

“Why are you even here, Fogbrain? This is a hunt for Serpents, not a trip to feed them!” The jab was followed by a chorus of snide, chittering mandibles from two other Unblooded.

Todak-golo paid no heed to the snide remark, in no small part because he’d barely even heard it, so focused was he on ensuring his gear was perfect for the hunt ahead.

“Everything must be flawless. I must succeed, I have to prove I am capable.”

From the moment he had entered the world, he had been considered a weakling. He had only barely escaped his embryonic sac before he’d suffocated, plopping unceremoniously into the world in a mess of fluid with a death-defying shriek. His father disdained that he had barely survived his birth, deeming him as hardly fit to throw to scavenging birds. His mother, however, would not give up on him so easily, for how weak could he truly be to defy Cetanu in his very first moments? She saw a smoldering ember, glowing faintly within him, and she sought to fuel it into a roaring flame.

Training for the Hunt was taxing for even the stoutest of the Yautja race. Half a dozen of Todak’s half siblings had not survived their first year of training as unblooded. His mother would not allow her son to suffer the same fate. With the same intensity of a Hunter pursuing its prey, she had driven him to train, forcing him to work his muscles until they screamed and eventually gave out, only to repeat this hellacious process the very next day, yet her methods proved themselves as he matured.

He’d always been smaller than most other Yautja, standing just a hair under seven feet tall and with a slighter build than most others of his kind, yet his frame had been made robust by the grueling training regimen his mother had put him through, strong enough to defy the expectations of most of his clan, and even his father most of all when he completed his combat training.

His tendency for his mind to wander, however, was not something his mother could ever rip out of him, though she had made many attempts. Todak had a one track mind, focusing on one thing at a time and drowning out most others until his attention was no longer occupied. It was always assumed this had been a result of the difficult birth, and he often had to make an active effort to ‘get out of his own head’ and return to the real world. This penchant for tunnel vision had certain benefits and disadvantages to go with it. Whatever he set his sights on would struggle to get away...but what he wasn’t paying attention to had a chance to take him unprepared.

Such as it was when the larger Yautja, a hulking brute named Pu’dtah, slammed a clawed, meaty palm into his chest in a rough shove, forcing Todak-golo from his focused stupor. “Pay attention when I’m talking to you, whelp!” He snarled, mandibles flared and eyes glowering. Todak recovered and met his gaze, having to look up to meet it, mandibles flaring back in his own defiant anger. “Do not touch me, Pu’dtah! I’ll gladly cut off those lumps you call hands!”

The larger Yautja's mandibles clicked together, a snide laughter. "I welcome you to try! I'll take pleasure in crushing your pathetic body-!" He snarled, lowering into a combat stance.

"ENOUGH!" The yell saw the group of youngbloods snap to attention, all gazes falling on the elder, spiked quills jutting from his cheeks and lower jaws, his cape flowing to the ground from his abrupt entrance. "If you're so desperate to slaughter each other, I might as well throw you to the Serpents naked! You are here to become hunters, not squabble like scavengers over a rotted corpse!"

The elder's gaze fell on each young blood in turn, lowering their heads one after the other in deference. "The mark of a great hunter is not just size or brute strength. It is to know your quarry, to get in its mind...to be one step ahead of it at all times." He chastised. "Or has your training taught you nothing?"

"Fogbrain is too lost in his own mind to get into the mind of any prey." Pu'dtah muttered, drawing a series of muted clicks from several of the others, while Todak barely contained a guttural growl. The elder's gaze fell back on Pu'dtah, and the glower from piercing yellow eyes saw the hulk's mandibles tighten across his teeth. "You can settle your petty fight after the hunt. I will not send battered, whimpering pups against our most sacred prey!" With that, he turned on a heel with a flourish of his cape and walked away, and even with his absence, none felt cocky enough to speak another word.

