GALYNTINE

"Trials" (pilot)

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THIRD DRAFT

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But it will be as in the ancient tales,

when the gods reared up a new people from stones or dragons' teeth,

and they were all strangers with strange faces.

George R. Stewart

Earth Abides

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Aethys Son of Britt and Haven, brother of Essyn. Apprentice handyman to Crawford.

Roman Aethys's best friend. Longtime boyfriend of Essyn. Colony's best young hunter.

Essyn Aethys's sister, Roman's girlfriend. Apprentice healer to Annabelle.

Britt Father of Aethys and Essyn. Husband of Haven. Senior member of colony.

Haven Aethys and Essyn's mother. Wife of Britt. Best friend of Micah. Senior colonist.

Samhir Aethys's mentor, teacher, herbalist. Micah's ex-lover. Born outside the colony.

Micah Former healer, now custodian of memory lodge. Most senior, revered colonist.

Annabelle Healer. Former apprentice to Micah.

Crawford Handyman. Senior colonist. Hyper-traditional, and a sadist.

Jude Friend to Roman, Essyn and Aethys. Bunyonesque.

Wylie Aethys's beautiful longtime crush. Herb and plant gatherer.

Neera Samhir's young wife.

Stuart A teenaged boy.

Kyree An injured hunter in his late teens.

Richter Kyree's father.

Dirkesen A senior colonist and experienced hunter in Aethys's youth.

TEASER

UP CLOSE: A RABBIT'S INQUISITIVE EYES. Jewel-like. Unblinking. Reflecting a bright, wide world ...

... from atop a pile of rabbit heads.

DIRKESEN
'Dja know you could starve to death, eating rabbit?

He tosses a skinned rabbit to a BOY, 13 - who chops its head off. They're in a winter valley, thick with snow. The boy hangs the carcasses on the frame of an oddly sleek, Tesla-like SLED. Boy and man wear sleeveless fur tunics.

DIRKESEN (CONT'D)
Meat's too lean. Need more fat to metabolize the protein. Nothing sadder 'n finding an outlier, huddled up in his cave, frozen stiff on a bed a' rabbit bones.

Chop. The boy's pretty capable with a blade. But he's been listening to Dirkesen for days. It's getting old.

DIRKESEN (CONT'D)
Don't move.

BEHIND THEM: a snowbank stirs. A faint subsurface quiver.

Dirkesen pulls a hunting disc from his back-cache: a razor-edged ring of thin, hammered metal.

DIRKESEN (CONT'D)
Gone to ground. Might be a whole passel of 'em. Sucking on their mama's teats. Now whatever you do -

A NOISE punches the air.

The boy shudders. A light snowburst powders his shoulder.

Dirkesen's face changes.

The boy looks left. It's as if a FREIGHT TRAIN leapt from the snowbank and tore through the sled. There's a splintery HOLE in the frame.

The carcasses are gone. All of them.

Then the boy looks down - at the jagged **STUMP** where his left arm used to be. Torn arteries and bone - but strangely *unbleeding.* Some invisible force stopping the flow.

The boy looks to Dirkesen - in time to see a huge white shape *RIP HIM OUT OF FRAME* -

CUT TO BLACK.

GRAPHIC: "**TEN YEARS LATER.**"

EXT. MOUNT GALYN - DAY

A broad-shouldered son of the Western Rockies. Lightning incandesces a distant cloudbank.

EXT. HIGH MEADOW - DAY

Four handsewn boots tramp through wet spring silvergrass.

SAMHIR
You walked right over it.

SAMHIR, a kindly sage in his 50's, separates a whip-fern from a muddy bootprint. Gently snips its stem.

SAMHIR (CONT'D)
Someplace you'd rather be?

Brooding, restless - there's always somewhere he'd rather be - AETHYS, 23, darts a look down-mountain, toward:

EXT. THE CHASM - DAY

A jagged slot canyon - eighty feet wide, a thousand deep.

On the east side: HUNTERS crouch in sparse brush. Boys and men, a few women. Lean hungry faces. Most wear pads of fibrous flex-armor. All carry knives, discs, or jabsticks: spear point at the top, scythe-blade folded Swiss-army style into the bottom.

Across the Chasm, a floor of impenetrable FOG.

The hunters wait.

On the west side: a nub pokes above the fog. Then, a network of nubs - **antlers** - but with a tighter, more ornate pattern than we've seen before. Like a variation on a snowflake.

Still the hunters wait.

A defiant BUGLING CALL shoots across. Loud and close. An "I'm not afraid" - or perhaps, "Follow me."

Then a face rises. An ELK. A proud, noble buck in his prime. A leader: the Cloud Elk.

The youngest hunter, STUART - all of 15 - GASPS.

The elk's head swivels left - zeroes on Stuart's gaze. And its irises *shift*. From deep brown, to iridescent BLUE.

The Cloud Elk **LEAPS COMPLETELY ACROSS THE CHASM**, soaring clear over the hunters' heads. Farther than a normal elk could or should. Leaving a thin contrail of FOG.

BRITT
Down!

The hunters drop and flatten. DOZENS MORE elk jump over them, their shadows dappling the hunters' backs.

BRITT - burly, 59, Falstaffian - lands nose-to-nose with Stuart. But he's not mad at the kid for spooking the elk - in fact, he CACKLES - the mad thrill of the hunt taking hold -

EXT. ASPEN FOREST - CONTINUOUS

AERIAL WIDE: the elk dart through lush green ASPEN, their leaps occasionally TOPPING the tree crowns. Orange lightning flashbulbs popping in the distance. Beautiful -

- but on the ground, BRUTAL. Hunters parkour tree trunks, LUNGE at the elk with crazy/brave desperation. (They move with animal swiftness: some distant simian gene re-awakened.) **Launchers** of super-flexible arcwood CATAPULT them to intercept the elk at their most vulnerable: in mid-flight.

Casualties mount. Hunters are antler-speared, KICKED, trampled. The hulking JUDE, 25, gets butted against a TREE.

KYREE, a wispy blond teenager, bravely attacks the Cloud Elk - but falls, another hunter's disc embedded in his spine.

The Cloud Elk emerges from this chaos into an open FIELD. Where he can outrun any human. He JUMPS as if to celebrate -

- which ROMAN, 24, was waiting for. He's not the fittest or fastest hunter. Only the cleverest.

Roman springs up from the grass, hits a launchpad, **FLIES** -

- flicks open his jabstick as his arc INTERCEPTS the elk's -

- SPEARS Blue Eyes' stomach, pole-vaults around the elk, and with the jabstick's blade-end, SEVERS its carotid artery.

It's a long way down. Roman lands concussively on top of his prey (to break his fall). Barrel-rolls a few yards.

TIGHT ON Roman, face smeared with elkblood. Wind knocked out of him. Somehow he recovers, finds his jabstick nearby.

Blue Eyes senses him coming. THRASHES its antlers, fighting to the last - but Roman DODGES the swipe, steps in behind it, and plunges the jabstick's speartip into its HEART -

TIME CUT TO:

EXT. THE COMMONS - NIGHT

A COLONY of some 80 lightweight, reed-and-branch lodges, arranged around a communal FIRE. Exhausted hunters pull **slipsleds** (all-weather frictionless runners), loaded with elk - and with the dead and wounded.

INT. HAVEN'S LODGE - CONTINUOUS

A window of crisscrossed arcwood branches flexes open. HAVEN - Britt's wife - sees her husband alive among the returnees. No triumph on her face, only relief. She hurries outside.

Her daughter ESSYN, 22, sharp eyes and a sharper tongue, sees Roman riding the Cloud Elk's sled, in weary triumph.

ESSYN
You coming out this year?

Aethys, her brother, doesn't answer.

ESSYN (CONT'D)
At least help with the dead.

She hurries OUTSIDE. Roman spots her. Hoping - *expecting* that she'll notice him. Be a part of his victory. But Essyn's busy, helping the injured Jude off a sled.

Aethys comes to the doorway, the backlight REVEALING: his left arm is an amputated STUMP. A wound that healed a decade ago - at least outwardly.

He catches Roman's eye. Nods and smiles at his best friend.

Roman shrugs back as the crowd carries him off the sled. A modest hero, embarrassed by the adulation. But a hero.

Something Aethys will never be.

ACT ONE

EXT. THE COMMONS - MORNING

AERIAL: a scattered group of DWELLINGS, of branch, bough and brick. Futuristic in form, but rustic in function. “Dwell” meets “Survival Weekly.” Carved out of harsh experience.

A few free-range dogs lope about ... some unfamiliar rodents we can’t identify from a distance. But no horses, cows, or corrals. No gardens or vegetable plots. No fences. No machines, large or small. And no electricity.

