at his face searchingly.

“Boy... You came from Whale Island, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And what does your father do?”

“He’s a Hunter! I’ve only ever seen him in photos, but I respect him.”

“A Hunter, you say... Heh! That’s enough joking around.” Said Leorio.

Gon glared at him.

“It’s the truth.”

The old captain held his pipe and seemed to be recollecting some old memory as he stared at Gon.

However, his gaze suddenly moved to the flying sea cranes.

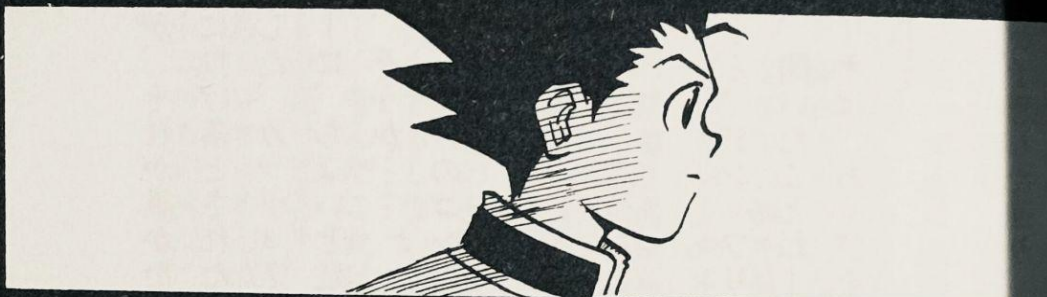
“...So, can you predict the scale of the storm and what time it will arrive?”

Gon answered immediately.

“The sea cranes are saying that it’s a really strong storm. And judging by the sky and this humidity, probably a little over two more hours?”

“...Hehe...! I’ve been doing this job for many years, but you’re only the second person who was able to guess it right.”

“The second...?”



Just as Gon was about to ask who that was, there was another scream, and one of the brawny Hunter applicants was thrown down into the sea.

“What is it, Katzo?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just a little slip of the foot!”

“Hmm. I see...”

The old captain then left Gon, who looked like he wanted to ask him something, and walked back to Katzo and the sailors.

“Your father. What’s his name?” Leorio suddenly asked Gon, as if thinking he might as well indulge the boy in the old captain’s place.

“Ging... Ging Freecss...”

“Hmph. Never heard of him.”

As Leorio stifled a yawn, he glimpsed the long-awaited breeze blowing faintly against the sails...

*

Just as Gon had predicted, the newly born breeze had grown into a violent rain storm in just two hours.

The sky was covered in dark clouds in no time, and several bolts of lightning flashed in the distance.

Thunder boomed, seeming to pass through the floor beneath their feet to the very top of their heads. The winds and waves grew stronger too. And the sea itself turned an inky black.

“It really does look like a storm is about to come.” Leorio said after scanning the entire sky after having glanced at Gon’s face.

He must have changed at some point, as it was not a gray necktie that blew in the wind.

From the Kaijinmaru’s crow’s nest, the low-hanging sky seemed close enough to touch as thunder rumbled all around.

Lightning struck everywhere, so relentless it became almost suffocating.

And then... Gon saw the mast suddenly shrouded in a faint light.

Leorio and the other applicants also looked up at the glowing phenomenon and raised their voices. The pale blue flames did not even waver in the wind.

“Wh...what is this...”

“The mast is glowing?” Said Leorio and Gon. And the old captain’s voice sounded behind them.

“It is St. Elmo’s fire.”

“St. Elmo’s fire...?” Gon and Leorio asked at the same time.

“St. Elmo’s fire... It’s a luminous phenomenon that occurs when a thundercloud or highly charged cloud passes over your head. It causes the electric field around the top of the mast to grow extremely strong.” The boy explained, and then the old captain put a hand on the mast and nodded slightly.

“Among sailors, there is a superstition that those who see St. Elmo’s fire will not be able to return alive. Ah, here it comes. A great storm...!”

The wild winds and waves quickly engulfed the Kaijinmaru.

As the deck was washed by high waves, the ship rushed forward as if flying over the sea.

After being battered around the deck like leaves in a storm, Gon and the other applicants finally withdrew to the hold-like cabin where they slept.