"Focus, Todak. This isn't training. This is the real deal. Serpents are skulking, and they want to hunt you as you want to hunt them. If you just focus, you can prove yourself here and now that you're just as capable as the rest, that-"

He shook his head suddenly, letting out a snarl. Yes, focus! Focus on the world beyond your head! There *are* serpents out here, and he's monologuing in his own mind about needing to focus on them, rather than actually doing it! The young hunter slowly creeps down a thin corridor, eyes set ahead, occasionally scanning the floor, walls, and ceiling for any sign of tracks through the various vision settings on his helmet, yet so far there had been nothing.

The slightest sound brought his head on a swivel, crouching into position and prepared to lunge, yet it would always end up as nothing of consequence. A piece of aged sandstone chipping from a brick, the hum of an insect taking to the wing. Yet he could not discount the slightest aberrant sound, scent, or sight. To underestimate a serpent was to invite death.

When a sudden piercing shriek filled the air, Todak unsheathed his wristblades and spun on the spot, one armed raised to deliver a blow. Yet still, nothing. The guttural roar that followed announced that one of the others had engaged a serpent. Now he was truly on edge. If serpents

were beginning to hunt down his fellows, how long before he was attacked?

"Can I do this? Am I really capable as a hunter?"

"These are the universe's perfect killers, and you're a mistake who should never have been born!"

"No, I can prove myself-"

"You'll never be able to match them. Far better than you have tried and failed. Why should you succeed?"

"Stop..."

"So lost in your head...you didn't even realize."

"Stop-! What...?"

The attack came from behind. Todak fell to the floor with a thud as the heavy weight of the creature pressed down on top of his back, a deep hiss sounding in the air as the chitinous, clawed fingers of the serpent dug into his shoulders, drawing iridescent, viridian blood and a pained snarl, while resinous saliva drooled from bladed fangs onto his hide. Mustering his strength, the youngblood staggered to his feet in spite of the heavy weight of the warrior on his back and threw himself backward, smashing the alien into a wall with a thundering crack as sandstone struggled to withstand the impact.

On a heavier Yautja, this might have been a more devastating blow, but it had the intended effect, disorienting the serpent just for long enough for him to reach back to grab it by its front most dorsal tubes to pry the creature free with the sound of claws tearing through flesh. He threw it forward with a roar, mandibles flaring under his mask in rage and agony.

The serpent skidded along the floor for several feet before righting itself, opening its maw to loose a shrill screech. Its eyeless dome tracked Todak as he slowly circled around, lips furled back, letting a flood of resinous spit dribble down its platinum colored teeth and chin to the floor below.

A shudder ran up Todak's spine at that moment. He was not too proud to admit, he was afraid. Other hunters might balk at the idea of fearing their prey, yet that was their arrogance putting on a mask. All Yautja feared the serpent, for no other species could compare. It was a perfectly designed killer, and that is why it was so revered, why it was the ultimate prey for the hunt; all feared the serpent, but few would willingly admit it.

The serpent seemed to sense this fear, and though it could not smile, he swore it wore a malevolent grin, before lunging forward at a sprint on all fours, rapidly closing the distance with

the youngblood. Wristblades unsheathed, Todak brought his arm up to strike, only for the bladed tail of the creature to lash forth, parrying the blades away. His other arm moved to strike next, but this the serpent avoided with a side step, instead slamming its domed skull into his midsection, sending him stumbling backward.

His eyes snapped up in time to see the pounce, the serpent flying through the air in an arc, claws outstretched and jaws open wide. With a tuck and roll he avoided it in time, coming to a stop, he lunged at the beast and swung his wristblades down in an arc, slicing into its torso. A pained howl escaped the Warrior, but Todak didn't stop. He barrelled into his foe, hoisting it over his shoulder, he sprinted with it into the same wall, smashing its body through the bricks into the room beyond, the structure crumbling behind them.

