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DEPARTURE

EXT. - THE PLAINS OF THE FRONTIER - DAY

The dry hills stretch to the horizon. Passing dust clouds indicate that it hasn't rained in weeks. Small trees and brush paint the landscape as a vulture circles above. The harsh sun beats down, with no means of escape.

A thundering rumble permeates the desolate surroundings. Growing in intensity, small creatures scatter as a horse-drawn wagon crosses the frame. The ELDEST SON (19), trails closely on horseback.

PA (50s, bearded) drives the wagon. A grizzled veteran in his faded blue Union coat, he's a seasoned cattle driver battling physical decline.

Protected within, his wife MARTHA (40s), and youngest son LOUIS (16) -- her busy sewing clothing repairs while he reads a hand-me-down version of Moby Dick.

ADULT LOUIS V.O.

The endpoint of childhood is when you realize that you're not invincible anymore. The death of that illusion is what allows the harsh realities of life to take hold. Those few years of freedom are the only ones we get, and not a single one of us has the wits to cherish it.

The Eldest Son spurs his horse and canters up to the front of the wagon.

ELDEST SON

Are we getting close Pa?

Pa grunts in affirmation, pulling off his hat to scratch his head. He calls back to the wagon without turning around.

PA

Martha! Louis! Start gettin' ready to unload!

The Eldest Son pays no mind to his dismissal, spurring his horse again in excitement. Heading off, he slows to a halt at the top of the ridge line. As the wagon climbs the hill, a homestead can be seen in the distance.

The wagon slows momentum at the bottom of the slope as an audibly excited ranch dog runs out from the property to greet them.

EXT. - HOMESTEAD FRONT - DAY

As they breach the fence line, UNCLE WALTER (60s) and AUNT JESSIE (50s) emerge from the homestead, eager to greet the new arrivals.

The Eldest Son appears first, trailed excitedly by the canine.

ELDEST SON
(dismounting)
Uncle Walter! Aunt Jessie!

He runs over and jumps into the arms of his Aunt. Patting him on the head, Uncle Walter slowly descends the stairs of the porch to greet his brother. The wagon comes to a halt, and Pa sits back in exhaustion.

UNCLE WALTER
Er, good to see ya Sam. Day late I see.

Martha disembarks and is greeted by Aunt Jessie while Louis remains tucked in the interior -- unfinished with his chapter.

PA
(grunts)
Drive got delayed by a thunderstorm over Horned Pass -- lost a few steer. Thankfully, I still got my due.

UNCLE WALTER
Enough to call it quits, huh?

PA
(grunts)
Enough for the winter. I'll find more work once we get settled.

The Eldest Son leads his horse to the barn, pausing briefly to chase a chicken. Pa finally dismounts the wagon and grunts in discomfort.

PA (CONT'D)
Another year as a drover will put me in an early grave. No, it's about time these boys grow up.

Martha and Aunt Jessie approach from the rear of the wagon carrying bundles of supplies. Overhearing the tail end of the conversation, Martha greets Uncle Walter with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, landing at her husband's side.

MARTHA

Thank you for having us Walter,
it's good to see you. How are your
boys? Off in the big city?

Uncle Walter recoils in surprise.

UNCLE WALTER

My boys! Never.
(takes a step back, stands
tall, and beams with
pride)
They're on their fourth drive now.
Last I heard, they holed up outside
Kansas City.

PA

Ya see! Now there are some hard-
workers. Nothing toughens ya up
like a decade of thieves and
savages on the open plains. I tell
ya, they won't come back to ya
boys.
(shouting over his
shoulder)
Louis! Where are ya? Get over here
and help your brother unload the
wagon!

The Eldest Son appears from the barn, now aware that he should have been unloading the wagon. Making his way over, he regroups with the emerging Louis.

AUNT JESSIE

Oh, let him be Sam. I love to see
Louis reading his books. He's so
grown now.

As his brother begins unloading, Louis grabs a basket of supplies as he passes the wagon to approach the group of adults. Moving confidently, he hugs his Aunt Jessie and receives a familiar pat on the head from Uncle Walter.

UNCLE WALTER

Hey there Louis!
(addressing Pa)
Er, well, we're glad you're here.
Let's get you settled, and we can
talk what's next over supper.

The group off-loads the supplies from the journey. Louis exuberantly takes lead as tack, tools, food, and raw materials are seen being carried in.

INT. - HOMESTEAD - NIGHT

The house is well maintained. Expansive but bare, save for a few hunting trophies, the house embraces its age. Cracked wood juxtaposes the handmade furniture as lanterns cast dancing shadows around the room.

Faded black and white photos line the mantle next to a wood-burned sign that reads, CRAITONS, serving as a reminder of the families' history. As the eldest patriarch, Walter's inherited the responsibility of the properties care after the War.

The men are seated around the table while Martha and Aunt Jessie finish bringing over different plates. Smiles and laughter are exchanged as drinks are refilled and food passed around.

Further into the meal, Pa puts down his cutlery.

PA

(grunts)

I hear the ranch in Longbow is still looking for hands. That'll be where I head first.

