

UNA SANGRE



PROLOGUE

Present day. A city in Europe. Night.

THE RESTAURANT

(A restaurant on a cobbled street. The kind of place people go to shake off the day. Cream-coloured tablecloths. Ashtrays. Conversations that aren't ours.)

(At a table in the back, a young man. Dark suit, red tie, a glass of wine that has been sitting there longer than any sommelier would forgive. His hands are clasped in front of his mouth. He is watching something in the distance with the expression of someone studying the bottom of an aquarium.)

(What he is watching is a young couple at another table: the man is nervous in a particular way, checking the inside pocket of his jacket every few minutes. She hasn't noticed yet.)

NARRATION: It took a certain practice to notice such things. People in love had theirs atrophied.

(The young man's phone vibrates. He looks at it. He answers without taking his eyes off the couple.)

COLTRANE: Yes. I'm in the middle of something.

THE ALLEY

(The same night. Another continent. An alley somewhere in the Middle East. Stone walls, a smell of rubbish cooked by the heat of the day.)

(GLENN is standing with the phone to his ear. He's wearing a photographer's jacket and a camera around his neck that has never taken a photograph in its life. JUNO is beside him, with the calm of someone who has done this many times.)

GLENN: Juno and I are going hunting. Are you in?

COLTRANE: *(into the phone)* I'd love to. But I'm tied up with something else, and I have the feeling that the two of you aren't precisely next door.

GLENN: You'll be here before dawn.

COLTRANE: I'm more interested in finding out whether this man is about to propose to Lauren. He's a physician. He'd be a suitable match.

GLENN: Lauren?

COLTRANE: One of my great-great-granddaughters. Fifth or sixth generation. I've lost count.

GLENN: Ah. Of course. Are you sure I can't tempt you? I'd appreciate having someone fluent in languages on the hunt.

COLTRANE: What about your "boyfriend"?

GLENN: *(pause)* He's... a bit rusty.

COLTRANE: *(covering his eyes with one hand)* That man. Honestly. Enjoy yourselves and tell me how it ends.

(Coltrane ends the call.)

BACK TO THE RESTAURANT

(Coltrane sets the phone down on the table. He looks at the couple again. The man is taking something out of the inside pocket of his jacket.)

(Coltrane tilts his head slightly.)

COLTRANE: *(to himself, murmuring)* Here we go.

THE NEST

(A warehouse on the outskirts. The night is darker here. No restaurants, no cobbles. Only brick walls and a faint light of uncertain origin.)

(Juno kills the first one without making a sound. She snaps his neck with the efficiency of someone closing a door.)

JUNO: We're close to the nest.

(Glenn examines the weapon the man had been carrying. An old AK-47, well kept.)

GLENN: *(with something that isn't quite nostalgia)* Ah. Memories.

JUNO: *(raising a hand, fingers curled like a claw)* No tricks. We do it the classic way. That's the beauty of it.

(Glenn sets the weapon down on the floor.)

GLENN: I know.

NARRATION: They were two. The rest were a crowd. Then their number began to dwindle, until none remained.

NARRATION: There were shouts. Rifle bursts emptied in erratic directions, because what was moving did so at a speed the human eye could not process. There were wooden objects that broke easily, and other things that yielded with a wet sound.

NARRATION: Afterwards, silence won the place out by exhaustion of materials. When the last sound was extinguished, the air of the warehouse went on vibrating for a few seconds.

THE AFTERMATH

(Glenn and Juno sit against the wall, spattered in blood not their own, with holes in their flesh that are already closing. Juno has the expression of someone who has just finished a good book.)

JUNO: Ah. Much better. A pity we can't do this more often.

(Glenn nods. But his gaze is somewhere that isn't the nest.)

(Juno notices. She doesn't say anything yet.)

(Glenn rises. He begins to pour petrol over the floor and the bodies. Juno stops him with a gesture.)

JUNO: Wait. There's one left. I can feel him.

(Glenn obeys. He focuses his senses. Among the bodies, a man is breathing, holding his whole body in check, feigning death.)

JUNO: There.

(The man panics. He starts to shout in a language that is indifferent to them.)

(Juno is about to act when the man pulls something out from the inside of his jacket: a creased Polaroid. Two little girls.)

(Glenn sees it. He freezes. He takes it and looks at it.)

NARRATION: For the moment there was no terrified man, nor was there Juno, watching him from a metre away with the curiosity of one who senses what is about to happen but not in what order. There were two little girls in a photograph that someone had been carrying on him for a reason.

DECISION 1

A) Glenn keeps the photograph. He folds it carefully. He slips it into the inside pocket of his jacket. He says nothing.

B) Glenn lets it fall. He looks at it a moment longer. He releases it with resignation. He doesn't pick it up.

(Before Glenn can react to what he has just decided, Juno finishes the man. She turns to face him.)

JUNO: What is wrong with you? Do you think none of the others had families? That the hundreds we've killed before didn't either? *(She kicks the body listlessly.)* What a waste. We did his family a favour.

(Glenn doesn't respond. Juno goes on.)

JUNO: I can't stand what "Goldilocks" is turning you into. He's softened you.