Seemingly unfazed, the serpent lashed out with its claws, effortlessly gouging into the protective facemask and chestplate, before tucking its lower legs in and kicking Todak away. He rolled once to land in a kneeling position, the Warrior already bearing down on him, arms outstretched with claws bared. Todak made to dodge away from the attack again, but was too slow, feeling more fire in his limbs as its claws raked through the flesh of his right arm, drawing fresh, vibrant green ichor. It lunged upon him recklessly now, screeching wildly while it slashed at anything it could reach, tearing into his chestplate, his helmet, his arms, sparks, metal chips, and blood flying out with each attack.

His arms lashed out, catching the serpent by the wrists, flames of agony burning in his arms from the strain to overpower it as blood ran from the wounds. With all the strength he could muster, he rolled the beast off of him, following in a roll of his own, he lunged at the creature, swinging down in an arc with his wristblades. Its tail lashed out seeking to batter him away, only to be caught by Todak's attack instead, drawing an agonized cry from the creature as the bladed tip sailed off in an arc through the air.

Before Todak could deliver the killing blow, the beast's mutilated tail swung again, the powerful appendage sending him tumbling to the ground, watching as the gush of acid blood missed him by mere inches as it sailed over head to splatter against the ruined wall. Before he could recover, the Warrior was on him again, bladed jaws ripping into his ruined chest piece, mauling his torso. A pained roar escaped him, gripping at its domed head as it shook violently, tearing through muscle.

Todak's limbs fell limp, fire burning through his entire body as the serpent now stood over him, glowering down into his mask, saliva and blood dripping onto it. Slowly, it opened its jaws, the inner jaw extending, building up power to shoot out, and put an end to him. His arm came up, delivered a weak punch, not even enough force to shove his blades into the creature. Unfazed, it pinned the limb down with one foot, and gripped his head in a chitinous, long-fingered hand to hold him in place for the killing blow.

Simply give in, there is no escape.

"No..."

Relax...

"No...!"

Let yourself fade away...

"NO!"

With renewed vigor, Todak's free arm swung up with all his strength, slamming the blades into the chest of the serpent. Its cry rang out, limbs flailing wildly, freeing Todak's other arm to slam the second set of blades in. The creature clawed desperately now, but despite the extra gouges in his mask and shoulders, Todak lifted the beast off of him and forced himself to his feet. Glaring at the creature through his mask, his blades twisted outward, still embedded in its flesh. "Die, snake!" He roared, before yanking his arms away from each other with all the power he had, slicing open its chest cavity in one swift motion, a rain of mutilated organs and acid blood spilling from the gash.

The monster fell to the ground with a gurgle, limbs still flailing in the air feebly for several moments until it slowed, then stilled. Todak didn't dare risk any tricks. With one final motion, he jammed a set of wristblades directly into the front of the creature's domed skull, its body spasming from the impact before falling limp. Panting heavily, the Yautja slowly stood to his full height, blood still running from his arms and chest, he stared down at his first kill.

My first kill...

The unfamiliar feelings of pride and power swelled within him. He had faced the serpent, and he had defeated it. Any thoughts of doubt he had in himself had been slain with it. It had not been an elegant first hunt, but with time his skill could improve. His wounds, he could mend, as he was doing now, sealing the gashes in his arms and chest with his medicomp, mandibles flaring with discomfort as the wounds were cauterized.

He stared at his dead foe for a time, still doubting he had managed it even with the evidence bleeding on the ground in front of him, burning a divot into the floor. Todak's mind roiled, playing as much of the battle in his head as he could over and over, thinking about how others would react, what the future would hold for him...

Fogbrain...Focus!

Todak shook himself from his stupor and, leaning down, picked up the severed tailblade of the creature as evidence of his victory. He spun on his heel, dreadlocks flaring out, and made

his way to return. What the future held was only for it to reveal, including the day Cetanu would challenge him again and claim victory. But for today, Todak knew he was capable, he could face down his prey and defeat it.

Today, he was a Hunter.