A future community of some 500 souls, practicing advanced naturalism. Separated by the Chasm from the world below. Living only off what it can hunt or forage on the mountain.

As a lodge INVERTS its conical roof like an umbrella -

INT. HAVEN’S LODGE - DAY

Catch tubes (lining the roof like shingles) funnel dew-water into a central basin. Haven fills gourds with water. This is her home; lodges are passed down from mother to daughter.

Aethys emerges from his room. She hands him a gourd - their morning routine. But his expression sours at the taste.

AETHYS
Roof needs cleaning.

HAVEN
And my son needs a chore.
(not happening)
Want to catch breakfast for your father? He had a late night -

AETHYS
Celebrating Roman’s elk.

A hollow *clunk* as he sets the empty gourd down.

HAVEN
Wouldn’t hurt to congratulate him.

AETHYS
I am. Can’t you hear?
(beat)
One hand clapping.

EXT. COURTYARD - MORNING

A few colonists stir. Their clothing a sophisticated mix of hides and natural fibers: 17th-century materials, 25th-century workmanship.

A pack of feral CHILDREN runs past. (Ages 4-8 run wild here, their animal instincts unfettered - in fact, encouraged.) Aethys turns a corner - and finds a 6-year old girl, gnawing a raw elk bone. Filthy-faced. Eyes wary.

AETHYS
Nice to have meat again.

But she clutches a sharp flint in the dirt. Ready to defend her meal. Aethys has to smile at her savage nerve.

A strong, young blonde woman, WYLIE, returns from a foraging hike. Her side-packs heavy with herbs and grasses. Even sweat looks good on Wylie.

AETHYS (CONT'D)
For the feast?

WYLIE
That time of year.

AETHYS
Such a waste. You having to hike all that way.

WYLIE
(so not a problem)
N'okay ....

AETHYS
Say I dropped one of them sprigs in the dirt. By mistake.

WYLIE
"Only from stem, never from seed."

AETHYS
I know the practice - but a nice little garden, waiting every morning? Who could that hurt?

WYLIE
(gently chiding)
You're not in the wild way, Aethys.

AETHYS
I'm wild. I just want to know why.

WYLIE
I know it's been a long winter.
And I know these -
(the herbs)
- make me happy.

She leaves, radiating healthy, hearty energy. Secure in her beliefs. And free as a result.

On Aethys, crushing hard on her. Wanting to see things that simply, that traditionally - yet not quite able to - PRELAP:

JUDE (O.S.)
Aggh!

INT. HOSPICE - DAY

The hulking Jude gets his shoulder popped back in by ANNABELLE, a hatchet-faced healer.

ANNABELLE
Rotate it?
(he does)
You're done.

JUDE
Can I hunt?

ANNABELLE
Pussy and 'plexbrew. You're grounded. Ten days.
(off his growl)
Want me to throw in a spay job?

JUDE
When I'm on the Plank? I'm gonna make you a butcher.

ANNABELLE
I'd like that. Better class a' meat.

Essyn - an apprentice here - returns from the cot of Kyree, the young hunter paralyzed by the disc. His mother squeezes his fingers. But Kyree can't squeeze back.

JUDE
How's Kyree?

ESSYN
Nothing below the collarbone. He can breathe and he can swallow.

JUDE
But he'll make it.

ESSYN
That's up to him.

EXT. SIDE OF COURTYARD - DAY

Samhir teaches his daily lesson to a semicircle of pre-teens. Samhir's an unusual colonist in many respects: the soft voice, the precise movements, the jangled bunch of tokens around his neck. (Ornamentation is frowned on here.)

SAMHIR
Even the ragweed, the simplest plant on the mountain, has dozens of uses. And before Trials, you must memorize them all ...

Nearby, Roman and Aethys cross the courtyard. Roman accompanies him to work every morning, as a morale booster.

AETHYS
You finally did it. Little orphan boy brought down a Cloud Elk.

ROMAN
One of us had to.

AETHYS
A whole year's worth of meat ...

ROMAN
Play your battens right, I'll save you a flank steak. Hold up -

He fastens a loose button on Aethys' sleeve. Aethys' gaze turns toward Samhir's class.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
How'd we ever get through Trials?

AETHYS
You cheated.

ROMAN
And you got caught. Two days, no food, no water. Never said a word.

AETHYS
Yeah, you're right. Fuck the flank - I'll take a filet.

ROMAN
The filet's spoken for.
(off Aethys's look)
She can't hold out forever.

They reach the entrance to the handyman's shop.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
Keep my blades sharp.

AETHYS
Up yours.

As Aethys takes a deep breath and enters the shop, to begin another day's drudgery (he hates this place) - BACK TO:

SAMHIR
Yes, the flower is sweet and fragrant. To attract bees.
(turns ragweed over)
But the leaves contain an oil so foul and noxious, that the male elk will avoid it at all costs. So when our hunters rub it on trees -

GIRL #1
- they show the elk where to go.

The class responds with the collective *intake of breath* that signifies "yes" or "I get it" in the colony.

SAMHIR
All living things are contradictions.

Britt rests a hand on his shoulder.

BRITT
Ready?

INT. DRESSING LODGE - DAY

The Cloud Elk - spread-eagled to a vertical **dissection table** - is sawed open. An annual ritual. Its windpipe/organ mass falls with a wet, grisly *thud*.

BRITT
Want a bucket?

Samhir's green-gilled. The other senior men and women - the "Plank" - watch the dissection closely. Including Haven and her oldest friend MICAH - serene, etched nut-brown skin.

MICAH
Good color.

HAVEN
Look at those ribs. Thicker than last year's?

BRITT
That's the table talking. Lung for me! And a stomach for my friend.
(taking pity on Samhir)
I'll drop it off for ya.

Samhir heads for the exit. The lead cutter, CRAWFORD (60's, grizzled, a hard-ass) holds up a bloody organ.

CRAWFORD
Adrenal gland!

OLDER MAN
Here.

CRAWFORD
Heart!

MICAH
I'll take it.

BRITT
Make sure you check for worms.

CRAWFORD
Balls! Who's got the biggest?

ANNABELLE
(snorts)
That's easy.

As the hatchet-faced healer goes up, to approving laughs -

INT. HANDYMAN'S SHOP - DAY

THUNK. A wooden BOLT pierces a patch of ARMOR. The shop awash with tools, weapons, smelt pots, a small forge.

Aethys picks the bolt out from the "armor" - a rug of thick white stones interlaced with hemp webbing. The bolt got through, but barely pierced the beam beneath.

Crawford enters. Still wiping blood off his hands. Aethys quickly hides his prototype (a wrist-mounted tube weapon).

CRAWFORD
Finished? Show me.

Aethys TWIRLS a hunting disc in the air, like a pizzaiolo throwing dough. Catches it by the hemp handgrip, FLINGS it underhand across the room. The disc lodges deep in the wood.

But Crawford sees the test-armor hanging on the beam.

CRAWFORD (CONT'D)
Show me.

Aethys hands over the tube weapon. Crawford adjusts it, cocks it - and FIRES THE BOLT at the rug of stones. A hit.

CRAWFORD (CONT'D)
You designed this?

AETHYS
Scoured it with bone chips and water. See the slide? It dampens the recoil. From the forced air.

Crawford turns the weapon over, admiring its light weight, balance, and craftsmanship ... clever boy.

Then he SNAPS IT in half.

AETHYS (CONT'D)
(bitterly)
Because it works?

CRAWFORD
You said it yourself: "forced air."

AETHYS
We force metal into blades, we boil tea. We make jumppads that launch us like the rockets of old.

CRAWFORD
Arcwood wants to bend.

AETHYS
And my arrow wants to fly.

CRAWFORD
It's bad practice. It's synth.

AETHYS
You mean it's an idea that wasn't yours.

Never challenge a handyman in his own shop. In a second, Crawford has a BLADE at his throat - Aethys barely blocks it -

CRAWFORD
When the worms dance in my nose hairs - then you can lecture me.

He SPEARS Aethys' solar plexus with a truncheon, kicks his feet out from under him. Aethys crumples to the floor.

Crawford crosses the room, retrieves the bolt and test-armor. Weighs the web of white stones. A pathetic facsimile.

CRAWFORD (CONT'D)
Its plates are thicker than this. And they're only white in the snow.
(beat)
When we found you, your wounds were cauterized open. Toxin claws. It won't even let you bleed ...

He tosses the "armor" onto his apprentice.

CRAWFORD (CONT'D)
Go on. Go after it. Let it finish the job. You'd be doing us a favor.