However, the shaking inside was just as great.

All around him, he could hear the groans of those who were seasick. Some rushed to the privy, but did not make it in time, causing buckets to be filled or the floor to be soiled.

Though, the waves that crashed over the deck soon forced the door open. Water poured in, carrying the vomit away with it.

Inside the cabin, sea water accumulated up to Gon’s ankles.

But amongst the quivering applicants, their faces bitterly white as candles after vomiting everything that would come out, there were some who were not moved at all.

The boy with the red eyes appeared to be asleep in his swaying hammock, while Leorio was leaning against a wall and peeling an apple.

As for Gon...

He was playing excitedly by riding on the barrels of grain that rolled with the tilting of the ship. For Gon, this was the most fun he had had since boarding.

Outside the cabin, they could hear the old captain softly humming a song.

*When the waves hit hard, petals fly in the spray...
Men of the sea, we've got mighty dreams to chase...
Blow, blow, storm, go and rage.
Young ladies...don't go falling for a man like me.*

The old captain eyed the applicants, who lay ghostly pale amongst the toppled cargo, with a faintly mocking look.

“Almost all were wiped out then. Tsk... Quite a pathetic bunch. And yet they mean to take the Hunter exam. What a joke.”

The old captain did not seem to be affected by the tilting of the ship in the least, and walked calmly over to Gon, Leorio, and the boy with the scarlet eyes.

“It looks like these three are the only decent ones. Alright then. Tell me your names. What are you called?”

“I am Leorio.”

“I’m Gon!”

“My name is Kurapika.” Said the boy with the scarlet eyes.

“Leorio, Gon and Kurapika, eh...?”

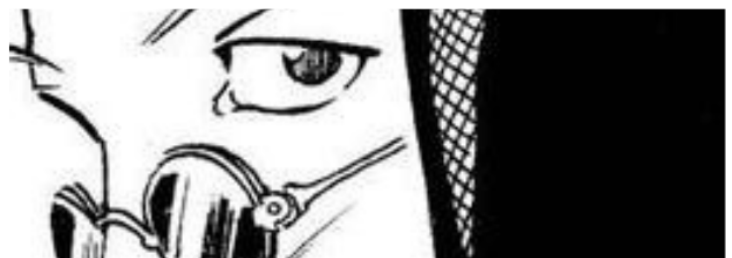
The old captain looked at each of them appraisingly.

“So tell me, why do you want to be Hunters?”

Leorio was annoyed by his lofty attitude.

“Hey! Quit acting so high and mighty! You’re not the one interviewing us!”

“Just answer the question.”



“Like I said, I don’t care for the way you’re talking to us.”

Gon then cut in from the side.

“Yes! Because I wanted to know what kind of job my father was doing...”

“Hey, wait! Gon! Don’t just answer him like that! I’m trying to have a word with this old man right now.”

“Why not? I’m only telling him the reason.”

Gon did not understand the logic.

Leorio frowned with dissatisfaction.

“Because I don’t like it! And if I don’t like something, I avoid doing it, even if it leads to a duel. That’s my principle.”

“I agree with Leorio.”

However, being addressed by his first name by Kurapika just made Leorio even more annoyed.

“Hey, how old are you, anyway? Show some respect when you address someone!”

But Kurapika ignored Leorio and stated his own point of view.

“It’s easy enough to tell a convincing lie in order to avoid an uncomfortable question. But in my opinion, perjury is no better than greed, and a most disgraceful act.”

“Correction. It is ‘Mr.’ Leorio! Hey, listen to me!”

Leorio was getting heated up on his own.

“With that being said, my reason for applying is too deeply connected to my personal life for me to confess it honestly in front of someone I’ve only just met. And so I cannot answer your question here.”

“It’s Mr. Leorio! Mr. Leorio...!”

The old captain’s eyes flashed sharply.

“Ahhh. Is that so? If you two have such strong feelings against answering the question, then you must get off of my ship immediately.”

Leorio and Kurapika looked surprised.

Gon was amused by the three different changing expressions of the others.

“Do you still not understand? The Hunter exam has already begun.”

“...!”

“From the moment you boarded this ship...”

The old captain then pulled the top half of the licence from his breast pocket, so that the Hunter Association mark with the two ‘X’s was visible.

