

Black was the eye whose gaze held his. It had sunken deep into the socket of a skull all but stripped of flesh and fur, bound only by sinew and scraps of hide to a body gnawed of meat and marrow by carrion beasts just days before and left to rot into the soil upon which it lay. However, it did not molder. The last of the autumn leaves had not fallen from their branches before arctic air bore down, bringing with it not pillowy snow, but a sickly, freezing ice that coated the ground and all that was sedentary, sealing the landscape in a brittle stillness. The remains lay frozen, its hollow gaze fixed forward, watching for someone to come along and view its grisly fate before being reclaimed by the earth – a corpse waiting for a witness.

The awaited sat beneath one of the multitude of cedars and pines, all bowing under the weight of accumulated ice, reverently submitting to the conquering winter. He tugged at the hemp rope around his waist, easing the discomfort caused by its constriction but did nothing to quell the ravenous pangs of hunger. At the other end of his binding sat a hastily made travois crafted from hickory branches and scraps of leather tack cut from a stolen mule that lay frozen two days behind him. Atop the ragged skid lay a motionless mound, partially shrouded by a soiled saddle blanket leaving two boots exposed to the elements – boots that had not stirred since the night before.

It had been at least three days since the storm had moved in and two since the man had eaten. He reached a trembling, red hand into the pocket of his woolen coat in search of a piece of pemmican he knew was not there. His numb fingers rooted into the deepest seams with the hopes of finding an errant crumb. He ceased his fruitless search with a curse, knowing he could no longer delay the inevitable. Feeling the lifeless gaze of the desiccated beast, he held back the

handfuls of melt that churned in his stomach at the thought of what he must do to survive. He pulled the travois to him and lifted the woven blanket to see the face of his younger brother, eyelids half open, showing a sliver of pale hazel peering lifelessly at the frozen branches above.

The brothers' flight had taken them deep into the mountains South and then East from Fort Smith. The first three days of the journey were made on the backs of two pack mules stolen from the corrals on the outskirts of town. On the fourth morning, the younger brother's mule was spooked by some small creature dashing between its legs, causing the beast to rear and fall back onto its rider, breaking its neck and crushing the ribs of the other – an injury that, unbeknownst to them, had pierced a lung. In the two days that followed, their supply of food was depleted, and the younger brother's condition worsened as did the constitution of the surviving mule which expired some time during the fifth night.

In the days before the icy gale, the brothers had seen rabbits and birds, squirrels and all manner of game run freely through the trees, giving them hope that they could outlast their pursuers – if any there were. The elder brother knew that the freeze had forced the creatures he had once seen as their salvation into their burrows, but tempered his dismay with hope that it had sent those that sought them back to their dens as well. There was no way of knowing for certain, and he considered each painful step he took as one he could not reclaim.

Leaning back against a brittle tree, he buried his hands in the pits of his arms then sank his chin as close to his chest as he was able, blowing hot air down the front of his collar and, for a moment, warming his face. It was near impossible to tell the time of day as the low-hanging

curtain of clouds that brought upon this frozen hell lingered above, remaining seemingly only to gloat upon the suffering they had caused. He allowed his eyes to close, focusing on the intermittent comfort his breath provided. There was no destination, he remembered. All he had hoped for himself and his brother was a sense of security amongst the peaks and valleys of the mountains; a place to hide until they could form a plan for the future. But, it seemed to him now that in fleeing death, they had unwittingly run into its gaping maw.

The unblinking eye remained fixed upon the pitiful sight before it in commiseration with their shared plights. The man met its lifeless gaze once more, now with a reluctant understanding of his situation. Just below the stinging pain emitting from his feet and the abraded skin around his waist, he felt the growing torment from his innards clawing its way through as his body consumed itself. The civil parts of his consciousness abated as he slowly stood and ambled brokenly towards the carcass of the deer. He fell to his knees and, with irreverent, blistered hands, reached inside the open carcass and began to eat.

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He couldn't tell if the trail was obscured by ice or if it was there at all. Regardless of the path's existence, he could travel no further as what little diffused light the sun provided quickly faded, and the oppressive cold crept in now unabated by the day's relative warmth. He was unsure of how far he had traveled that day and even more uncertain if his pursuers had kept pace. Through the uncertainty, he was sure that either of the latter issues would be irrelevant if he froze during the night. Looking behind him, he saw the near-unbroken lines trenched into the ice and soil flanking uneven footsteps. He imagined the path leading miles back in the wrong direction and the glee his pursuers must have felt once the railway to their quarry was discovered, resting

easy knowing that they had but only follow at a distance until he was too weak to put up any sort of fight. It would be the simplest bounty they would likely ever collect.

A flat portion of the valley against the bank of a frozen stream provided a spot adequate as any to set up his camp. The man sat against a limestone rock jutting from the ground and removed the makeshift harness around his waist before standing and positioning the travois just beside it. His brother's face still covered, he pondered on what he should do.