EXT. TRAINING PEN - DAY

With hemp netting, obstacles, and an arcwood trampoline. Teens aged 12-15 practice jumping, dodging, parkouring, mid-air sparring. A brutal, extrahuman ballet.

But they drop everything as their hero passes: the taker of the Cloud Elk. Faces and palms press against the netting.

ROMAN
All right, enough ... thank you.
(a kid's toothless grin)
I told you, easy on the jumps!
(off Essyn's look)
What? Training's hard, they should enjoy the results.

ESSYN
Oh, they're enjoying it.

Cutting him down to size is one of many reasons he loves her.

ROMAN
Your dad cooking for the feast?

ESSYN
His usual elk-lung hash ...
casserole ... thing.

ROMAN
I'll take a scoop.

ESSYN
And throw it out back.

ROMAN
Least I pretend to like it.
Crawford uses it for his bricks.

The courtyard's bustling with colonists - cooking, repairing winter damage, drying elk hides.

ESSYN
Decided what to do with your prize?
(he hesitates)
Don't wait 'til the last minute.

ROMAN
Oh trust me: I've got a plan.

Essyn gives a slight, pro-forma smile. Once again, the foregone conclusion of their future together.

Then she sees: he's limping slightly.

ESSYN
You all right? Can't swag if your boot's not strapped.
(eyes narrowing)
And why isn't your boot strapped?

She leans down, gently pulls off his boot - Roman grits his teeth - REVEAL: his ankle's grotesquely SWOLLEN. A blue/yellow puncture wound on his shin. It's infected.

ROMAN
It's nothing.

ESSYN
No - it's pride.
(takes on his weight)
Lean on me.

INT. HANDYMAN'S SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

AETHYS
- shit -

A disc he's sharpening hiccups against the honing wheel, flies out of his hand. Aethys shakes his stung fingertips, slumps back on his stool. Frustrated. Exhausted.

Jude appears in the doorway, out of breath.

JUDE
Hospice -

INT. HOSPICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Roman lies on a wooden operating table, his skin flush with fever. Annabelle lifts a wooden vial of extract to his lips.

ANNABELLE
This'll put you in bluebells ...

Aethys and Jude join Essyn at Roman's side.

ROMAN
Oh, now he shows up.

AETHYS
Enough attention for you?

ROMAN
It's a spider bite.

AETHYS
Nah. Cloud Elks have fleas. Best to avoid them, really.

ROMAN
Just don't be late for the funeral.

Gallows humor, but Aethys' expression tells us - the loss of his best friend would be a horror beyond words.

ESSYN
Drink.

Roman finishes the extract. Annabelle pulls Aethys aside.

ANNABELLE
We need more extract.

AETHYS
I'm staying.

ANNABELLE
Loyalty won't help your friend when he wakes up screaming. Murdoch root. Two hands' worth.

She pivots curtly to the instrument table - simple clamps, a few short-blade scalpels. But she's nervous.

MICAH
All right?

Micah appears at her side, washing her hands. Calm as always. (She used to run the hospice, and still helps Annabelle out when needed.)

ANNABELLE
The infection's spreading.

MICAH
Cut what's compromised. Clean the rest.
(then)
Steady on.

What Micah always says when things go to shit. She's a rock.

Roman's cot. Slipping out, Roman grips Aethys' hand.

ROMAN
... don't go anywhere ...

AETHYS
(white lie)
I won't.

His eyelids flutter closed. Annabelle brings her scalpel to bear on Roman's ankle.

Essyn mouths the word "Go," to her brother. He's not going to want to see this.

EXT. HOSPICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Aethys exits the hospice. Wishing he could take his mind off what Roman's about to endure.

Then he strides away from the hospice, from the courtyard - from everything. Into his refuge ... the FOREST.

MONTAGE of the next six hours. Annabelle cuts into the shin ... Roman REACTING even under the anaesthetic ... Essyn assisting, biting back tears ... Annabelle pulling out an ugly black CHUNK of wood, the source of the infection ...

INTERCUT WITH: Aethys ripping through underbrush ... the murdoch plant's hard to find in daylight, never mind night ... getting fatigued as he ranges miles away ...

slogging across a meadow under a pitiless moon ... digging in frozen dirt with numb unfeeling fingers ...

We **END AT:** Annabelle wiping her hands. Roman remains asleep (thankfully). His face pale from loss of blood, his leg heavily wrapped. She did what she could.

AND AT: Aethys, exhausted, collapsed at the base of a massive BURR OAK in the dead of night. Its boughs some 20 feet thick. So far away, he couldn't say where he is.

A dead stuporous acceptance: he’s not making it home tonight.

Then a subsonic, guttural PURR thrums his chest cavity.

Only seconds to act. Aethys plucks a leaf off a sapling, rubs it over every inch of exposed skin. Then he clambers up the tree - dives onto a rough PLATFORM shaped by two horizontal branches. And goes still. Maybe just in time.

Maybe not.

Inch by cautious inch, making no sound against the bark, Aethys stretches his neck over the edge, and looks down ...

A massive feline/xenarthric **shape** pads in silence. Strange armored plates shifting with oily smoothness. (Crawford was right: it changes color to match its environment).

It stops to sniff the trunk of the burr oak, its broad tail sweeping the earth, searching for vibrations. Its body seems to pour itself over the ground, like smoke.

This is the apex predator on the mountain, a phantom of rumor and nightmare. Little is known of it, despite countless fireside stories. A dozen colonists have seen its pawprints, visible only after rain. Even fewer have seen it firsthand.

Of those, only Aethys survived.

They call it the **galyntine.**

In four quick, coiled leaps, the creature scales a nearby CLIFF. It surveys its territory with an lidless, mercuric gaze. Arches its back regally.

It has time. It can wait.

Off Aethys, too terrified to move, blink, breathe -

CUT TO BLACK.

ACT TWO

EXT. TREE BRANCH - DAWN

RACK FOCUS ON: an ant, crawling to the tip of Aethys's nose.

Slowly he wakes, lifts his head. He's fallen asleep on the platform of the burr oak, some 30 feet above-ground.

Cautiously he picks a flake of bark, drops it. A soft plunk.

Then a quail comes poking through the underbrush. Its head bobs inquisitively.

Aethys exhales. If small prey are out in the open, chances are the galyntine has moved on.

He stands up on the platform of intertwined trunks. Stretches his aching limbs, loosens his neck.

Then he starts climbing down, toeholds first. But when he reaches into a deep knobby **crevice** in the bark - he STOPS. His fingertips have grazed something ... strange.

Aethys puts his ear to the trunk, and picks up a low, mechanical *humming*. As if his touch has activated it.

Aethys turns his body upside down, cranes his neck to peer into the crevice. It's impenetrably dark.

Flattening his body against the trunk, he reaches in, with his one and only hand, compromising his balance -

- and a buzzy CURRENT shocks him from scalp to toes. He lets go and FALLS to ground. A rib-rattling *kchunk.*

He coughs, spits, gets to his knees. Eventually to his feet.

The crevice's dark slash looks back at him. Daring him to climb up to that bulging section of trunk ... as if the tree, over time, swallowed some large mass whole.

But Aethys is hungry, tired, alone. He has no frame of reference for what he's experienced: no words to describe it.

And so, despite a gnawing curiosity, he turns and trudges into the underbrush ... down the long slope toward home.

INT. HANDYMAN'S SHOP - MORNING

Samhir pokes his head in. Looking for Aethys.

CRAWFORD
He’s not here.

SAMHIR
I’ll come back later -

Crawford tosses the pieces of the tube weapon at his feet.

SAMHIR (CONT’D)
Is it so wrong to dream.

CRAWFORD
That what you’ll say over his corpse? “He was a dreamer”?

SAMHIR
Rules are like arcwood saps. You test them by bending them.

He carefully picks up the pieces. Crawford approaches. Wants Samhir to feel the threat - up close and personal.

CRAWFORD
Teach your class. Pick your flowers. But keep your poison out of his head.

EXT. COURTYARD - DAY

Aethys stumbles in, bedraggled after his long hike back. In the training pen, teens stop to snicker at his appearance. But Aethys is too tired (and used to it) to confront them -

INT. HOSPICE - DAY

A surprise: Roman’s awake, wan but cheerful. His fever broken. Ess and Jude have brought him breakfast.

ROMAN
Aeth. Saved you some leftovers.

JUDE
(guiltily)
Not really.

Aethys drops the two murdoch tubers he found onto a table. (Annabelle swipes them up grumpily: too little, too late). Essyn helps him to a seat, under -

ESSYN
What took you so long?

