

Virgin Wilderness

Leaving the last bastion of civilization, headed east, the sun was barely rising over the Aux Arcs, as this wilderness had been called for years. Tommy began to think on what the old man had told him the night before.

“You young’n’s should take care if you head east, there’s danger aplenty to be found in yonder foothills. Why, the Injun’s won’t even live in that area, fer the creatures that live along the creek are haint’s, and it’s curs’d!”

His words had caused a great ruckus of laughter between the traders sharing a bottle of Tennessee whiskey. The men had mocked the old fellow to scorn. The next day, Tommy, David, and Elijah left early, heading to a place where the Short-Leaf Pines were so thick that the sunshine could only pass through in an dull orange hue. As they moved deeper into this shadowy place, they knew they had found a truly chaste land that was untouched by human hands. They watched as elk strolled the creek bank below. The hounds began to bay impatiently, as the men hurriedly loosed their muskets, and set off after their fleeing quarry. The three horsemen split, each riding in different directions. The woods became thicker and the creek became shrouded in a vale of ethereal fog as it wound and bubbled through its ancient course.

David screamed and it echoed against the hills through the forest, causing Tommy to frantically ride toward the sound.

“Where are you, and what has happened?”, Tommy yelled out, his own voice echoing back to him.

“I’m laid up! Something leapt upon my mare, and she threw me. I haven’t a clue where she has gotten off to, but my old dog chased something into the brush and he come back to me bleeding and ragged.. He is in a bad way, and I believe my leg may be broken”, was David’s frantic answer.

Tommy rode quickly in David’s direction, and saw Elijah making his way toward him in full gallop. The two men quickly started up the steep hillside rising from the creek. They saw a dark mass at the edge of a clearing near the top of the hill. As they approached a huge creature looked up at them before darting off into the brush. David’s horse laid dead, contorted with a large chunk of flesh

carved out of it's flank. Huge scratches ran the length of it's neck all the way to the torso, as if something had attacked from above.

"Maybe that old man wasn't crazy after all!", Elijah gasp as they searched the landscape for their friend, or the mysterious beast. Following the horses blood trail, they found David , laying on the side of the hill. Below them the dogs began to bark loudly.

"David, think you have the strength to wield my pistol?", Elijah ask calmly, to help calm his friend.

"Prop me up against this tree, and go get yer dogs. I'll be fine", David responded.

Tommy and Elijah made their way toward the barking..They noticed a great opening in the side of the bluff that hooked out over the creek. Elijah's hound was at the entrance barking, but Tommy's dog was no where in sight.

Tommy quickly lit a fire, while Elijah prepared two torches. They each looked toward the other for courage to enter into the forbidden darkness and retrieve Tommy's dog. With torches lit they entered into the abyss of the cave. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness Tommy realized his dog was a mangled corpse laying to their right. Pacing on a ledge above them was a black monster, the size of a pony. Tommy raised his musket and fired. The percussion of the shot in the enclosed space reduced the torch flames to smoldering cinders.

"Get against the wall, it may not be kilt!", Tommy exclaimed, as they frantically tried to bring their torches back to life. As the flames flickered once again, there was silence, as Tommy and Elijah looked on in wonder at the figure laid out on the floor, dying were it leaped from the ledge toward it's next intended victims.

There are those to this day who claim that there are no black '*painters*' in Missouri, however, Tommy, David, and Elijah would never recant having killed one measuring nine feet from nose to tail, near that little creek in the virgin wilderness.