

ENDLING

Two men check on reports of extinct Tasmanian tigers seen in the forest, but some things are not meant to be found.

## ENDLING

“Michael, something stirs.” Caldwell pointed a shaking hand at the midnight-dark underbrush.

Wild things existed in the dense trees of Tasmania: possums, kangaroos, wallabies, devils. Many pouched, sharp-toothed marsupials wove through this forest, hidden creatures expertly dotted and striped in camouflage.

“Something always stirs,” said Michael, shoving Caldwell’s outstretched hand down. He hitched his sack on his shoulder, searched the path. “Cabin’s around this bend. Almost done with this fool’s mission.”

“Sightings are worth investigating, Michael. Something extinct for fifty years, and the hikers said they saw two yesterday...it’s a new era for Tasmanian tigers.”

Michael did not respond. Caldwell’s mission to prove the extinct creatures were alive was like hunting Bigfoot. None of the sightings were fruitful, yet as the only sympathetic park ranger, Michael felt an obligation to help him.

Dusk threatened. Damp decay permeated, holding the softness of leaf molt and the sharp rot of something recently dead.

An overgrown path careened around a massive cypress, and ahead, covered in shadow, was a small one-room cabin a hunter abandoned decades ago. The place bled green moss. Caldwell ran ahead, childlike, his large pack slapping loudly. Eager to reach the door, he ignored the many left-behind things on the lichen-covered porch. Something dripped.

Caldwell was stopped by a black padlock, which Michael violently chopped with his foldable shovel. Debris and a swollen rug jammed the door and Michael shouldered it open.

Mottled light filtered through a broken window. The place smelled like a dog cage. Mold bloomed on flowered wallpaper.

“Something lives here,” said Michael, shining a flashlight on shredded, stained blankets in the corner.

“You know the last of a species is called an endling?” said Caldwell, nudging the nest.

“Poetic. And any supposed survivors?”

“Cryptids,” said Caldwell.

Michael flashed his light up the blackened stone fireplace. Something peered down at him, green eyes reflective. He scrambled away, his heart a drumbeat.

“Outside! On the roof!”

Caldwell darted out the door. A creature leapt down.

“Stripes! Unmoving tail! It’s the tiger! Capture it alive!”

Michael followed the noise. The cypress loomed. Something swung, dripping blood from its low-hanging branches.

The sun was nearly gone. Caldwell ran to the cypress and cried out. The swinging thing was another tiger in a rusted trap, a back leg clamped in metal teeth, eyes clouded in death.

Its mate let out an otherworldly coughing bark and lunged from the shadows. Caldwell’s hand was clamped in its mouth. The creature shook, tearing tendons. Screams echoed. The Tasmanian tiger let go, opening its jaws unnaturally wide at Michael in warning. He pulled his pistol.

Two shots.

Caldwell leaned against the tree. Michael poured canteen water over Caldwell’s mangled hand, washing blood away, though it did little for the dripping wound.

“The ending,” Caldwell said. “You’ve killed it.”

Flies danced on the swinging Tasmanian tiger above them and Michael saw something wiggle between its legs.

“Cryptids?” Michael said, pulling three warm, squelching, pink-tinged joeys from its pouch. Caldwell nodded, bleeding.

“Better,” he said. “Survivors.”