

Telo stood overlooking the great Maw, its depths inky black despite the soft white light of the Great Stone overhead.

Tales of the great chasm's origins had always been his favorite before his father's death. Thoughts of his father caused anger to bristle and nerves to rise simultaneously. Tonight he would become Chief of the Ayam—or at least his age and birthright provided him the opportunity to try.

First he had to survive a night at the lip of the Maw.

When his first warrior, Dato, had insisted on accompanying him, Telo had steadfastly refused. He must embark alone on the quest to chieftom.

Yet it wasn't tales of the Flightless, or even the Zaam that plagued him tonight. Instead, the far more recent threat of the Cursed loomed for anyone who remained outside after nightfall.

Dark brown hair tied back in a softgrass ring in an attempt to cool the sweat from his back, Telo almost wished he had no locks.

Already, the warning call of the grass shoot seemed like an age ago. The darkness had fallen soon after. Telo moved cautiously, guided only by the light of the Stone, the night clouds beyond faint in comparison.

He'd stayed awake nearly the whole night, and thank the Zaam none of the *onn* beasts had befallen him yet.

Drawing a deep breath to steady himself, the young Ayam looked upward to the Great Stone that towered above the jungle canopy, several dozen footfalls from where he stood by the Maw. For just a moment, he allowed himself to close his eyes, and uttered a silent prayer to the now glowing form of the usually black structure. Circles of brighter white created a design like a winding river down its length.

Here by the Maw, the absence of dwellings meant a lack of light even from the modest home lanterns.

Behind him, the rainforest seemed alive with the song of nocturnal insects and tree frogs. If he hadn't known better, the night would have seemed almost peaceful.

A rustle in the shadows to the right caused him to stiffen. Mustn't make any sudden movements...no movement at all, if possible. They were attracted to motion. Beyond that, it was said they could *smell* fear. And yet Telo mainly wished to avoid the need to encounter one of them, should the creature turn out to be a familiar...

Staring into the chasm before him with shallow breaths that he kept as silent as possible, the young man only wished his people knew more about this Curse. For eons, the legends

of unseen light that dwelt within the Maw had fed the fears well enough for soon-to-be chieftains. These days, it was what dwelt *around* its edges—and all throughout the jungle—after nightfall.

How much simpler life had been for Ayam when the people still felt safe after the forest came alive with the gentle sounds of the dark. So long as they avoided the gaping pit just beside the quietest part of the forest stream.

After sundown, however, the darkness itself meant the entire terrain was off-limits, and all Ayam must withdraw into their tree shelters.

The near pitch dark threatened to disorient him. Telo found himself wishing that the once-often seen lightstreams would grace the skies above.

As soon as the heavy rasps reached his ears, Telo closed his eyes. They had weak sight, he knew. Yet, despite years of warrior's training, Telo's own eyes could barely make out how close his feet stood to the edge of the abyss before him.

Equipped to move at the same enhanced speed as an afflicted in man form, the beast's only weakness remained its eyes. Telo would have to think fast, the hot breath of the creature behind him now close enough to feel on the nape of his neck. The stench was rank with rot. It could surely smell him as well, but shouldn't be able to determine exact distance...

Screwing shut his eyes tighter, Telo chanced a nimble leap to the left. He held his own breath at the quiet grunt of the creature as it processed its prey's change of position and rattled quietly. The only noise that followed was the sound of tiny pebbles as they slipped off into the oblivion that now lay directly beyond his toes.

How silent it was besides the breath and that light scuttle...Telo hadn't even heard its footfalls. Which was why he needed to use every sense he had at his disposal. Drawing in a quiet breath, he opened his eyes just as a long, moist tongue lapped at the air centimeters from his bare shoulder. The sheer proximity shot through Telo like a flame, spurring him on.

*Got him.*

Whirling around to throw his opponent off guard, Telo took care to maintain his balance so as not to go tumbling off the ledge behind him. He kept his eyes trained on the vines before him, just visible in the weak light and swaying from the treetops around the creature.