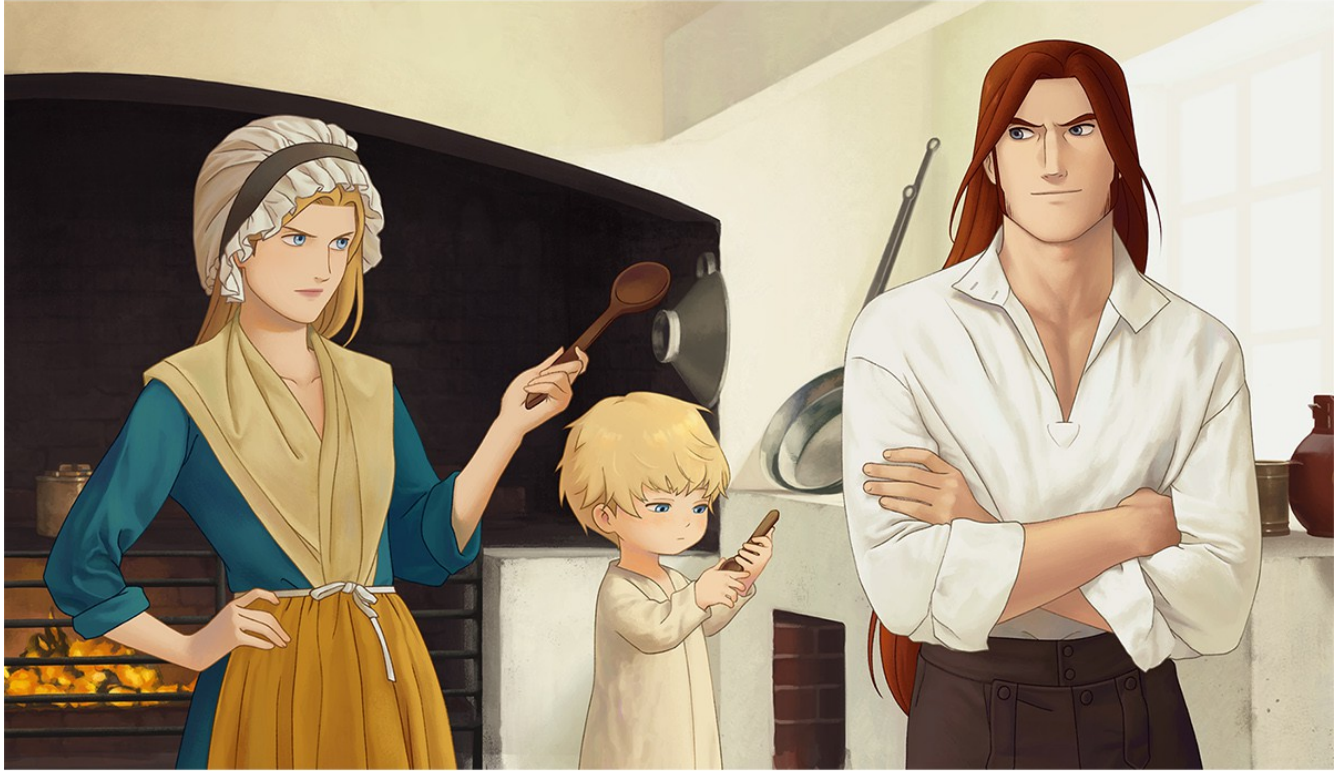
(She places the petrol can in Glenn's hands.)

JUNO: Finish the job. We're done here.

(Glenn does as she asks.)

(They walk on as the nest burns at their backs.)

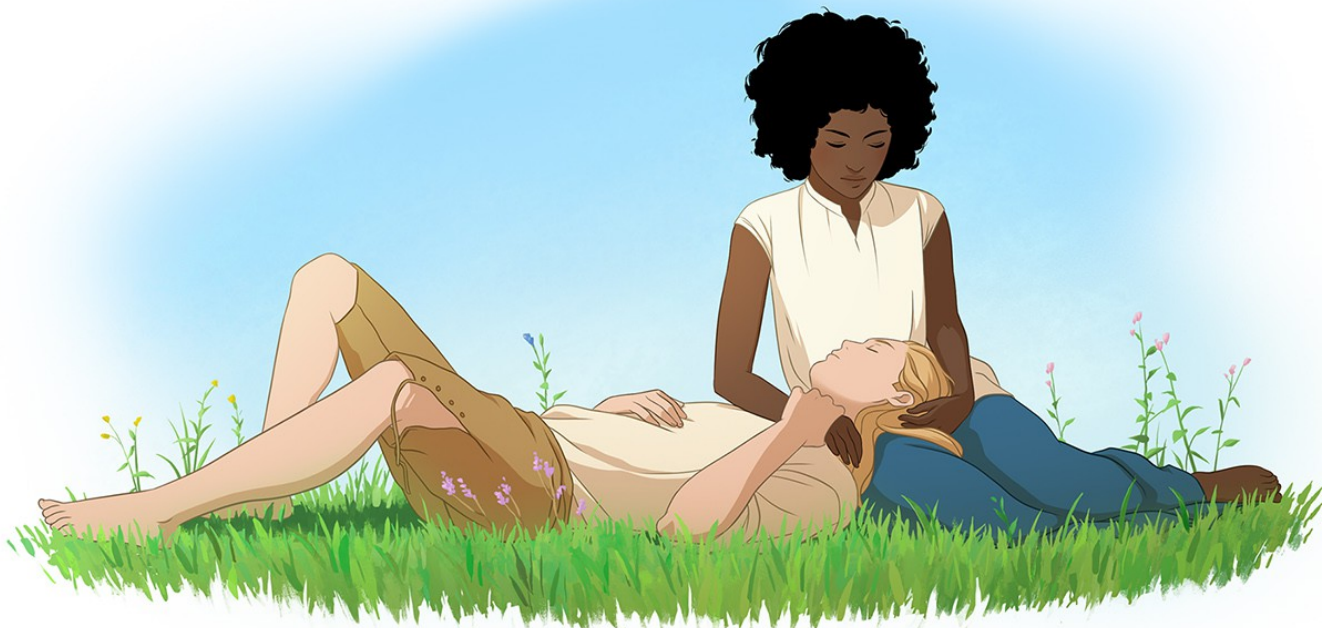
JUNO: *(with unsettling naturalness)* Ah. And for what it's worth: I win.



