

It all started out as a regular, day-long canoe trip. Victor, Carlos, and Anthony had planned a one-day-long canoe trip on a river in Canada. They had set off from their campsite early and wanted to get to their pickup point in the late evening.

Victor was the oldest of them, but had never been camping. Anthony had been camping once or twice, but not as much as Carlos. Carlos, who loved camping and canoeing, had suggested the trip to the friends. They all had liked the idea at once, so they started planning right away. Anthony's family had a house on a lake in Canada with a campground nearby where they could spend a night. So they left for Anthony's lake house and from there on they traveled to the campground.

When they got to the campground, Carlos and Anthony showed Victor how to set up a tent.

"So you put the poles together and then stick them in the tubes on the tent?" said Victor.

"Yes," said Carlos, "and then you put the ends of the poles in the rings at the corners of the tent."

"Wow, Carlos, you must go camping a lot," said Anthony and Victor in unison.

"Well, yeah, I guess."

"Let's make some dinner and then go to sleep," said Carlos.

Then they ate a dinner of fettuccini alfredo and went to sleep.

The next morning dawned bright and early with birds chirping in the trees and a beautiful sunrise. Carlos got a simple breakfast of hash browns and sausage ready. They all helped clean up camp and packed their bags. They could all feel the excitement in the air about the upcoming trip.

Then they were off, and since Carlos had the most canoeing experience, he steered in the back. Anthony paddled in the front, and Victor, having no experience at all, sat in the middle and did nothing except enjoy the beautiful day. Canoeing on the lake was easy, so they got across the lake in no time and came to the place where the river joined the lake. When they got to the correct point, there was nothing but dense swamp.

"That's funny," thought Carlos out loud, "we are at the right place."

"Let me see the map. Maybe you just don't realize we are in the wrong place," Victor said.

"Of course we are in the right place! Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, no, I just think we should all look at the map together."

"Yeah!" Anthony said.

"Fine, do what you want."

So they all looked at the map and saw that they were in fact at the right place. Carlos offered to go to see how far it would be before they got to the river. After Carlos went into the swamp, Victor and Anthony waited, and waited, and waited. Suddenly there was a shout from a little ways into the swamp. Instantly, Anthony crashed into the swamp and nearly ran into Carlos. On the ground in front of Carlos was a dead bird.

"Hey," yelled Anthony, "you nearly scared us to death!"

"Sorry! It's just that this is a rare bird," replied Carlos.

"Whoa! It's been mauled by something," said Anthony.

"Yep," said Carlos "Let's go back to the canoe and eat lunch. Maybe we can find out what happened."

When they got back to the canoe, they saw Victor yelling and slapping at the air. Running towards him, they saw that he was slapping a hoard of mosquitos.

"You know that we have bug spray, right?" said Carlos.

"You could have told me!" said Victor angrily.

"Well, let's get started. We've got a long portage ahead of us."

So they picked up the canoes and their gear and set off into the forest. While walking their feet started sinking into the muck on the forest floor. Suddenly, there was a roar and a flap of feathers.

"Whoa!" yelled Anthony, "It's not hunting season yet, is it?"

"No," whispered Carlos, "so be quiet and hide over here."

"Guys! What's going on?" said Victor frantically.

"Just.. Be...Quiet!"

All three of them dove into a thicket just as a crashing sound entered the clearing. Through the branches they could see a panther. Its black coat shimmered in the light, and its teeth flashed. It was a majestic creature, and it radiated a sense of domination and power. Just as quickly as the panther appeared, it faded back into the forest leaving only paw prints in the mud.

For a while all three of the boys sat in the thicket in awe of the animal that had just been standing in front of them. When they came to their senses, Victor said, "That was so amazing! Yet so scary!"

"Yeah," whispered Anthony.

"Let's stay out of that thing's way," said Carlos.

"It could probably kill us so fast!" agreed Anthony.

Though startled, they decided to keep hiking. They picked up the gear and set off again, only this time more cautiously.

After about five minutes, they came to a swampy area where they could canoe.

"What the heck!" said Carlos.

"What's wrong?" asked Victor.

"It should be a clear river from your lake, Anthony, not swamp!"

"Well, do we want to continue?"

"The swamp has to turn back into river sometime, right?" questioned Victor.

"Not necessarily."

"Hey, at least we can canoe from here on!"

Putting the canoe in the water and setting themselves into the canoe, they set off. It was rough canoeing, so Anthony offered to get out of the canoe and push out of an especially rough patch. When Anthony had pushed them off the rough patch, he got in the canoe, but while getting back in, he saw little black things all over his legs. Realizing that there were little tiny leeches all over his arms and legs, he let loose a horrible scream which was immediately followed by a roar on the bank of the swamp. One by one Carlos flicked the leeches off Anthony's legs. After that they canoed as hard as they could. Soon they came to a pond that was easy canoeing. They paddled to a rock near the far shore and sat down for a lunch break.

"What is that? Is it a leech?" asked Victor.