“The Hunter Association’s...”

“It seems like you understand now.”

The old captain flicked off the ashes from his pipe.

“As you already know, there are as many people who want the Hunter licence as there are stars in the sky. However, examiners don’t have the time to judge all of them... And so, people like us are hired to sift through the applicants.”

The ship tilted far to the left as it let out a painful creak. A rush of seawater then burst through the doorway, sweeping up to Gon’s knees.

The applicants, endlessly tormented by seasickness and fear of the storm, let out a scream.

“Those removed from my ship and those laid out on the floor here will be reported as eliminated to the judging committee. So they’ll be rejected at the door even if they do make it to the exam venue. In short, whether or not you will be able to take the exam is all up to my mood. And so you better answer my questions carefully.”

Leorio scratched his head awkwardly.

“Tsk... It can’t be helped then... I...”

But Kurapika spoke as if to interrupt him.

“I am...the last survivor of the Kurta Clan.”

“Hey, wait! I’m trying to talk here...”

“I aim to become a Hunter so that I can capture the ‘Phantom Troupe’, the group of murderers who massacred my people four years ago.”

“So you want to be a Blacklist Hunter, eh? Every last member of the Phantom Troupe has an A-rank bounty on their head. Even veteran Hunters don’t go after them lightly. At your age, you’d just be throwing your life away.”

“I have no fear at all of death. What I fear most, is that this rage will eventually weather away.”

Gon recalled what he had seen in the back alley of the port town. Kurapika’s scarlet eyes that were painted with hatred.

“He crushed a spider. Come to think of it, I heard about that before. About how members of the Phantom Troupe have spider tattoos on their shoulders.” Said Leorio, who must have been thinking about the same thing.

“That was a rather embarrassing moment for you to have seen me.”

“But hey, while it may sound impressive, the way you rattled off, if it’s just revenge you’re after, why go through the trouble of becoming a Hunter?”

“That was the most foolish question in the world, Leorio. When there are mountains of places one cannot enter, information you cannot hear, and actions one cannot take if they are not a Hunter.”

“Tsk...! I told you to call me ‘Mr. Leorio’!”

“So...? What is your motive, ‘Mr.’ Leorio?” Asked the old captain, with a hint of sarcasm.

“Me? Well, I’m not about to bother trying to read your mood before answering. So I’ll be straight with you! It’s the money! With money, you can acquire anything. A huge house! A good car! Great liquor! Even women...”

“But money cannot buy class, Leorio.”

A cold shadow came over Leorio’s cheeks. Leorio then thrust out three fingers in front of Kurapika’s eyes and said in a suppressed voice.

“That’s the third time. You can’t take it back now. Step outside, Kurapika. I’m going to teach you the proper manners for dealing with your superiors. After all, it seems like the filthy Kurta Clan or whatever don’t know about manners.”

Kurapika’s cheeks twitched. The way that Leorio had spoken provoked the proud boy.

Having his clan insulted must be more offensive to him than anything.

“Take those words back, Leorio.”

“That’s Mr. Leorio.”

The air became tense as the two glared at each other.

“Come then.”

“Just what I was hoping for.”

“Hey, you two! We aren’t finished here yet!”

As the old captain raised his voice in irritation over Leorio and Kurapika trying to go outside, Gon stopped him.

“Let’s leave them alone.”

“What?”

He looked at Gon with suspicion.

“If you want to understand someone, learn what makes them angry... It’s one of my favorite sayings that my Aunt Mito taught me.”

“...”

“I think it’s very important, the reasons that they are angry. So it’s better if we don’t stop them.”

“Hmm...”

It was difficult to tell if the old captain was satisfied with this, as he put his pipe in his mouth and narrowed his eyes.

And then...

Katzo rushed in frantically, as if trying to barge past the two as they were leaving.

“Captain! The wind is swirling more than expected!”

“Alright. I’ll go right now.”

“I’m going too.”

Gon rushed out of the cabin, ahead of the old captain and Katzo.

*

Vicious waves washed over the deck.

The water foamed white, twisting wildly in all directions before shattering into pieces.

All four of the masts were screaming as if they could not bear it. The yards and rigging were relentlessly battered by wind, rain, and waves, and the sails looked ready to burst.