DIANA

JOHANNES

HUMAN GLENN

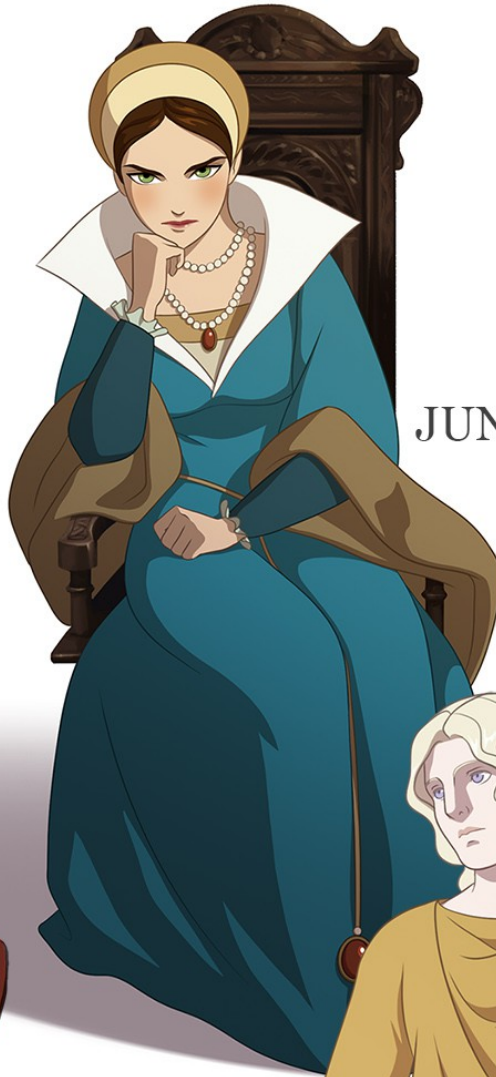


COLTRANE

ANNIE



PAUL



JUNO



IMMORTAL
GLENN



AISON

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The man he was. *Virginia. 1764. Irish District, Richmond.*

QUICK CUT — THE TAVERN

(The tavern smells of wet sawdust, stale sweat, and cheap whiskey. GLENN is at a table in the back, one hand resting on the dice, the other holding a tankard that has been empty for a while. He laughs before the joke is even finished. Throws the dice. Loses. Laughs again.)

NARRATION: Thirty-five years old. A wife. A son. And not a shilling in his pocket. Any other man in his position would be home.

NARRATION: Word in the district was that he carried himself like a nobleman. Beneath that, he was just an Irish farmer dodging his responsibilities, perfectly at ease in his own disaster.

(The barkeep brings him another tankard before Glenn has paid for the last one. Glenn raises it toward him in thanks. The barkeep grimaces.)

THOM, a fifty-something regular, poorly shaved and already well into his cups, leans in and gives him a conspiratorial nudge.

THOM: Sheridan, I saw you coming out of Baxter's studio yesterday.

GLENN: *(without looking up, arranging the dice)* Then your eyes are failing you, Thom. I was home yesterday.

THOM: *(laughing)* Sure you were. And I was made Archbishop.

GLENN: *(raising his freshly filled tankard)* Bless me, Your Grace.

(Thom lets out a coarse laugh. Glenn smiles. Throws the dice. Loses again.)

THOM: So what's Baxter got you doing? Another Madonna?

GLENN: Baxter doesn't commission me to do anything. I just go to make sure he doesn't ruin his own canvases. Call it Christian charity.

THOM: Just dropping by with your brushes on, eh?

GLENN: Dropping by with whatever's needed.

(Thom laughs again. Glenn doesn't clarify. Glenn never clarifies.)

NARRATION: He painted the models Baxter tossed his way when it wasn't the master's turn. He painted them free of charge, which irritated Baxter, who always charged. Glenn said it was practice, that it was a favor. He was not even entirely sure what it really was.

(A younger regular, NED, who has been listening from the next table for a while, turns to Glenn with admiration.)

NED: Sheridan, tell Thom about the Dutch captain.