AETHYS
Got lost.
(blank frown)
How are you -

ROMAN
I'm fine. A splinter. Annabelle says, long as I take it easy, I can come to the Hall tonight.

JUDE
No way can you miss the feast.

ROMAN
Not an option.

AETHYS
(abruptly)
I saw a galyntine.
(off their shock)
Must've dehibernated early. I had to switchback three miles, south/southwest ...

MICAH
Aethys. Is this true?

AETHYS
It was young. And hungry.

Micah shoots a look at Annabelle, then leaves - to tell the other colonists. This is serious news.

JUDE
What're the fucking chances ...

ROMAN
For real?

Aethys' dead-on stare convinces them. And for a moment, pure unfiltered jealousy flits across Roman's face.

He covers quickly. Raises his gourd.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
Then here's to surviving the night.

Pulls his friend in close, forehead to forehead.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
And don't do that again.

On Aethys, the mask of the ordeal finally cracking. Letting his friends - and real life - back in.

INT. NEERA'S LODGE - LATE AFTERNOON

At his workbench, Samhir tweezes out the contents of the Cloud Elk's stomach. A "lens" of metal strapped to his forehead focuses sunlight like a lamp. A bird - a great grey shrike - perches at the window. (She's a frequent visitor.)

Samhir's young wife NEERA, 24, wraps her buttery arms around his neck. The shrike CAWS raspily.

NEERA
Your friend doesn't approve.

SAMHIR
She perceives an intruder.

He tweezes a piece of matted vegetation out of the stomach.

NEERA
You choose digested grass over me.

SAMHIR
Not a grass. An unsavory, low-lying sedge. Non-native. Which combined with an excess of salt -

He dabs a bit of sedge on his tongue. Neera grimaces.

SAMHIR (CONT'D)
- tells me this elk took a very long, strange, roundabout path to the mountain. The question is why. To avoid - what?

Neera kisses his neck, whispers in his ear -

NEERA
I'll be waiting.

And heads back toward their bedroom.

Samhir continues his examination - the gift pleasures of searching, classifying, deducing ... until he finds and picks out a small black **pellet.** Smooth and oval.

For Samhir, it's like seeing a ghost.

NEERA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Waiting!

SAMHIR
Yes yes -

As he quickly folds the pellet away in a scrap of leather -

EXT. GREAT HALL - NIGHT

The largest structure in the Commons, LIT from within, its walls shaking from the raucous celebration inside -

INT. GREAT HALL - CONTINUOUS

A free-for-all communal feast of elk steak, wild vegetables, “plex” (a mint-green beer), loaves and cakes. A dozen singers holler in a corner, an old raunchy colonies favorite -

LEAD SINGER
... he broke in the storeroom, and what did he find?

CHORUS
A.T.G.C, C.G.T.A!

LEAD SINGER
His wife's bare bazoons, and his best friend's behind!

CHORUS
A.T.G.C., C.G.T.A.!

Foot-stomps and drums their only instruments (all others are considered “synth.”) Dancers collide in a chaotic mishmash.

Amid the crowd, Britt grabs his son in a surprise hug.

AETHYS
Quite a night.

BRITT
You’re here. ‘S enough for me.

A father’s relief. Haven notes the small, intimate moment amidst the chaos. Her eyes shining.

Britt returns to the “Plank,” a long table elevated from the fray - reserved for the colony’s leaders. Aethys heads to Roman’s cot, carried in for the occasion. Essyn at his side. A safe redoubt from which to view the festivities.

ROMAN
There’s a fly in the honeypot.

He indicates Jude, dancing lumberingly with Wylie.

ESSYN
A horse fly.

AETHYS
Horse's ass.

ROMAN
She doesn't seem to mind.
(off Aethys' hesitation)
You're not seriously going to get outdanced by Jude.

ESSYN
Go on. Do a girl a favor.

Aethys takes a fortifying swig of 'plex, then wades into the mosh pit/hoedown of dancers. Roman reaches for Ess's hand. So great to see Aethys not brooding, for once.

LEAD SINGER
It's all right, he said, you can take her away -

CHORUS
A.T.G.C, C.G.T.A!

LEAD SINGER
I'll clone her again with a bigger boo-tay!

Wylie spins close to Aethys, catches his eye. Twirling and laughing - but open to a new partner.

Aethys SEIZES THE MOMENT - JUMPS IN, grabs her waist. He's no Fred Astaire, but he's a big upgrade over Jude.

The music picks up. TIGHT ON Aethys, swinging Wylie with his one good arm, kicking loose for once - enjoying himself -

EXT. BACK OF GREAT HALL - NIGHT

Samhir sits alone, a big gourd of 'plex. Drunk off his ass.

Aethys spins outside, sweaty and happy. Taking a breather.

AETHYS
You don't drink 'plex.

SAMHIR
Neither do I eat meat. Yet tonight I have consumed six gourds, two tenderloins, and a hoof.
(burps)
You know why it's called "plex"? 'Course you don't. You've never seen sp - soyplex -

He nearly vomits, stops himself. Then passes the gourd to Aethys. They exchange draughts, under:

SAMHIR (CONT'D)
May I ask you a question? My strange young silent friend.
(Aethys shrugs)
Taking into account the pain of your injury. The inability to hunt. The subsequent loss of social status, romantic prospects, virility -

AETHYS
Don't be shy, Samhir - speak your mind.

SAMHIR
If you were given the choice. Today.
(the point)
Would you rather have died?

It's a cruel question. Especially coming from the colony's gentlest man, and the closest Aethys has to a mentor.

AETHYS
I don't know ...
(finally admits)
Before tonight? I would've said yes.

SAMHIR
A quick death. Over a slow agony.

Aethys snatches the gourd out of his hands.

AETHYS
You've had enough.

He takes it inside. But Samhir's beyond caring.

SAMHIR
Not nearly.

INT. GREAT HALL - NIGHT

Britt stands, calls the crowd to attention.

BRITT
By tradition, the last toast goes to the taker of the Cloud Elk.

Behind him, Roman (his injured leg propped on a footrest) acknowledges the crowd's cheers.

BRITT (CONT'D)
Roman. The Hall's yours.

Two colonists bring up the Cloud Elk's huge rack of antlers.

ROMAN
Thank you, Britt. Thank you, members of the Plank, for your leadership.
(beat)
I'm not gonna lie. I've dreamed about this moment. 'Course in my dreams, you-all were good looking. And I was sober!
(some LAUGHS)
I've heard some say that our wild ways have run their course. That we should let up on ourselves. Raise us a cow. Plant a seed.
(beat)
For over two hundred years, we have trained and hunted, shared and starved. Sacrificed life and limb.

A meaningful glance toward Aethys.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
(proudly)
We farm nothing. Grow nothing. <u>We take as God gives</u>. We close no animal in our pens, and we seek dominion over neither the seed, nor the atom - nor the stars.
(a beat)
Our reward has been a deep and lasting content. While the Outside fell into unimaginable darkness.

A deep <u>intake of breath</u> from the crowd - the sign of assent.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
And now comes spring. Our choosing time. When our young men make their petitions, and our women either welcome them into their lodges - or bar their doors.

Cocky BOOS from the young men, CHEERS from the women.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
And I'm supposed to choose first.

TIGHT ON: Essyn. Unsure if she wants what's coming.

Roman sees it - and lets her off the hook. (For now.)

ROMAN (CONT'D)
But tonight, I'd like to propose something different. You see, I grew up an orphan. With no family. And no future. Until someone noticed a starving refugee at the edge of the courtyard. Gave him his own dinner. And that night, invited him home.
(beat)
Aeth?

Surprised, but conscious of the hundreds of eyes on him, Aethys steps up to the Plank.

Roman nods to one of antler-holders. (This is all pre-arranged). With one hatchet-swing, the man SPLITS THE RACK in two. A GASP from the crowd at this break from tradition.

But Roman confidently hands <u>half</u> the antler-rack to Aethys.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
For family. For fellowship. For a spring full of meat!
(CHEERS)
For my friend. Who faced a galyntine <u>twice</u> - and lived. And who's never left my side.

Then Roman lifts his antlers HIGH above his head, and with all his might, sounds the victor's cry -

ROMAN (CONT'D)
The Cloud Elk!

CROWD
The Cloud Elk!

A huge ***<u>STANDING OVATION</u>***, colonists stomping and ROARING 'til they're red in the face. It's the greatest toast they've heard in years. Roman's a born politician. Born to lead.

As Aethys lifts his antlers to fit Roman's, and the two friends's eyes meet - for this moment, <u>united</u> as one -

CUT TO BLACK.

ACT THREE

TIGHT ON: Aethys, behind a tangle of antlers. Asleep.