The one feature he allowed himself to note was the beast's eerie eyes, reflecting the soft glow of the Great Stone overhead. Silver orbs, like two scales, only slightly lighter than the black scales that adorned the rest of its hulking form. Barely visible in the dark, the locks of the person the creature had once been trailed its broad shoulders.

Setting his jaw, Telo resolved not to allow any more thoughts on how these monsters lived as Ayam villagers during the day. Not when their form by night posed such danger to their people.

As it tore open its mouth wide to reveal multiple rows of fangs as sharp as any spear, Telo took this opportunity to dart away again—this time to the right—narrowly avoiding the creature's long, scalding tongue.

The beast licked a sizzling path along one of the thick hanging vines, swaying its large head in Telo's direction. Jaws snapping noisily, those teeth just missing the flesh of Telo's left cheek.

For a fleeting moment, he regretted not bringing the small weapon the Flightless Hak had given him—the gun. No need. Going back countless years, the spear had always sufficed for his people.

Rolling behind the monster, Telo drew back his arm and released his spear with a mighty force that would have easily slaughtered a palm cat from a far greater distance.

But then again, the *onn* beasts had wiped out all the jungle cats—and the spear fell to the dirt with a clatter.

Those scales were too thick.

Now too far away to retrieve his spear, Telo again moved slowly toward the lip of the Maw. Both to his apprehension and relief, the creature followed, the low rattle sounding again from its throat.

The monster charged.

By the time those jaws opened again, Telo could feel a stroke of hot breath caress his arm, and chose that moment to leave his precarious position at the edge of the chasm, maneuvering beneath the beast's right upper limb.

The creature before him hadn't a moment to right itself, and went tumbling over the Maw's lip into the yawning abyss below.

Perhaps the most chilling part was the sound that accompanied its fall. A sheer, rattling wail.

After retrieving his spear from the ground, the Ayam collapsed onto his back. Still panting slightly from the thrill of the fight, he closed his eyes.

The first luminous fingers of dawn were approaching over the horizon, causing the glow of the Great Stone to gradually recede by comparison.

Zaam willing, no others would attempt an attack before sunrise.

Braku, a young woman recently afflicted, fell to her knees at the center of the circle of warriors.

“Where is Telo?” she demanded, glancing around, determined to conceal her fear.

Or perhaps she truly had none.

“The new chief has more important matters than listening to a Cursed boast of her own plague.” Dato, the chief’s head warrior, placed the tip of his spear on Braku’s right shoulder, forcing her to kneel to the ground.

“You’ve seen what I can do!” Braku slammed her fist down onto the quarter-meter-wide rock she’d carried here. The rock crumbled to bits. “During the day, I can fight!”

“And what about at night?” Dato challenged, sliding the spearhead until it touched the side of Braku’s throat. “Shall we let you roam free to consume our flesh?”

“You’ll be in the trees!” Braku cried in earnest. “Just as you are every night. Safe in the trees. I can fight for you by day. I will be the strongest warrior of all. Is that what you fear, Dato? That I will challenge you?”

A tense ripple shivered through the circle of warriors at that moment. In the next fraction of a second, Braku moved quick as lightning, grabbing Dato’s spear by the point and snapping the weapon in two.

Just as the Cursed woman dove for the head warrior, Chief Telo impaled her with a spear through the belly.

“Chief!” Dato shouted in warning, as Telo withdrew his spear as fast as possible with a sucking pop. “Aim for the eye!”

Anywhere to reach the mind. Anywhere else, and they would heal nearly instantly.

As Braku rounded on the chief, Telo drove his spear between the rabid woman’s eyes.

“It almost seems a shame,” Dato mused, looking down on the corpse before them, its eyes still open, staring into nothingness. “She always wanted to be a warrior, despite not having a man’s power. When she finally gets the gift of speed and strength, it’s thanks to the Curse.”

Chief Telo wrenched out his spear.