“This is a fine mess. Lower the sails! If you don’t hurry, the mast won’t hold!”

“Lower the sails!” Katzo repeated the old captain’s order, and then the sailors who were on deck began to run towards all four of the masts.

“Tie down the cargo tightly so that it doesn’t roll away!” Said Katzo, and the sailors shouted back with a powerful ‘Aye!’ Their spirits were brimming with a will to defy the storm.

Waves clashed against waves, each one growing into an even larger swell.

One moment, the ship soared to the crest of a towering wave, the next, it was hurled into the depths, as if dragged into a bottomless abyss.

Gon joined the sailors as they pulled down the sails.

But then...

Of the six sails on the main mast, the second and third from the top were unable to withstand the strong wind, and one after another, they were torn with a resounding rip. The torn sail then became entangled with the rigging of the mast.

The rope securing the trawl net at the stern also snapped, and one of the yardarms thrashed violently above Gon and the others, as if being swung like a club.

“Watch your heads! You’ll be knocked off of your feet!” The old captain shouted, and then Katzo, holding a knife between his teeth, climbed up the swaying rope ladder with unbelievable lightness.

“Be careful, Katzo...!”

“Don’t get swept by the wind!”

The sailors focused their eyes on Katzo’s every movement as he climbed up the rope ladder.

Gon then turned towards Leorio and Kurapika, as if suddenly remembering them.

With their backs towards the roaring on deck, the two continued to glare at each other with murderous rage.

In Leorio's hand was the knife, which he had previously demonstrated a dazzling quick draw...

While Kurapika was poised with two short-bladed swords whose hilts were linked by a chain.

"If you take it back right now, I will forgive you, Leorio."

"You better go first, Kurapika. I'm not going to be the first to back down!"

"Then this is unavoidable."

"Aye. I'll shut that arrogant mouth of yours."

"Let's go!"

"Come at me!"

Kurapika sank into a low stance and charged toward Leorio.

Leorio also dropped into a half-crouch to meet the attack, his left heel rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

One of Kurapika's swords flew in the air with a shriek.

Leorio leapt diagonally to the side to dodge it, and without a moment's delay, thrust out his knife towards Kurapika's chest.

Gon gasped in surprise. From his point of view, it had appeared as if Leorio's knife had sunk deep into Kurapika's stomach...

However, the chain that connected Kurapika's two swords had expertly tangled around the knife.

As Leorio tried to free his knife from the chains, Kurapika moved in to stop him, bringing their faces close enough that their noses almost collided.

Gon held his breath, completely absorbed in the fight unfolding before him.

The Goddess of Victory had yet to smile on either of them.

The ship tilted greatly to the side once again. And as if waiting for that moment, Leorio and Kurapika jumped back, creating distance between them.

“You’re not too bad.”

“You as well.”

And then the two clashed again.

Kurapika’s sword grazed Leorio’s hair, while Leorio’s knife made a slight opening on Kurapika’s shoulder.

One moment, they were trading vicious blows, the next, they had switched places while still locked together. Both were breathing raggedly now.

Gon felt that the end of the battle was approaching, and his hands began to sweat.

Their tense standoff continued as they measured each other’s breathing, ready to lunge.

When suddenly...

Katzo had been balancing on the yardarm, cutting the sails free from the mast, when the wood suddenly snapped with a grating, unsettling sound.

He was caught by the wind, and for an instant, Katzo appeared to be frozen in midair.

“Katzo!”

The ship then slipped into the valley between the waves and tilted sharply to the right. Seawater sloshed in over their heads.

The deck was transformed into a foaming sea, and into the churning white water, Katzo’s body tumbled, upside down.

The surging waves waited below, as if ready to swallow him up.

Before he knew it, Gon was running. The only thing in his vision was Katzo, who was about to be taken by the waves climbing over the side of the ship.

Gon, lost in the moment, sprang at his legs.

The waves had transformed into a savage monster now, and they thrashed wildly, unwilling to surrender the prey.



While coughing up seawater, Gon did not let go of Katzo's legs after clutching onto them.

But it was an unstoppable power. And so Gon braced himself to be dragged into the raging sea alongside Katzo.