A dull *thud*. He winces, COUGHS - spraying a cloud of dirt. REVEAL: he's fallen asleep in the courtyard.

CRAWFORD
Up. Up, yah shitberry.

Crawford kicks him again. Aethys gets to one knee.

CRAWFORD (CONT'D)
Bring your toy.

Aethys grabs the antlers and follows Crawford, CROSSING:

A bruised and bewildered YOUNG GUY, hustling out of a lodge, clutching his clothes. Whatever happened inside, he'll be trying to blot from his memory for years.

We LINGER on the lodge door - until Annabelle emerges, stretches, gives a satisfied yawn. Nothing like a fresh young whippersnapper to stir the blood. She heads toward:

INT. HOSPICE - MORNING

Roman's waiting, on two crutches he jerry-rigged.

ANNABELLE
Who told you to get out of bed?

ROMAN
Who said not to.

Annabelle grunts, unwraps his bandages, surveys his shin.

ANNABELLE
Lookin' good.

Just to be sure, she probes the rest of his foot. But as her fingers press his heel - he winces.

ANNABELLE (CONT'D)
Did that hurt?

Roman won't say. So she digs her figures in deeper - right at the base of the ankle. This time, Roman cries out.

They share a look. Then Annabelle re-bandages him.

ANNABELLE (CONT'D)
Infection's beat, stitches 'r holding. And: your ankle's broken. Congratulations. You hid it well.

Guilt, disappointment, anger war on Roman's clenched face.

ROMAN
So fix it. Operate.

ANNABELLE
You barely survived the last one.

ROMAN
Then what?

ANNABELLE
Then nothing. You do nothing. For at least a few months. Y' lay up.

ROMAN
I can't -

ANNABELLE
Even if I were willing to twist the talus bone back into place - which I'm not - we'd just be creating new problems. Ruptured blood vessels. Necrosis.
(then)
Come back tomorrow, we'll pack you a cast. Let it re-set on its own.

ROMAN
Annabelle. Will I hunt again. Can I run.

Something like sympathy flickers across her face. Softly:

ANNABELLE
You took the Cloud Elk. Made us all proud. 'S a thing most boys can only dream of.

Off Roman, processing this life-altering news -

EXT. MEMORY LODGE - DAY

Micah, custodian of the place, opens the door to Samhir. Who's visibly hung-over. And ill-at-ease.

MICAH
Sleep well?

She kisses his cheek. Samhir accepts this uncomfortably. They were lovers once, but only Micah's at peace with that -

INT. MEMORY LODGE - CONTINUOUS

Lined with alcoves of personal and historical mementoes: necklaces, weapons, boots, engraved gourds, etc. (In a culture without text, objects <u>are</u> memories.)

Britt, Haven and Crawford wait - a Plank subcommittee, of sorts. At their feet, a broad *something*, covered by a tarp.

BRITT
Oldest first.

Crawford removes the tarp. Britt and Samhir hoist a gray SLATE, of heavy stonelike plastic, onto two sawhorses.

Sunlight BUBBLES the mapstone to life - forming 3-D ridges and valleys, lakes and rivers. The whole of Mount Galyn. Including the Chasm, which rings the mountain like a moat.

Micah taps a high ridge. It RISES and scales up.

MICAH
Aethys saw the galyntine around here. Headed southwest.

A tense beat. They all know what this means.

BRITT
It's going for the elk.

HAVEN
Along with all our hunters. A galyntine in open ground? They'll be slaughtered.

MICAH
Then we redirect it.

CRAWFORD
(skeptical)
Scare parties?

SAMHIR
It won't go north. Small game is too scarce up-mountain.

BRITT
If we push it east, we put the other colonies at risk.

MICAH
Go west, we're shoving it into the heart of the herd.

BRITT
Our food supply for the year.

CRAWFORD
How do we know he saw what he saw?

HAVEN
Because he's my son.

A stony silence. But Crawford's skepticism lingers.

BRITT
We've got to clear it out. I want it here.
(taps a high peak)
Away from us and the elk.

SAMHIR
A difficult task.

BRITT
Put your minds to it. We'll meet again.

Grimly, they cover the mapstone with the tarp, put it back.

CRAWFORD
(distaste)
Need a brew and a wash. Smell 'a synth on my hands.

MICAH
What's life without a little hypocrisy.

SAMHIR
Perhaps the mapstone survived for a reason. For times like this.

CRAWFORD
Up to me, I'd smash it to pieces. Newcomers too.

He means it. Off Samhir's practiced non-reaction -

INT. HANDYMAN'S SHOP - DAY

Aethys sharpens a knife. Back to the grind - literally.

A sharp CRACK from outside. He recognizes the sound.

EXT. TRAINING PEN - CONTINUOUS

Two YOUNG MEN spar in the pen, leaping and parrying with blunted jabsticks - like scorpions trapped in a jar. A wordless crowd watches the carnage. Aethys finds Wylie.

AETHYS
Who're they fighting over.

WYLIE
Tammeryn. She couldn't decide.

TAMMERYN, 22, grimaces as one combatant leaps, misses his strike - and gets swatted into an obstacle.

AETHYS
They don't watch it, she'll be widowed twice.

WYLIE
At least they care. Not every woman gets to be fought over.

AETHYS
I'd fight for you.

He blurted it out so sub-consciously, it has to be true. Wylie meets Aethys' startled gaze.

Then she bolts from the crowd. Leaving Aethys: was that the stupidest mistake of his life? Or the smartest?

INT. GREAT HALL - DAY

So empty you'd hardly believe there was a feast last night. Roman enters, gets nods and smiles from the cleaning crew.

ROMAN
Anyone seen Ess?

A girl looks up from her scrubbing, nods toward:

INT. DRESSING LODGE - DAY

Essyn watches from the back of the room as cleaners scrub down the dissection table. Roman joins her, quietly.

ROMAN
It'll be us up there, someday. On the Plank. Making the decisions.

ESSYN
You ready for that? Who am I kidding. You were born ready.

ROMAN
I'm not doing it alone.

An uncomfortable beat.

ESSYN
I hate this. The way they cut it up. Reduce it. Then wash it away.

ROMAN
'S how we learn. We see where it's been, the health of the herd.

ESSYN
And where does it say we have to know everything?
(beat)
What I really know, in my bones? That elk was magnificent. And we turned it into scraps.

Roman has always loved her restless spirit. They kiss. Essyn presses her forehead to his, but can't meet his eyes.

ESSYN (CONT'D)
I'll ruin it for you. All your plans.

ROMAN
Let me be the judge of that.

Essyn breaks off the next kiss, a shade prematurely. She smiles to paper over the moment. But it's noticed.

Off the suspicion stirring faintly in Roman's eyes -

EXT. EDGE OF COURTYARD - DAY

Aethys sits cross-legged in the grass, cutting chunks of fennel root and elk leather. He tends to eat lunch alone, so he can people-watch the courtyard - in this case Wylie, roasting nuts in the communal fire with her mother.

SAMHIR
Am I interrupting?

AETHYS
(startled)
Nah, just - skinnin' flies.

SAMHIR
Have you noticed. For a colony that preaches sincere living, we have a genius for euphemism.

Aethys slides over, makes a spot in the grass. Wordlessly Samhir returns the broken pieces of the tube weapon.

SAMHIR (CONT'D)
Please forgive what I said to you.

AETHYS
It was the 'brew talking.

SAMHIR
I wish that were so.

Aethys clocks the troubled look in his eyes.

AETHYS
Samhir? What's wrong?

SAMHIR
It's none of your concern.

AETHYS
Then why -

SAMHIR
Stop asking why. There <u>is</u> no why. A picked wound will never heal.
(then, softening)
Here.

He removes a corrugated, tarnished <u>token</u> from his necklace. A peace offering. Aethys thumbs it.

AETHYS
Feels synth-y.

SAMHIR
It belonged to a friend of mine.

TIGHTER ON: an **ancient U.S. QUARTER**, from the commemorative state series. Mostly eroded: George Washington's head is a cipher. But the leaping FISH on the reverse is legible.

But Aethys has <u>never seen a fish.</u> Fish haven't existed for centuries.

AETHYS
What kind of creature is this?

SAMHIR
If I told you, you'd never believe me.
(stands up)
See you on the trails?

AETHYS
I'll be waiting.

Samhir nods and starts walking away.

AETHYS (CONT'D)
(sudden impulse)
You taught me everything I know.

Samhir's always treasured these awkward truth-bursts of his.

SAMHIR
I taught a boy full of self-pity and regret to use his mind. To face his terrors. To find something to live for.
(re: Wylie)
Unless I am very much mistaken - he has.