GLENN: *(without enthusiasm, like a man who has told the story a thousand times)* Again?

NED: Thom hasn't heard it.

THOM: I haven't.

(Glenn sets the dice down. He leans back in his chair. The other two fall silent.)

GLENN: Right. There was a Dutch captain. Fat. Drunk the way only a Calvinist can be when he's far from his congregation. He swears to me, on his mother's soul (and in Dutch, to top it all off) that he had a shipment of Chinese silk held up at customs, and that he needed someone trustworthy to watch over it for the night.

THOM: And you were someone trustworthy?

GLENN: That night, I was. *(Pause.)* Here's the important part. I tell him: Captain, I'll guard your silk. But my religion strictly forbids me from guarding things I haven't touched.

(Anticipatory laughter. Glenn lets it ride.)

GLENN: He takes me down to the docks. Shows me a crate. I say: Captain, this is linen.

THOM: Was it linen?

GLENN: It was hemp! The worst kind, too. But the captain didn't take offense. The poor bastard had spent all day trying to swindle somebody, and when he found out I was the only wretched soul who could tell hemp from silk at two in the morning, he was so moved he offered to buy me a drink.

THOM: And did you take it?

GLENN: Drank 'til dawn. Right up until the captain, in tears, confessed that the crate belonged to his wife, that he had no cargo, and that he just wanted some company.

(Glenn raises his tankard.)

GLENN: And that, gentlemen, is why I continue to hold the financial assets of a stray dog. But I did earn myself a Dutch friend.

(Thom slaps his palm against the wood. Ned laughs as if he were hearing it for the first time, even though he asked for it. Glenn drinks, looking over the rim of his tankard.)

NARRATION: The anecdote was absurd. His drinking companions knew he was lying. But they had silently agreed that the lie was better than their own lives, and they funded it with ale.

NARRATION: It was the only gift he had cultivated with any discipline. It had saved his life more times than he could count. And it had cost him just as many.

(A BARMAID walks briskly past. Glenn doesn't look at her, but grazes the edge of her apron with his fingers as she goes by. She turns to look at him a second longer than necessary. He's already looking at Thom.)

THOM: *(lowering his voice)* Listen, Sheridan. Your wife.

GLENN: *(his smile freezes for a fraction of a second)* What about her.

THOM: When do you plan on going back home?

(Brief pause. Glenn runs his thumb over the dice. He doesn't roll them.)

GLENN: Diana knows exactly where I am, Thom.

THOM: Does that mean you're going back?

GLENN: It means she knows where I am.

(Thom laughs, visibly uncomfortable. Glenn holds his gaze until the older man looks away. He throws the dice.)

NARRATION: Diana always knew where he was. And she always decided not to come looking for him.

NED: And the boy? Is he walking yet? How old is he now?

GLENN: *(without looking at Ned)* Two. He walks, and he stares right at you, like he's reading your mind.

THOM: Children don't look at people like that.

GLENN: Well, mine does. He looks at you and makes you feel like you owe him money.

(Pause.)

GLENN: It's probably just a phase.

(Glenn throws the dice. They roll off the board. He loses. This time, defeat only draws a half-smile from him.)

NARRATION: Glenn was joking. Johannes was not. The boy looked at him with the gravity of an adult, like someone reading a document that doesn't quite make sense. Glenn had learned to barely meet his gaze.

(Image: The background and characters shift color for a single second. Everything turns a few shades colder and desaturated. The murmur of the tavern dims a fraction. Then everything returns to normal.)

NARRATION: Glenn felt a chill for no apparent reason, a sudden drop in temperature at the base of his skull. He chalked it up to the smoke, the exhaustion, the cold seeping in through some drafty crack. He glanced at the door. It was shut. He went back to the dice.

NARRATION: The sensation lingered for a long while. Like when you think you've heard your name called in a room full of strangers.

(Glenn leaves the dice on the table. He stares at his tankard. Doesn't pick it up. The noise of the tavern carries on around him.)

NARRATION: There is a moment, in every tavern, when the life of the party stops performing. It lasts only as long as it takes for anyone to turn their head. If someone were to observe him in that exact second, they would see a man who was entirely alone. But at that hour, in that place, no one is paying attention to anyone else.

NED: *(distant, muffled)* Sheridan? You rolling or what?

(The second closes. Glenn blinks. He smiles. The smile works.)

GLENN: *(gathering the dice)* You roll, Ned. Tonight, luck favors the fools, so you've got the upper hand.

(They all laugh. Thom raises his tankard.)

THOM: To the Dutch captain.

GLENN: To the Dutch captain.

NARRATION: The table toasted. Glenn toasted with them. His hand was as steady as ever.

(SLOW FADE.)

NARRATION: That night, like every other night, Glenn slipped out the back door without saying goodbye. He knew his absence wouldn't stop the party.

NARRATION: But this time, someone did take note of his absence. Someone who wasn't inside the

tavern.

(SLOW FADE.)

QUICK CUT — THE MONEYLENDER

(A cramped shop, walls lined with wallpaper that has seen better days. Behind the counter, a stout man with spectacles. His eyes have that specific absence of color developed only by men who have heard every excuse in Richmond.)