Tom had always followed his brother wherever he led. He thought of the day his father disowned him, expelling him from their family's farm South of St. Louis. His father, a man whose morals stood as a reflection of that holy book, could not abide by his oldest son's drinking and debauchery so he cast him away as his sinful right hand. As he rode into the morning and his mother's wailing pleas faded, Tom pursued, unwilling to continue his existence without his only friend. From the Indian Territories to the plains of Texas, Tom followed without question. From legitimate work as ranch hands and cattle drivers into vile thievery and killing, he followed. He had not asked him to, but he didn't turn him away either.

Tom still followed him, but not on his own volition – drug along as he had always been in a lonely procession through the Fourches with no resting place to be found.

The surviving brother searched for the driest of kindling he could find, but only managed to gather a handful of twigs among the countless frozen and saturated limbs that littered the ground. During his last desperate search, he found a tree whose top had fallen beneath an outcropping of

rock which kept it sheltered from the elements. His fingers had lost all feeling and bled as he wrenched the brittle limbs from their host and drug them towards his camp.

The man produced a box of matches bearing the faded seal of the commissary where its previous owner had purchased it. No matches remained. He remembered the pouch that hung around Tom's neck and the flint and steel contained within. He had taken things from the bodies of dead men before – the act of turning men into corpses and the subsequent theft both being direct contributors to his current woes. In his mind, this was different. He had not killed his brother, and Tom surely would have wanted him to have it. Should he die as well because of some antiquated sense of respect? Morals? He had left those in Missouri along with his meaningless farm life.

He leaned over to the travois and took hold of the blanket's corner at Tom's head and pulled it back. He gazed upon the same glassy, lifeless eyes staring into the darkening sky with lips barely parted as though ready to comment on its bleakness. Gently pulling at the leather strap strung around his brother's neck, he created just enough space to place the blade of his knife. The cut was quick and practiced, and he pulled the severed ends towards him, revealing an embroidered buckskin pouch. Pulling it away, he quickly returned the blanket to its original state and leaned against the rock. He remembered Tom trading ten lead balls to a young Creek boy during one of their more pleasant encounters with the tribe while passing through the territories. Loosening the leather string tied in a half-hitch knot, he upturned the pouch and emptied its contents into his cracked palm. A chipped striker and worn piece of chert lay amongst a few malformed lead balls and three tarnished half-cent coins. Taking the desired items and returning the remainder to the

pouch, he returned it to its rightful owner, placing the strings around Tom's neck and tying the strings back together. Returning to his newly acquired implements, he glimpsed the knife he had used to cut the string and tried to remember who he had taken it from. He wondered how many, if any, of his possessions he had come about honestly.

Sparks pierced the darkness in multitudes of violent births which nearly instantaneously faded from existence as he struck the flint, none of them finding purchase among the tinder that awaited their igniting force. He leaned in closer and tried again, and again, striking his knuckle against the cold ground, sending a sharp pain shooting up his arm. The man struck again and again, stone against steel, his broken hands struggling to grip the implements as melted ice intermingled with blood coated them. Anger began to grow inside the man with each attempt, striking with increasing ferocity, no longer caring for the embers. Sparks flew wildly, and it seemed as though he hoped his burning rage would set the mountains ablaze. It was then that he heard the first voice he had heard in days echo through the valley. His voice – A primitive scream that he felt could be heard in the heavens burst from his lungs, burning his throat as he wailed to the uncaring sky.

And then, a flame.

Through his stinging eyes, he saw the glowing ember among the nest of tinder begin to take form. The apocalyptic rage was instantly replaced by urgent focus as he sheltered it, carefully adding kindling and nursing the flame with gentle breaths.

The flames lashed out at the darkness as its heat drove back the cold. The man's feet and hands began to emit a needling pain as his appendages thawed but still, he kept them close to the fire, embracing the newfound feeling despite its unpleasantness. Strips of meat cut from his recent find began to char as they hung skewered over the flames. Though the man felt he could eat the meal in its entirety along with the sticks it was prepared with, he ate sparingly, gnawing at the sinewy cuts that even the least finicky scavenger had deemed unworthy of trouble. Placing the larger limbs onto the fire, he laid as close as he could, pulling his coat over him and stared into the glowing center. He watched as the coals pulsed deep orange light, fixated on the hypnotic pattern. There was no sound other than the faint crackling of the fire; no warbles or howls, no wind or breeze, only an oppressive silence filled the air as quiet as the grave.

“Jim?”

The voice was weak and muffled, but familiar.

“Jim... I... I can't see...”

He didn't answer.

“P- please... You know I don't like the dark.”

“You ought not be talkin',” Jim said after a moment, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

The silence once again fell upon the camp, with even the sputtering of the fire quieting itself in a seeming fear of reprisal.

“C’aint you at least cover my feet?”

A tear rolled down Jim’s face as he tightened his grip on his coat, unwilling to turn to face his brother.

“... You're dead, Tom. You ought not be talkin’...”

Jim’s shoulders began to tremble as he quietly sobbed. The silence returned and lingered for a while.

“Ain’t nothin’ here, Jim...” said Tom, his tone turning somber.

“... You’ll see...”