He turns and goes.

Leaving Aethys unburdened. Feeling better - lighter on his feet. He turns toward the courtyard, the communal fire.

Wylie stands up straight and faces him. Enough with the flirting. A blast of forthright interest - clear as a trumpet. For anyone and everyone to see.

Aethys turns and throws the pieces of the tube weapon DEEP INTO THE FOREST. Putting it far behind him.

A smile breaks on Wylie's face. Gorgeously.

ON AETHYS. Finally with her. Decision made.

Time to start living.

CUT TO BLACK.

ACT FOUR

EXT. HAVEN'S LODGE - AFTERNOON

Haven wrings an elk hide, twisting it into knots between two horizontal poles. Hard, grinding work. Essyn approaches, helps her finish an especially tough section.

ESSYN
Where's Da?

HAVEN
Off surveying the east meadow.

ESSYN
You mean looking for galyntine scat? Men. It's no wonder they can't own property. They're useless.

HAVEN
Keep one for a few years. You might change your mind.
(beat)
Or are you too good for that.

Haven soaks her blistered hands in a salve bucket.

ESSYN
Are you saying I should deny my feelings?

HAVEN
Feelings. I thought we were speaking of realities.
(like:)
Your father hasn't taken an elk in two seasons. Aethys never will. You have a chance to marry the smartest, most capable young man in the three colonies.

ESSYN
I love Roman like a brother. It's not him, it's me. This future you've laid out, sometimes I just want to smash it to pieces -

HAVEN
(SLAMS table)
Essyn! We've no time for this!

A shock to the system. To wake her daughter up.

HAVEN (CONT'D)
Roman has felt what you never have: hunger. Starvation. And he'll do <u>anything</u> to avoid it. You might appreciate that, come a cold morning. And my grandchild at your breast.

Harsh, survivalist bedrock. Off Essyn, in disbelief at her mother's tone - and Haven's serious stare - "believe it" -

EXT. NEERA'S LODGE - AFTERNOON

Samhir patches holes in a wall with mud and grass. He wants to finish by sundown - but is distracted by the sight of Neera, inside, combing her waterfall of long black hair.

Samhir rests his trowel. Mesmerized. How did he arrive at such a lucky place?

But the shrike CAWS. An alert: someone is watching *him.*

Samhir turns to spot Micah, some twenty yards away. Not at all embarrassed to be eavesdropping. Samhir goes to her - slightly anxious that Neera not see them -

MICAH
Did you look at me like that?

SAMHIR
What is the purpose of such a question.

MICAH
To watch you squirm. Of course.
(then)
Have you given any thought to our galyntine? A course of action?

SAMHIR
You're the wisest. You decide.

MICAH
Such favoritism. Not your nature.

SAMHIR
I owe you my life.

That's what slays her, every time: his unflinching honesty.

MICAH
How long were we together.

SAMHIR
Three winters.

MICAH
Yes. The winters were best. I remember when we found you - broken, bloody. Crawford wanted to finish you where you lay.

SAMHIR
I remember your eyes.

Their gazes meet head-on, briefly. All too briefly.

NEERA
(from the window)
Samhir?

Micah breaks the spell. Not jealous - she's past that -

MICAH
She'll give you children.

SAMHIR
The needs of the colony.

Micah watches him return to the lodge. Then, impulsively:

MICAH
Doesn't make them right.

She put those needs first. Always. And this is her reward.

INT. HAVEN'S LODGE - AFTERNOON

Dew-water streams down onto Essyn's face and body. (She's just inverted the roof.) She scrubs herself angrily - as if to scour her mother's words out of her skin.

Two brisk <u>rasping</u> sounds. (Colonists don't knock: they rake a stick across a door's interlaced branches - like trilling a xylophone.) Essyn quickly pulls on the nearest thing to her - a totally inadequate wrap -

ESSYN
Just a second ...

She opens the door - and outside waits: <u>Roman</u>. Shifting on his crutches. Nervous. Clear as day why he's there.

Dust motes freeze, sunbeams hold their breath. The long-expected moment, suddenly - here.

ROMAN
Hello Ess.

<u>On Essyn</u>. At a crossroads of her life.

INT. HANDYMAN'S SHOP - AFTERNOON

JUDE
Shit -

Jude knocks over a rack of weaponry as he enters.

CRAWFORD
Ah: the sweet sound of cloddery.

JUDE
Sorry.

CRAWFORD
Too late for that.

He selects a boning knife from the wall.

JUDE
My Da's slipsled. The strut's bent, he wants you to take a look -

CRAWFORD
(with relish)
I am going to field-roast your joysack like a coupla chestnuts.

JUDE
Well send *someone!* Please!

Aethys looks up from his work, catches their eye -

EXT. COURTYARD - AFTERNOON

Jude marches Aethys across the courtyard -

JUDE
C'mon. Before he changes his mind.

AETHYS
It's just a sled -

JUDE
There <u>is</u> no sled.

Jude yanks him behind a lodge, out of sight.

JUDE (CONT'D)
Wylie just asked my aunt Jonquil for spare buttons. Shiny ones.

AETHYS
N'okay ...

JUDE
And just now, I seen her putting them on a vest. A new vest. Did you say something to her?

Against his better judgment, Aethys cracks a grin.

JUDE (CONT'D)
I knew it. Fucking knew it. It's for you! She's gonna say yes!

Excited, Jude shoves Aethys out of the shadows.

JUDE (CONT'D)
Ask her.

AETHYS
But -

JUDE
Seal the deal!

In a few stumbling steps, he's at WYLIE'S LODGE. And yes, through a window: Wylie's sewing buttons onto a beautifully embroidered man's VEST. Humming happily as she finishes up.

Aethys goes to the door, is about to pick up the rasping stick hanging by a string when he sees:

ACROSS THE COURTYARD: Essyn, exposed, in her wrap. Roman in front of her. Essyn explaining herself. Roman persisting. Getting angry. Not accepting what he's hearing.

Aethys leaves Wylie's door, starts toward them.

Too late. He doesn't hear the final exchange - but when Essyn reaches for Roman's cheek - he SLAPS HER HAND AWAY.

Roman turns on Essyn like an exile banished from his country.

AETHYS
Hey -

He shakes Aethys off as he stalks past.

Essyn's face crumbles. The breach impossible to have avoided. Now impossible to undo.

On Aethys, caught between. Somehow he's lost them both.

EXT. MOUNT GALYN - NIGHT

Unforgiving moonlight paints the mountain's harsh rockslopes.

INT. HOSPICE - NIGHT

Kyree's family has gathered around him. By candlelight.

Micah props up his limp left leg. Exposes the skin. And brings a simple toothpick to bear.

MICAH
Let me know when you feel it.

She pricks the sole of his foot. Kyree shakes his head - nothing. And the big toe. Still nothing. But when she reaches his ankle -

KYREE
There.

His mother and father clutch hands. Hopefully.

Micah moves up his leg, from ankle to knee.

KYREE (CONT'D)
Yup. Again. Oww.

His eyes locked on the toothpick. And on Micah's eyes.

MICAH
Now we'll test for heat and cold.
Richter, fetch me that warm cloth.

His father turns, Kyree's eyes follow him - and Micah swiftly jams a needle into the meat of his thigh.

Distracted, Kyree doesn't feel a thing.

His mother meets Micah's gaze. A terrible knowledge.

His father returns with the cloth. And double-takes at the sight of the protruding needle. But Kyree just looks at it resignedly. Game over.

MICAH (CONT'D)
We have some decisions to make.

EXT. HILLSIDE - NIGHT

Aethys finds Essyn sitting alone, overlooking a meadow thick with moonweed. Tiny MOTHBATS (the two species have merged) divebomb the meadow for aphids, kicking up little phosphorescent BLOOMS.

A few mothbats swirl around, taking aphids from Essyn's outstretched palm - like park pigeons. With unsettling speed, Aethys snatches one out of mid-air.

ESSYN
How do you do that?

AETHYS
(shrugs)
I'm a freak.

ESSYN
No-one thinks you're a freak but you.

He opens his palm. The mothbat escapes, CHEEPING in relief, all wrinkled gray skin and oversized feathery antennae.

ESSYN (CONT'D)
You ever seen the mapstone?
(he shakes his head)
I snuck a peak. Years ago. It shows everything: rivers, valleys. All of Mount Galyn.

AETHYS
Sounds incredible.

ESSYN
Our whole world, everyone we've ever known, every game, every hunt - played out on a tabletop.
(beat)
It made me want to run screaming. It made me feel so trapped.

Aethys loops an arm through his sister's. He knows she's not talking about the mapstone anymore.