Pa looks down at his food before glancing at his wife and then his brother. Martha offers a soft smile, while Walter pays no mind.

PA (CONT'D)

I may not be able to weather a drive any longer, but I ain't dead yet.

UNCLE WALTER

(meeting Pa's gaze)

Huh -- who'da thought it'd be age that got us. Life's not been all that kind so, feel lucky we made it this far. We all know those who didn't.

Melancholy envelopes the table as the somberness of reality weighs on the family - they've all experienced that loss. A kind mother notices her children's discomfort.

MARTHA

That's enough of that talk. Sam, you're the hardest worker I know, you'll be back out there soon enough. You've spent so long fighting to protect and provide for more than just us. For now, enjoy the time with your boys.

While Pa picks at his food, Aunt Jessie nonverbally prompts Uncle Walter to speak up.

UNCLE WALTER

Er, she's right. When they go, it's like the last train out the station, leaving nothing behind but empty track. My boys don't have any interest in settling here on the family land, so it may just come down to young Louis here to uphold the legacy.

(winks at Louis)

As Louis starts to speak, his older brother cuts in.

ELDEST SON

Ohhh I'll do it! I'll take care of the plot! Once I'm Sheriff, bandits and savages'll think twice about messing with us.

Uncle Walter finds himself under the gaze of Aunt Jessie, Martha, and Pa -- all turned serious.

AUNT JESSIE

You tell 'em bout the conversation you had with the Sheriff last time you were in town?

UNCLE WALTER

Sam and I spoke earlier, and we've both seen far worse.

He looks towards his eldest nephew.

UNCLE WALTER (CONT'D)

Why don't you head to town with me tomorrow, and we'll see about getting you deputized. The Sheriff always needs extra hands.

Martha sits with a pained look of distress, but says nothing. She is reassured by a squeeze of the hand by Aunt Jessie.

ELDEST SON

Yeah!? Can I Pa!?

PA

I think that's a great idea.
Martha, it's about time he sees
more of the world.

Like any concerned mother, Martha struggles to hide her emotion. Finally, she comes to terms with the path her boy has chosen.

MARTHA

You're right. He's at that age.
(breaking gaze from her
eldest son)
You trust the Sheriff, Walter? I've
heard the stories of those corrupt
bastards who have their entire
towns living in fear.

Pa grunts and continues to eat his food, while his Eldest Son listens intently. Uncle Walter softens and smiles to appease a mothers concerns.

UNCLE WALTER

Yes ma'am, he's a fine gentleman.
Spry, honest, and well about his
wits. Your boy will be in good
care.

With that, the topic is settled. Now picking at her plate, Martha eyes Louis with concern. Pa clears his throat to speak up.

PA

Louis, tomorrow you'll help me mend
that fence Uncle Walter's been
griping about. After that, we'll
continue your hunting lessons. The
food stores we've got will only
last us till the first snow in
about two months time. We'll have
to go out three times a week now if
we're to feed all five of us for
the winter.

Having pacified his wife, the conversation fades.

INT. - HOMESTEAD - KITCHEN/FAMILY ROOM - LATER

Cattle hide leather wraps the stools and chairs. Lanterns hang from the ceiling, turning what could be a dark and empty space into a warm and full home.

Dishes are being dried by Martha and Aunt Jessie as Louis brings what remains from the table over.

Looking through to the family room, Louis's brother can be seen wrestling with the dog while the patriarchs are seen reminiscing over war scars and hunting prizes. Uncle Walter is habitually chewing on his cigar.

Gradually, a rumble permeates the room. Going unnoticed at first, it grows in aggression. Stepping away from the mantle, Pa steps to the window. Greeted by nothing but darkness, he turns his head to listen. A horse neighs in distress.

The dog pulls away from wrestling and begins to bark. Pa shoots a worried glance to Uncle Walter, then to the women. Grabbing Louis, Martha and Aunt Jessie join the men in the family room.

UNCLE WALTER

They've never been out this way before. Sheriff said they were getting desperate, but I can't believe it's come to this.

PA

Only way out here woulda been to track us from the drive.

Now, what are undeniably hoof beats reverberate throughout the room. Uncle Walter goes into the cabinet for his shotgun, while Pa digs through some belongings for his old war rifle.

UNCLE WALTER

(loading shells)

There's a cellar 'round back.
Jessie, take the boys and be quick.

As soon as he finishes speaking a gun is fired, and a bullet cracks through the wall -- zipping over their heads. Pa pulls a dresser in front of the door, and breaks the window pane, taking a shot into the darkness.

UNCLE WALTER (CONT'D)

Go, now!
(fires the shotgun)

Martha and Aunt Jessie gather the boys and usher them towards the side door. The Eldest Son breaks away, grabbing a revolver from the gun cabinet and running to his Pa's side.

ELDEST SON

Pa! I can help!

A bullet comes whizzing through, shattering what's left of the window pane. Pa grunts as he takes cover, dragging his Eldest Son down with him.

PA

I need you to protect your mother,
brother, and aunt. They need you.

(Pa stands and takes a
shot out the window)

Go!