(Glenn is on the other side of the counter. Hat in hand. Glenn's signature smile.)

GLENN: Morgan! My dear friend!

MORGAN: *(without looking up)* No.

GLENN: I haven't even said anything yet.

MORGAN: You don't have to.

(Glenn leans his elbows on the counter, invading just the right amount of space. Morgan keeps writing.)

GLENN: Two pounds. Until Friday.

MORGAN: No.

GLENN: Friday. I swear it on my mother.

MORGAN: Your mother died twelve years ago, Sheridan.

GLENN: *(pause)* Exactly. That's what makes it a serious oath.

(Morgan looks up. He stares at him for a long moment. He sighs with the weariness of a man who has lost this argument many times before and is surrendering once again. He opens a drawer. Counts the coins.)

MORGAN: Friday.

GLENN: Your Highness.

MORGAN: Get out.

(Glenn takes the coins. Puts his hat back on and walks out whistling.)

NARRATION: Morgan never saw the money again. No moneylender in the Irish district ever did. But they handed it over anyway. They felt, without quite being able to explain it, that saying no to this man would cost them far more than two pounds.

QUICK CUT — THE STUDIO

(The makeshift studio smells of linseed oil and turpentine. The afternoon light slips in through a small window. GLENN stands before a small canvas, his shirt stained, his hair tied back carelessly.)

(The model, a middle-aged woman who looks thoroughly bored with being alive, poses in a chair. He doesn't look at her: he looks at the canvas. He has turned her into something ethereal, almost divine.)

NARRATION: With a brush in his hand, Glenn Sheridan could see beauty in the rot. He told himself that documenting life compensated for his utter failure at living it.

(The model yawns. Glenn smiles without taking his eyes off the canvas.)

GLENN: *(without looking at her)* You can move. I'm done with your face.

MODEL: What about the rest?

GLENN: I'll make up the rest.

(The model lets out a short, tired laugh. She stands, stretches, and looks at the canvas out of curiosity, because they all do. She stares at it.)

MODEL: *(quietly)* Mr. Sheridan.

GLENN: Hm?

MODEL: This isn't me.

GLENN: *(cleaning his brush)* It's a version of you.

MODEL: A version I don't recognize.

GLENN: Well, now you do.

(She looks at him a moment longer. She says nothing. She gets dressed and leaves.)

NARRATION: He never charged for these paintings. It was his only honest transaction. Every model left a little different than when she had arrived, though neither she nor he could have explained exactly how. It was the only thing he did without calculating what he would get in return.

QUICK CUT — THE KITCHEN

(The kitchen. Early morning. DIANA stands with her back turned, stirring something over the fire. JOHANNES, two years old, blond, bearing a seriousness unsuited for his age, sits on the floor holding a wooden spoon that he examines as if it were an archaeological artifact.)

(Glenn enters wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Diana doesn't turn around.)

DIANA: Did you bring any food? Or did you gamble our future on the bottom of a bottle again?

GLENN: Good morning to you too.

DIANA: Did you win anything?

(Glenn thinks about it. He smiles.)

GLENN: I won time. That counts.

(Diana turns around. She looks him up and down with that expression of hers that, after all these years, Glenn still hasn't managed to decipher.)

DIANA: Eat. Get changed. And this afternoon, you fix the stable door.

(Glenn sits down.)

GLENN: And if I fix two doors? Do I get something in return?

DIANA: No. But you get the satisfaction of a job well done.

(Glenn laughs. Diana turns back to the fire, almost smiling.)

NARRATION: He pushed, she refused to yield, and within that tension, they lived reasonably well.

(Johannes looks up, fixing his intensely blue eyes on his father.)

(Glenn watches him for a moment. He lowers his voice, speaking only to the boy.)

GLENN: What are you looking at?

(Johannes doesn't answer. He returns his gaze to the spoon.)

NARRATION: The boy barely spoke. Glenn claimed he had inherited Diana's temper. Diana claimed he had inherited Glenn's. They were probably both right.

(Glenn eats. Diana doesn't sit down. She eats standing up, or she eats later, or she doesn't eat at all. Glenn has noticed this. He has never asked her about it.)

QUICK CUT — THE STABLE DOOR

(Afternoon. Glenn attempts to fix the stable door. He does a poor job of it, but exerts just enough effort to make it look, from a distance, like he's trying. Diana watches him from behind, her arms crossed.)

DIANA: It's crooked.

GLENN: It's fine.

DIANA: Glenn.

GLENN: *(without turning around)* It's fine like this. It's rustic. Gives it character.

DIANA: Character.

GLENN: ...Soul.

(Diana sighs. She steps forward. She takes the hammer from him, like always. Glenn steps aside and watches her work. She straightens the hinge in half the time it took him to deform it.)

NARRATION: And there it was: the reminder of why he loved her.

DIANA: Done.

GLENN: It's perfect.

DIANA: Do me a favor and get out of here.

GLENN: *(smiling)* I'm leaving.

(Glenn walks away. Before turning the corner, he looks back and stands there, watching her. She doesn't see him; she's busy putting the tools away.)

NARRATION: Sometimes, in brief moments like this, Glenn wondered what his life would have been without her. He didn't like the answer that began to form. He buried it quickly, turned around, and headed to the tavern.