AETHYS
You did the right thing.

Her upraised face is wracked with doubt. And guilt.

AETHYS (CONT'D)
I know Roman. He'll get over it.

A confident brotherly vote of support. Exactly what she needs. But so unlike him.

ESSYN
It really changed you. Seeing the galyntine.

He's on the brink of telling her the real shocker - the burr oak, the crevice, that alien sound. Wants to.

But that would be truly dangerous.

AETHYS
What I saw ... I can't explain.

EXT. TRAIL - NIGHT

A FIGURE with his back to us. The communal fire over his shoulder, about a half-mile distant.

Roman turns, sinks his crutches into the pine-needled earth, and continues limping down the trail.

A few yards later, he finds what he's looking for: an old gnarled pine, with exposed, intertwined roots.

He looks around, makes sure he's alone. Then he sets his crutches against the tree. And wedges his ankle into a GAP between two roots. Pushes it until it's firmly stuck.

TIGHT ON Roman. Taking a series of short, intense breaths. Like a swimmer preparing for a long dive.

Then he TORQUES his ankle with a sickening CRUNCH.

His SCREAM echoes among the pines. But when he checks the result - his ankle's not re-aligned. Not totally.

Not enough for his pride.

Roman raises his eyes skyward, then squeezes them shut. Blotting out the stars.

He TWISTS HIS LEG and SCREAMS - the self-torture reaching depths he never knew were there. A crucible of pain.

INT. NEERA'S LODGE - NIGHT

Dark as the surrounding night. A glimpse of Neera's sleeping face. Then a rustling sound ... a shadow among the shadows.

A FIRE flares under a copper smelting pan. Illuminating Samhir's face.

At his bench. He has to work to do.

He unwraps the leather pouch, drops the black pellet onto the pan. Then rummages through his nearby work table, ultimately finding two long, thin threading needles.

He returns to the smelter. TIGHT ON: the black pellet smouldering ... then melting into a tiny pool.

FROM BEHIND: we watch Samhir dip the needles into the black liquid. And JAB THEM through the air in a spinning, tossing motion - as if sketching in 3-dimensional space.

After an intense flurry of this, the copper pan lies empty. Samhir slumps back in his chair.

Before him is an elegant polyhedral SPHERE, of impossibly thin, black strands. Like a wire model, with a complex internal structure of crisscrossing struts.

It's the definition of "synth." It's from Outside.

And it's *levitating.*

Then Samhir hears footsteps passing by. VOICES.

Resignedly, but with great precision, he touches a crucial strut inside the sphere - and it COLLAPSES. Instantly reforming into the black pellet. Which Samhir catches in mid-air - it's still warm - and drops on the table.

To see such doom, in so small a thing.

Then he flips the pan and SLAMS it onto the smelting fire. Not just extinguishing it. EXECUTING it.

Putting it out of its misery.

CUT TO BLACK.

ACT FIVE

INT. MEMORY LODGE - MORNING

Two hands lay a nicked, battered practice jabstick on a shelf. It's Kyree's favorite thing in the world.

Kyree's mother returns to: four strong men, including his father, hoisting Kyree atop a stretcher.

Kyree turns his head to Micah. Their eyes meet keenly - yet intimately. As custodian of the lodge, this is the most important promise she can make. To anyone.

MICAH
We'll remember you.

EXT. MEMORY LODGE - MORNING

They carry Kyree outside, where a crowd has lined the path out of the village. As the stretcher-bearers pass with Kyree, colonists squeeze his hand, kiss him, leave little tokens next to his body. Crawford puts a small, ceremonial knife on the stretcher, steps back into the crowd.

CRAWFORD
He did the right thing.

The comment lands hard on its intended audience: Aethys. Samhir overhears it, and eyes Crawford returning to his shop.

Britt, Haven, and Annabelle watch the four men load the stretcher onto a slipsled. Britt is deeply conflicted.

BRITT
We should've given him more time.

HAVEN
It's the only way.

Annabelle just looks on, stricken, as the crowd breaks up.

And the slipsled bearing Kyree is pulled away.

EXT. A LODGE - MORNING

Roman, recovered from yesterday's ordeal. Face washed, hair combed. In his best, cleanest shirt and pants.

At the last second he TOSSES HIS CRUTCHES around the corner. Wouldn't make the right impression.

Then he takes a deep breath - and rasps the door -

INT. HANDYMAN'S SHOP - MORNING

Crawford at the anvil, with tongs and hammer, beating out a new hunting disc. Slitted spark-shields over his eyes.

He glances up to see Samhir, waiting for him.

CRAWFORD
What can I do for you?

SAMHIR
Nothing, I'm afraid.

Crawford snorts - typical. Goes back to work.

Until Samhir slowly, deliberately, tips the bucket of cooling water onto his forge-fire. The whole bucket. STEAM erupts.

Crawford HURLS his spark-shield glasses against a wall. His pupils contract into black diamonds of rage. It'll take him hours to rekindle that fucking fire.

Of course, Samhir knew that.

Crawford SWINGS THE HAMMER in a swift, cruel arc. But fighting and killing are only passions for him: they were Samhir's profession.

He dodges Crawford's attacks easily, gracefully - a matador to a bull. Using a combat style Crawford's never seen. And at the first opening, Samhir **pounces**. An elbow to the spine, a whirling HEELSTRIKE to the forehead. Fight over.

Samhir re-aligns his sleeves. Composes himself. Crosses to a low cabinet obscured by a pile of tools. (Crawford's secret hiding place). Shoves them aside, kicks the crude lock until it shatters. Opens the door, REVEALING:

His old black leatherish case, stamped with an insignia: a scythe blade, with thick banded stripes. (It's not a scythe blade - but more on that later).

Samhir pulls it out, slings it over his shoulder. Aha: two cases, attached by a strap. Aerodynamic, like motorcycle saddlebags, designed to rest astride of ... something fast.

Samhir exits the shop's rear door without a backward glance.

EXT. A TRAIL - DAY

Wylie comes upon Aethys - sweaty after his long morning hike. A huge swath of WILDFLOWERS under his arm.

AETHYS
You were right. They grow better wild.

He gives them to her. Wylie swallows tightly.

AETHYS (CONT'D)
I know a handyman isn't what most girls dream of. Especially one like me. But Wylie, if you're willing to chance it, I swear -

WYLIE
I can't. I'm sorry.

The abruptness is shocking. And bewildering. Wylie decides a quick, sharp cut is the kindest.

WYLIE (CONT'D)
There's someone else.

AETHYS
But how - I mean, who -

And just like that: he *knows.*

TIME CUT TO:

INT. GREAT HALL - DAY

Empty and silent. Aethys bursts in - to find Roman. His ankle up on a table, rigged with a new splint.

Wylie's shiny-buttoned shirt tossed aside in a careless lump.

ROMAN
Want to fight me for her? Go ahead. I might even let you win.

AETHYS
The taker of the Cloud Elk. How could she refuse.

ROMAN
Trust me - her family could use the meat.

He adjusts the splint, tightens it.

AETHYS
I've stood by you. Through everything.

ROMAN
No Aeth, you stood next to me. And now your sister thinks I'm damaged goods. How rich is that.
(woundedly)
All I ever wanted was to be a part of your family. But I don't belong, do I? And you never did.

AETHYS
You really think you can make this work.

ROMAN
I know I can.

He stands up straight. A new, harder air about him. A leader has to face reality - make choices others won't.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
How do you think I got the Cloud Elk? I told Jude where to hide. I sent Kyree. I played out the entire hunt in my mind - before it even happened.

AETHYS
Then what happens now.

ROMAN
I'll let you know. When it's time.

His expression softens. He rests a hand on his friend's shoulder, freighted with - what? Aethys recognizes it now.

With pity.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
I'll take care of you, Aethys. You'll always have your share. But I'm not gonna end up like you.

AETHYS
Say it.

ROMAN
A cripple.

The word hangs in the air. A milestone. A death knell.

Aethys heads for the exit.

ROMAN (CONT'D)
Going after the galyntine?

AETHYS
Maybe I'm gonna kill it.

A bitter smile creases Roman's lips.

ROMAN
You'll never do it alone -

EXT. GREAT HALL - CONTINUOUS

Aethys stops outside, heartbeat racing, mind spinning with confusion, betrayal, rage.

The worst thing about Roman's final words? They were true.

From AETHYS' P.O.V.:

Teens play a rough game of soccer over near the trees. Stuart trips and suffers a hard SHOT to the side of his face, but play continues - the game doesn't wait for injuries -

A young couple flirts by a tree. She leaning coyly. He wrapping her hair around his fingers. As they KISS -

A 50ish man and wife squabble in a doorway. The subject's irrelevant, they argue all the time - just talking past each other. The bitter fruit of middle age.