The Eldest Son stumbles getting up, but hurriedly makes his way back to the outstretched arms of his mother. As they're ushered to the door, a fire-bottle breaks the window beside Uncle Walter -- exploding as it impacts the ground.

The carpet goes up in flames, causing both groups to recoil. Bullets begin to rain in on the home, shattering pictures and prompting Martha to pull Louis in close.

Searching desperately for her husband's gaze, Martha finds Pa sectioning off his remaining ammunition. Aunt Jessie pulls her out the doorway as another fire bottle flies in.

EXT. - HOMESTEAD/BARN - NIGHT

As flames seep out from the windows, parts of the exterior begin to ignite. Stumbling around to the cellar entrance, they find it blocked by fallen debris. Chaotic orders are heard being shouted by riders on the perimeter, accompanied closely by the bangs of gunfire.

The stars fade as the wafting smoke rises from the homestead. Martha's motherly instinct kicks in. She gathers her boys, uncertain of the events to come, but remaining steadfast in resolve.

MARTHA

Get to the horses. If you ride
hard, you can get to town by
morning. Stay off the roads, follow
the river for as long as you can,
but remember if you take it too
far, it curls up the mountain.

(taking a long look at her
sons)

(MORE)

MARTHA (CONT'D)

We'll be right behind you. Go --
protect each other.

The boys head off into the night. They can barely make out the barn in the distance, dimly lit by the growing flames engulfing the house.

Slowly, they start off. Stumbling at first, they increase their pace until they're clawing their way through the night. An excited yell spurs excited hoof beats and scattered gunfire. Terrified, they begin to sprint.

Gaining distance on his brother, Louis arrives at the barn first. He throws open the doors, causing one horse to immediately bolt -- riled by all the commotion. Methodically, he throws a lead over the remaining horse and brings it out.

ELDEST SON

(winces)

C'mon! We gotta go!

Louis's brother raggedly helps him up onto the horse and jumps on behind him. They take off into the night, unsure what direction they're headed.

Louis spares a brief look back to see shadowy horses cut off the view of his Mother and Aunt.

For one hundred yards the scattered gunshots continue with the occasional bullet smacking the ground beside them. After another fifty yards, the shots cease, with no indication of a pursuit. Reaching two hundred yards, Louis timidly looks back to see the distant homestead fully in flames.

EXT. - PLAINS/WOODS - NIGHT

The horse begins to slow. Unsure how long they've been riding, Louis snaps out of his exhausted daze. The weight of his brother on his back has gotten heavier, and as they enter a section of larger trees, his brother leans up.

ELDEST SON

(groans)

Louis, we need to stop.

Noticing his brothers deteriorating condition, Louis brings their horse to a halt. His brother stumbles off, falling to the ground. Louis quickly dismounts and rushes to his brothers side. Blood soaks his shirt as he holds his flank.

ELDEST SON (CONT'D)

(looking around)

I -- I think we're okay here.

(MORE)

ELDEST SON (CONT'D)

I'm sorry Louis, I can't tell where we are. You need to find the river --

(coughs)
-- just find us some water.

Louis moves closer as fear creeps into his eyes.

LOUIS

Let me make you a fire.

ELDEST SON

No, no fire --
(coughs)
That'll draw 'em right to us.

Louis stands, tears beginning to well in his eyes. Louis' brother adjusts his position, propping himself against a tree.

LOUIS

What about Ma and Pa? Uncle Walter?
Aunt Jessie?

Louis' brother is hit by a wave of sadness, the last images of their parents and their burning homestead still fresh on both their minds. Knowing the most likely outcome, he stays strong for Louis.

ELDEST SON

Ma said to go to town. We camp here for the night --
(coughs)
Then that's the first thing we'll do.

LOUIS

I'll leave you the horse.

ELDEST SON

No -- you need it. You'll be faster, and once you find water, you'll need to bring it back quick.

Louis stays put, scared for his brother, but mostly unsure which direction to go. His brother senses his apprehension.

ELDEST SON (CONT'D)

Remember what Pa taught us? Water flows downhill.

(coughs)
Try to find yourself a slope and follow it. Comb side-to-side.

In a gathered leap, Louis mounts the horse. As the horse dances around in adjustment to his weight, the brothers maintain their connected gaze.

ELDEST SON (CONT'D)

Go on, get goin'.

(after a small coughing
fit, mutters to himself)

Come back soon.

EXT. - WOODS/RIVERBANK - NIGHT

Louis rides his horse through the woods, doing his best to navigate the terrain as he was taught. Moonlight peaks through the trees, and as Louis comes around the bend, he can hear the sound of running water. Hopefully, he nudges his horse on.

As he breaches the trees Louis comes to the riverbank -- hurriedly dismounting in relief. His horse drinks as he rapidly collects water. Moving quickly to get back to his horse, Louis freezes in shock when he sees a campfire flickering across the way.

His horse spooks and bolts as suddenly two men appear behind him. One quickly wraps Louis in a bear hug while the other rears back and cracks Louis on the head with the butt of his gun -- knocking him out cold.