It was then that Gon's body was suddenly pulled back by a powerful force. Emerging from the white murk, Gon heard the roar of the waves crashing around him.

Leorio and Kurapika had pulled Gon and Katzo back to safety, stopping them just a few millimeters short of the line between life and death.

The sailors then rushed towards Gon and Katzo.

"Well done, kid!"

"You have our gratitude... Are you alright, Katzo!"

"Ah...yes... More importantly, fold the sails. What are you doing? Don't stand around..." Katzo said. And then he sat down as if all of the strength had left his body.

Gon also threw his feet down and collapsed next to Katzo.

"Hahh... I got water in my nose." Said Gon.

Leorio and Kurapika looked at him with exasperation.

It was Kurapika who spoke to him first.

"What a reckless thing to do!"

"If we hadn't grabbed you too, you would have been lost to the sea as well! You idiot!"

"But you caught me, didn't you?"

Leorio and Kurapika both looked bewildered, as if their minds had completely shut down.

"Right!"

"Uh...well...yes..." Leorio said with a dumbfounded expression.

"So, what about the duel?"

"Duel? Oh, right..."

Leorio and Kurapika looked at each other, as if it was something that had happened years ago already.

“Well, that kinda dampened things. I’ve totally lost my motivation.”

“Me too.”

Leorio and Kurapika sat down on the deck, with Gon right between them. And then they both broke into a smile at the same moment.

“I apologize for my rudeness. I have a tendency to overreact when it concerns my comrades. I’m sorry, Mr. Leorio.”

After being called ‘Mr.’, Leorio scratched his neck exaggeratedly.

“Ahh! Suddenly being called ‘Mr.’ makes me really uncomfortable! Leorio is much more bearable.”

Gon and Kurapika burst into laughter.

“Hehe... And I will also take back everything I said about your clan, Kurapika.”

Kurapika nodded understandingly.

As Gon watched them with a cheerful smile, Katzo, his eyes following the sails being folded one after another, expressed his gratitude once again.

“Thank you. You’re a strange fellow. I’ve never met anyone quite like you before.”

Behind him, Gon could hear the old captain laughing amusedly.

“Hah...! Hehehe...! Ahahahaha! Now then...let’s continue with the exam.”

“What, it’s not over yet?”

The old captain flashed a white-toothed grin as Leorio muttered with exasperation.

“All three of you have passed. And so I will make it my responsibility to take all three of you to Dolle Island!”

Gon turned to Leorio and Kurapika, and then they nodded to each other with satisfaction.

There was no doubt that something different had been born between them. The distant manner and words were now gone, and there was an air of friendly warmth about them.

Leorio may have been a cynic who liked to act tough, but beneath that exterior lay a surprisingly gentle nature and a firm sense of justice. And Kurapika, while having the appearance of someone grim and revenge-driven, had a thoughtful and quietly considerate heart.

It was amusing how both had a public face that they showed to others, and a hidden one that revealed their true nature, in spite of their attempts to hide it.

From now on, I will always stick with them. Not as rivals, but so that all three of us can pass the Hunter exam together...

That was what Gon thought.

“But really, it won't sink... right? This ship...!” Leorio asked with a sigh.

Episode III — The Hunter Exam Begins

AFTERWORD/POSTSCRIPT

When I think about a story, I set up several options.

For example, Kite — his personality is straightforward and faithful to his mission, a man of chivalrous spirit who values obligation and would give his life for his master.

Without changing that setup, I thought of three reasons for him to pursue Ging:

- ① the final test
- ② to kill Ging
- ③ to capture Ging

In the end, I chose ①, but even now, I smile to myself imagining cases ② and ③. It's fun to think, "What if it had been like that?"

Even the smallest difference in a single movement can subtly—and sometimes greatly—change the story's future. That deviation is strangely something that heightens the imagination. This story, too, stimulates that pleasure centre.

In this version of the world, Mito is set up as Ging's wife's younger sister. Because of that, the reason Mito hates Hunters is quite different. And a new rival appears in the Hunter Exam. How will this Gon respond to that?

You'll understand if you read it.

Then, what about Gon from here on?

There's plenty of room for imagination. There are as many stories as there are readers.

— Togashi Yoshihiro