An old man sits blind and alone and possibly senile. His head raised slightly, mouth agape like a death mask. Listening to music only he can hear.

ON AETHYS. Assembling these images. Seeing his whole life laid out before him, like the panels of a quilt.

It's not enough.

INT. HAVEN'S LODGE - DAY

QUICK CUTS: Aethys unbundles the stash he keeps under his cot. Straps on a few pads of flex armor. Holsters a HAND-AXE. Packs his fire kit, a coil of hemp rope.

EXT. COURTYARD - DAY

Stuart gets elbowed in the ribs. Steps away from the soccer game for a moment.

In the distance, he sees Aethys SPRINT into the forest. He splits off from the main path up the mountain, and quickly disappears down a much narrower, rarely-used trail.

ON STUART. Frowning quizzically. But no-one else has seen Aethys.

Nobody follows.

EXT. EAST SLOPE OF MOUNT GALYN - DAY

MUSIC SWELLS as we pick out the 4-man slipsled carrying Kyree. About 7,000 feet up the mountain, and climbing fast.

EXT. ASPEN FOREST - DAY

Samhir marches determinedly, the saddlebags over his shoulder. Headed down-mountain.

EXT. WEST SLOPE OF MOUNT GALYN - DAY

Aethys carving up the trail, his stride hard and steady. He can keep this pace up for HOURS ...

... which pass into DUSK. One of the men carrying Kyree stumbles at a switchback, gets back on his feet.

Samhir telemarks his way down a severe ridge - slip-sliding awkwardly on the dirt and gravel.

Aethys emerges from a GORGE, and stops. A half mile above him, the burr oak grove.

EXT. TRAIL OF SHARDS - DUSK

A hillside of broken shale, devoid of bush, tree, or weed.

The four men remove the stretcher from the slipsled, and carry Kyree by hand onto the Trail of Shards.

The point of no return.

EXT. BURR OAK - DUSK

Aethys comes face to face with the giant tree. Its swollen trunk well over 40 feet in diameter. Its dark crevice an unblinking EYE ... a question he has to answer.

Aethys climbs swiftly up to the platform where he spent the night. Takes a deep breath.

Reaches in - and again there's a slight buzz of CURRENT.

He stands up, peels off his armor, unsheathes his hand-axe.

And starts HACKING away. Opening the crevice wider. A practiced, handyman's tempo. Letting the blade do the work.

It's going to be a long night.

EXT. COURTYARD FIRE - NIGHT

Fewer colonists than usual, perhaps a dozen. Annabelle huddles with Britt and Haven. Wylie wedged unhappily between her parents ... her decision, but their influence.

ACROSS THE FLAMES: Jude, sitting next to Essyn. Who stares hollow-eyed into the fire.

Roman approaches the fire at a separate angle, on his crutches. Ess sees him. Jude invites him over with a wave.

But Roman stays apart from all of them.

Leaning his weight on his good foot, he hauls back and TOSSES his antler-crown into the fire. It lands with a *clack* among the gnarled branches, the hungry coals.

TIGHT ON ROMAN. Watching it burn.

EXT. TRAIL OF SHARDS - NIGHT

The Trail ends at a gradually ascending CLIFF. The four men lay the stretcher on a switchback, only thirty yards from the top of the cliff. Then they depart - all except Richter.

He lays a circle of tokens around his son's body. Kneels down and kisses Kyree's cheek. Runs a hand gently through his son's precious straw-colored hair. Eyes brimming.

Then he fits a small tasseled STICK between Kyree's jaws. And as he walks away, makes an incision in his own hand - and smears it on the rock wall. A trail of blood.

EXT. BURR OAK PLATFORM - NIGHT

Thwocck - Aethys hits a sweet spot. With his feet he dislodges a huge CHUNK of bark, kicks it to the forest floor.

He kneels down, reaches inside. His fingertips brush the current - but this time it TURNS OFF. Simply dematerializes.

Aethys stands, and looks down at what's now a gaping HOLE in the bark.

Just wide enough for a person to slip through.

EXT. THE CHASM - NIGHT

Samhir SKIDS TO A STOP at the edge of the Chasm. His toes peeking over the edge. The fog-layer thick as cotton.

Quickly he removes three separate pieces of a **weapon** - gleaming black sterilene - from the saddlebags. Assembles it. Drops the tiny black pellet into a cylinder with a dry rattle. Then loads the cylinder into a chamber.

Hits a button. The weapon WHINES, an ascending note - when it reaches its peak, the barrel's heated properly.

Samhir FIRES. A whisper-thin, black strand SHOOTS ACROSS the Chasm, like a jet of spider silk, at a slight 5-degree downward angle. Hits and lodges somewhere in the distance - on the fog-shrouded, opposite side.

Samhir adjusts the fire setting - and SHOOTS INTO THE GROUND near his feet. The string anchors itself in a thick, sticky black mass. Then he repeats the firing/anchoring procedure: now two black strings bridge the Chasm.

Dismantling the gun, Samhir returns the pieces to the saddlebags. Hangs them around his neck, like a life-vest.

Then SLIDES DOWN the twin black tightropes into the mist.

EXT. CLIFF - NIGHT

TIGHT ON: Kyree. Immobilized. Waiting.

Until a low guttural **snarl** echoes faintly from the mountainside.

Kyree spits the bit out from between his clenched jaws. A final act of defiance.

INT. TREE CAVITY - NIGHT

WHAM - Aethys lands heavily ... somewhere.

AETHYS
Hello?

The space refunds none of his voice.

Scrambling, Aethys tinders his fire kit, strikes the flint - and sees a layer of dirt, insect shells, and small skeletons underneath his feet. The end of a hundred unlucky journeys.

Carefully he picks up the skeleton of a long-dead SQUIRREL - and his hand-flame reveals that the floor underneath it is translucent. Completely INVISIBLE.

LIGHTS come on overhead. Harsh white pinpoints.

He's in an **oval chamber**, eight feet wide, twelve feet tall. Faint welcoming CHIMES, stereoscopic, dance around his ears. Triangle-lights blink a pattern on the floor: a forward path.

He follows them. And is rewarded by an encouraging TONE. There's no writing or symbology on the walls. Only the language of light, shape, color, music.

White particles coalesce, solidifying into a horizontal SLAB, which levitates at the height of Aethys's sternum. Then a depression sinks into the top of the slab. A precise negative MOLD of a left arm. Palm-side up. Inviting.

But Aethys has no left arm. So he rests his right arm in the depression, transposing the thumb and pinky. Close enough.

A sound like a PIPE ORGAN CHORD. Deep, congratulatory. Now the walls and ceiling of the chamber GLOW, streaked pink and arterial purple. Membranous. Organic.

Aethys is so enchanted, he barely notices the thick, warm GEL flowing onto his arm, comforting as amniotic fluid. It spreads from his elbow to his fingertips, weighing his arm to the slab. Then it self-seals with a pleasing little POP.

Off Aethys's wide-eyed WONDER -

EXT. CLIFF - NIGHT

Kyree, a little frantic now, strains to look over the cliff, scanning from left to right. But it’s nowhere to be seen.

CUT TO:

The galyntine's armored scales SKIM BENEATH US - we're with it, rounding some corner, its predator paws silent and prehensile. Kyree comes into view, only a few yards away -

- but the perspective is wrong - his body is UPSIDE DOWN -

- and Kyree realizes (too late) that the galyntine is **above him**, clinging impossibly to the sheer cliff wall, its head swiveled 180° around like a praying mantis's -

The boy's last sight on earth is the predator LEAPING down straight at him, its body uncorkscrewing, jaws unsheathed -

INT. CHAMBER - NIGHT

Aethys tries to free his arm from the gel. Can't. He feels a twinge of panic - has this all been a mistake?

The chamber senses it - and reacts. Graphics of pulse rate and hormone levels blink to life. As a precaution his leg muscles are LOCKED STIFF by an invisible field.

Then a small white DISK lowers on a column of air. It sinks through the binding gel, and spreads like batter on his skin.

Aethys SPASMS as the patch binds to his forearm - ACTIVATING. His brain floods with images, sounds, sensations that **strain the limits of his comprehension** - and the wall lights goes into a green STROBE PATTERN - "emergency" -

- and fighting his immobility, Aethys cranks his neck around -

- to see a stiletto-thin anaesthetic PROBE emerge out of the darkness. A metal hornet on an invisible wire.

As it hurtles straight for his carotid artery -

CUT TO BLACK.

THE END