QUICK CUT — THE DIRT PATH

(Night. Glenn walks alone down the path leading away from the district. He's in no hurry. He stops in front of a puddle of stagnant water. He catches his reflection for a moment: the red hair, the broad shoulders, the face of a man who doesn't know what he's looking for, but is confident he'll recognize it when he sees it.)

NARRATION: He wasn't unhappy; that was the most honest thing that could be said of him. But on nights like this, the hangover left him with the lingering sensation that his life was an enormous canvas missing its focal point.

NARRATION: And the universe abhors a vacuum.

(He reaches the bend in the path, where the trees swallow the moonlight. And there, in the darkness,

stands a woman who wasn't there before.)

(SLOW FADE.)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The encounter with Juno. *Virginia. 1764. Irish District, Richmond. Night.*

QUICK CUT — THE DIRT PATH

NARRATION: Another wasted night. He had lost what little he carried in his pockets. He slipped out the back door of the tavern and sought the dirt path that cut through the woods, a shortcut home.

(Background: A dark dirt path. Trees on either side. Sparse illumination, only moonlight filtering through the branches.)

(Glenn walks alone. The cold is dry. His boots crunch over dead leaves: too much noise for the immensity of the silence surrounding him.)

NARRATION: He had drunk less than usual. He knew that much. What he didn't know was why the woods seemed to have shifted in dimension that night.

(He stops. Looks ahead.)

(At a bend in the path, beneath an old oak tree marking a property line, stands a figure. A woman. Motionless, as if she had been waiting there a very long time.)

(Cut to: Juno's figure in the darkness. Pale skin, dark dress. The texture of the background shifts subtly: the night seems to grow denser, the moonlight turns clinical, stagnant.)

(Glenn blinks. She's still there.)

NARRATION: His first thought was that she was a prostitute. His second was that she wasn't. Both thoughts hit him at the same time, and the second one won out without the first understanding why.

(The woman does not move. But Glenn feels, with an inexplicable certainty, that she is looking directly at him. That she has been looking at him since before he arrived.)

(Glenn takes a step. Then another.)

NARRATION: Every step cost him more than usual, as if the ground were biting at his boots. Like in those dreams where you run and run but never get anywhere.

(When she is finally a couple of meters away, he sees her face.)

NARRATION: Black hair. Skin so white it hurt to look at. Eyes of a color that didn't belong to this world.

(Glenn is not a man whose hands tremble. Tonight, they tremble just a little.)

JUNO: You've been walking in circles for a while.

(The voice doesn't arrive through his ears. Glenn feels the words inside his head, sharp and clear.)

GLENN: *(out of habit, his voice raspy)* Sorry... I don't have any money. I was just heading home.

JUNO: That's not where you want to go.

(The wind suddenly picks up. Glenn isn't sure what it is he's feeling.)

GLENN: Do I know you?

JUNO: No.

GLENN: Should I?

(Juno looks at him. Something in her expression suggests she finds the question foolish, but slightly less boring than the ones from the previous centuries.)

JUNO: That depends on you.

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: Afterwards, Glenn couldn't say for sure how long he stood there. He remembered her voice. He remembered the cold radiating from her without her even touching him: a cold that didn't belong to any living body. He remembered thinking: *this is a dream.*

(A whisper in his ear, almost imperceptible, as if she had always been at that exact distance.)

JUNO: I am the queen of your dreams.

(Glenn does not move. Neither does she.)

NARRATION: Nothing happened that first night. She held his gaze for a moment longer, turned, and walked away. She kept walking until she disappeared. Glenn stayed exactly where he was.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: When his legs finally obeyed him and he made it home, he had no memory of the walk back. He only remembered the tree.

QUICK CUT — THE FOUR NIGHTS

NARRATION: The first night, Glenn told himself it had been the alcohol. An elaborate hallucination. He'd had them before. He went to bed certain that by morning he wouldn't remember a thing.

NARRATION: He remembered.

(Image: The bedroom in darkness. Glenn in bed, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling beams. Diana sleeps beside him, her back turned. Johannes breathes between them.)

NARRATION: He was in his bed, with his family, but his body and his thoughts no longer belonged there.

NARRATION: The second night he returned to the property line, just to confirm that no one was there. That under the tree, there were only roots. It would be quick, just to be sure.

(Image: The dirt path. Glenn standing in front of the oak. There is no one. Only the wind in the dead branches. Only the cold.)

NARRATION: He stayed longer than reason dictated. Half an hour. Perhaps an hour. The path remained empty, and he didn't leave.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He went home at dawn, having seen nothing. And he returned feeling worse than if he had found her.

(Image: Glenn walking into the kitchen in the early morning light. Diana, awake, standing by the stove.)

She says nothing to him. Glenn walks past her without looking and goes upstairs to bed.)

NARRATION: The third night he tried to resist. He stayed at the tavern, determined to drink until his legs gave out. By two in the morning, he had succeeded.

NARRATION: And yet he still went to the woods, his vision blurred, stumbling on whiskey.

(Image: The empty oak tree once again.)

NARRATION: This time he let himself drop to the dirt, his back against the bark. He waited, not knowing for what.