"Where?"

"In the water."

"It can't be! It's as long as my hand!" exclaimed Anthony, "Is it a leech, Carlos?"

"I think it is!"

"Just one more monster we have to deal with!"

"Let's hope it doesn't know how to climb."

Setting off again, they saw a beaver, but no dam until they got to end of the pond where the swamp started again. Directly in their way was a beaver dam.

"Well, I guess we have to get out and pull the canoe over it," said Anthony.

"Yeah, get out and pull the edge of the canoe up on the dam," said Carlos.

They got the canoe and gear over the dam without much problem and started canoeing again. Just a short way after the dam they came to another beaver dam! Repeating the process they got over the second dam. Right after the second dam, there was another dam! This time they could see that the dam was not just a dam, it was solid ground! The three boys could see straight down the "river," and it was all ground.

It was getting darker, so Anthony and Victor picked up the gear while Carlos picked up the canoe. They hurried off into the forest by the "river." Knowing that sunset would happen soon, they went as fast as they could, but the canoe and gear slowed them down.

Then things started going wrong. First of all the river split in two, and they went the wrong way. By the time they realized that they had gone the wrong way, they were too far. Finally they came to a clearing.

"Guys, I think we are going to have to spend the night here," said Anthony.

"Yeah," agreed Carlos.

"But we don't have breakfast for tomorrow!" replied Victor.

"Too bad!"

So they set up camp and got dinner cooking.

"Let's try to get a fire started," said Victor.

"Okay, how about you go get the wood," said Anthony.

"But there is the panther out in there," Victor said, pointing to the woods.

"Surely it hasn't followed us all the way here!"

Victor got the wood, and they started a fire. After sitting around the fire for a while not really talking, they decided to go to bed. Carlos put out the fire safely, and they got into their sleeping bags and went to sleep. They slept deeply, not knowing what would happen the next morning.

When they woke up, they were hungry, but there was nothing to eat because they had not planned for the extra day. Then all three boys packed up and set off, but they were

hopelessly lost. They all sat down and discussed their options-either go off and maybe get more lost, or they could stay put and hope someone would come to them. After talking it over, they decided to stay and hope that someone came for them.

Repeatedly they heard planes passing over them and yelled to get their attention, but the planes kept flying. Finally, a helicopter flew overhead and apparently saw them because it started circling. The helicopter got lower and lower until the boys knew they were saved.

There was a "crash!" and a black streak soared and hit Carlos straight in the back. A scream went up. It could have been from Carlos, but it might just have well been from Anthony or Victor. Before anyone knew what had happened, it was raking it's claws across Carlos's face and neck. Blood poured off Carlos, and he slumped unconscious. Anthony charged the panther, but it batted him away like he was as light as a feather. Suddenly there was a gunshot, and the helicopter landed.

A man rushed over with an ugly looking shotgun and prodded the panther. It didn't move so he pulled the bloody form out from underneath the panther. He motioned to the helicopter and two medics came rushing out, carrying a stretcher and a first aid kit. The man with the shotgun came over to the other two boys, who were staring at Carlos in disbelief.

"Are you two okay?"

"I might have a broken rib, and we are both a little scratched up," said Anthony.

"Yeah," said Victor, still in shock.

"I'll have the doctors come look at you after they see to him."

The man's nameplate said Spencer, and he was wearing a park ranger suit.

"I didn't know we were in a park," said Victor.

"Well, apparently you got lost and ended up here. Somewhere along the way the cat must have seen you and thought that you looked like a tasty treat."

"Is Carlos going to be okay?"

"Hopefully, but I can't say for sure."

With that, something snapped inside of the two boys, and they started crying. At that moment the medics picked Carlos up on the stretcher. Everything was quiet, even the birds stopped chirping, and everyone watched somberly as Carlos passed. Half of his face was

missing and his neck lolled at an awkward angle, his shirt was tattered and bloodstained. They could see scratches all over his chest. Then he was put in the helicopter, and the noise started again.

"I'll get some people to come get the panther even though it's pretty blasted up," said Spencer.

"Is Carlos going to die?"

"Maybe, as I said before, I can't tell."

They got into the helicopter and carefully took off. On the way back, Anthony and Victor stared at Carlos's body, still in disbelief that their best friend had been mauled by a panther. Nobody talked and the only sounds were the rotor blades, and even they sounded quieter in recognition of Carlos.

Then Carlos started to convulse, and the medics rushed to his side. When they pulled away, Carlos was still and everyone looked towards the medics for an answer.

"He...is...dead!"

Anthony and Victor rushed to his side, now not believing that he was dead. When they landed, the medics carried Carlos's lifeless body out of the helicopter to an ambulance. Suddenly there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and all the birds chirped. Everyone stood silently as Carlos's broken body was put in the ambulance and driven off.

The swamp was soon closed off so that people did not go snoop around, but in truth after the boys' experience nobody would have ever dared to go into the Panther Swamp.