NARRATION: That was when he began to understand what he didn't want to understand. The problem wasn't her. If she had been there, it would have been bearable: they would have exchanged words, or not, and there would have been closure. What was destroying him was the empty tree. The possibility that she had never existed. The possibility, worse still, that she had.

(Image: The makeshift studio. Glenn in front of the unfinished canvas of the middle-aged woman. The brush dry on the palette. He stares at the inert canvas. One hour. Two. The canvas remains the same.)

NARRATION: He stopped painting without deciding to. He stopped eating without noticing. He stopped talking to Diana at some point he later couldn't pinpoint. He moved through the house like someone passing through his own life.

NARRATION: The fourth night, he went to the path without telling himself any stories. He didn't promise himself he was just going to confirm anything. He didn't get drunk first. He didn't forbid himself from going. He walked out of the house like a man leaving for work.

NARRATION: He was going to return to that tree every night for the rest of his life if he had to. He had accepted it that very afternoon, without drama, the way a man accepts the diagnosis of a chronic illness.

(Image: The dirt path. Glenn leans against the oak. He lets himself slide down to the damp earth. He expects nothing in particular. Staring blankly ahead.)

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He didn't know how much time passed like that. But when he finally looked up, she was there.

(FADE OUT)

QUICK CUT — THE KITCHEN

(Midday. Glenn sits at the table. In front of him, a plate with a piece of pork he has barely touched. Diana watches him from across the room, wearing that expression of hers: the one of a doctor who already knows the diagnosis and is just waiting for the patient to speak first.)

DIANA: You've gone four days without painting your usual nonsense.

GLENN: I'm thinking.

DIANA: About what?

(It isn't a question. Glenn knows it.)

GLENN: Nothing important.

(Diana doesn't reply. She clears his plate. With her back to him, she speaks in that voice of hers that never raises its pitch but still manages to cut to the bone:)

DIANA: Glenn. You don't know how to lie.

(Glenn doesn't defend himself. He looks out the window. Outside, Johannes examines a rock with the intense concentration another child might reserve for a treasure.)

NARRATION: Diana didn't press the matter. Not because she didn't want to know, but because at this point in their marriage, she already knew enough. What she lacked were the kind of details she preferred not to confirm. She had learned the hard way that, with a man like Glenn, certain questions only yielded answers that pulled the ground right out from under you.

(Glenn watches her back for a moment. He opens his mouth. Closes it. He stands up, scraping the chair against the floor. He leaves through the back door.)

NARRATION: As he crossed the threshold, Diana stood perfectly still for far too long, staring at the plate as if the answers were resting right there on the ceramic.

QUICK CUT — THAT NIGHT

(Background: The dirt path under the old oak tree. Pitch black, only the silhouettes of the trees.)

(Glenn turns the bend without hiding, without pretending he's heading anywhere else.)

(She is there.)

JUNO: *(without moving, her voice like an echo coming from somewhere behind his eyes)* I knew you'd come back.

(Glenn stops two paces away. This time, there is no ambiguity in the cold she radiates, nor in the way she looks at him: as if she has already made a decision about him, and everything else is just a formality.)

GLENN: What are you?

JUNO: Whatever you need me to be.

GLENN: That's not an answer.

JUNO: No. But it's the only one I'm giving you tonight.

(Juno takes a step toward him. Glenn doesn't step back.)

NARRATION: He had a very brief moment of lucidity. He thought of Diana. He thought of Johannes with his rock. He thought he should go home. All three thoughts arrived at once, and he dismissed all three with the exact same ease with which he had dismissed thousands of good things throughout his life.

(The surroundings fade into absolute blackness. The forest disappears.)

NARRATION: There was a flash. A pain that wasn't physical, but rather a reconfiguration of consciousness. He thought he saw something in the gloom. Sharp teeth, the reflection of something that did not belong to this world.

NARRATION: After that, nothing else.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE AWAKENING

NARRATION: When he woke up, he was different. The world was, too.

(Close-up: Glenn's eyes snapping open.)

NARRATION: The dawn light felt offensive in a way he couldn't remember ever experiencing. The world sounded too loud, too bright, too alive. He couldn't understand the agony squeezing his guts. He only knew that the hunger devouring him from the inside was something entirely new—an entity of its own—and that it had a woman's name.

(END OF SCENE)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

Intermezzo. *Virginia. 1764—1780.*

NARRATION: The first thing was the noise.

(The sound begins muffled, with a low-pass filter, as though submerged in water. Then the filter cuts out. The sound comes in all at once: high, multiple, invasive.)

NARRATION: Glenn had not known the world sounded like this. That his own blood, pushed along the veins, had the volume of a conversation half a metre away. That the wood of houses creaked at night as if it were splitting. That insects did not buzz: they shrieked, all at once, in an unintelligible language.

NARRATION: The first nights he covered his ears. It did no good. The noise was not in the room: it was in his head.

(Juno watches him from a corner of the room. She does not laugh. At first she only waits, patiently.)

JUNO: It passes.

GLENN: When?

JUNO: When it has to pass.

NARRATION: She did not explain the hunger to him. Perhaps she took it for obvious. Perhaps she forgot, the way one forgets to explain to someone how to breathe. It took Glenn three days to understand what that knot in his stomach was, the one that bore no resemblance to human hunger.

NARRATION: By the time he understood, it was already too late.

QUICK CUT — A NIGHT LIKE ANY OTHER

(An alley. Walls of dirty brick. A man lying on the ground. Glenn standing, looking at his own hands. Juno two paces away, wiping the corner of her mouth with her thumb.)

JUNO: Better?

(Glenn does not answer. He looks at the man on the ground. He looks at his hands. He looks at the man again.)

JUNO: You get used to it.

GLENN: I don't want to get used to it.

JUNO: Then you're going to suffer a great deal.

(Glenn retches. His body doubles over, trying to expel something, but the stomach has already absorbed the blood and refuses to give it back. Juno looks at him with an expression that in another woman would pass for tenderness.)

JUNO: Give it time.

QUICK CUT — THE HOUSE

NARRATION: What no one had warned him (because Juno had not considered it necessary, or because she had stopped caring centuries ago) was that the hunger does not discriminate. That one freshly turned lacks the filters that develop over centuries. That the people you love taste the same as a stranger in an alley.

NARRATION: It took Glenn several days to understand why he could not approach his own door.

(A familiar street. Glenn stops halfway down the block. The window of his house is lit. Diana moves behind the glass, doing something that cannot be made out from outside.)

(Glenn closes his eyes. He breathes.)

NARRATION: He can smell them. He can hear their hearts. Diana's, steady. Johannes's, faster, smaller.

NARRATION: Two heartbeats. That was how his new nature reduced them. They were not a wife and a son: they were two sounds inside a house.

(Glenn clenches his jaw. He does not step forward. He does not leave.)

NARRATION: He thought, with a clarity that sickened him, that he had never loved them as much as at that moment. And that he would never be able to tell them so.

NARRATION: He stayed a while longer. Then he left. He returned the following night. And the one after.

NARRATION: Each night he stopped a metre farther away, as if calculating the exact distance at which the hunger still permitted him to keep his sanity.

(One of those nights, Juno appears beside him. He has not heard her arrive. The hand she places on his shoulder feels like cold stone.)

JUNO: You know you can't go in.

GLENN: I know.

JUNO: And you know you can't keep doing this.

(Glenn does not answer. Juno does not press. She leaves him there a moment longer and walks off down the street.)

(Glenn looks at the window. Inside, Johannes, with the clumsy gait of a two-year-old, trips and falls. The crying reaches him muffled by the glass. Diana comes in, picks him up, soothes him.)

(He closes his eyes.)

NARRATION: He did not go in.

NARRATION: He told himself that this was the difficult decision. That he deserved some credit for staying outside. But he knew, in the one human corner that remained to him, that this was no sacrifice. It was cowardice under another name.

NARRATION: He left at dawn. He left nothing behind. Not a note, not a message. He looked up no

mutual acquaintance.

NARRATION: He told himself that for them, it was better this way: as if he had died. People bury their dead and move on. Diana was young and could find another. And Johannes would not remember him.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He would not remember him.

QUICK CUT — EUROPE

NARRATION: Juno took him far away. She said there was nothing worse for a neophyte than to remain close to where he had been human. In that she was right.

(A room somewhere in Europe. Impersonal luxury, the kind one rents by the season. Juno undressed on the bed, leafing through a book in a language Glenn does not understand. Glenn by the window, his back to her, looking at the street.)

JUNO: You're going to stand there all night.

GLENN: No.

JUNO: Yes.

(Glenn does not turn around.)

JUNO: It's tedious, Glenn. You've been like this for weeks.

GLENN: How many?

JUNO: I don't know. Does it matter?

NARRATION: Glenn tried to work it out. No number came to him. That was the disturbing part.

NARRATION: Time had begun to behave otherwise. At first he had tried to keep count. Then he had given up. The days and the nights blurred together because only the nights existed, and they were all the same. A week in one city. Three in another. Months that passed without anyone bothering to name them.

(Glenn at last turns toward Juno. She closes the book.)

JUNO: Come here.

GLENN: What for?

JUNO: What does it matter, come over.

NARRATION: Nothing mattered.

QUICK CUT — A PORTRAIT

NARRATION: There was something he did sometimes, when she wasn't there. Something he had not planned the first time, and that, on seeing it finished, produced in him a sensation very close to fear.

(Another room. Another city. Glenn in front of an easel. Candlelight, faint. On the canvas, a blonde woman with a serious expression and pale blue eyes.)

NARRATION: She was not Juno.

(Glenn stands looking at her for a long while. Then he covers the canvas with a cloth.)

NARRATION: He painted her from memory. And each time he did, the memory corrected itself. He

knew the more recent versions were less her. That soon he would be painting the idea he had of Diana, not Diana herself.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He went on painting her all the same.

(He hides the canvas in a dark corner, where Juno can't find it.)

NARRATION: That small act of privacy was the only thing he had left that was truly his own.

QUICK CUT — AN ARGUMENT WITHOUT VOLUME

(Another room. Another continent, probably. Juno on her feet, gesturing. Glenn seated, elbows on his knees, head bowed.)

NARRATION: We do not hear what they say. The distance is exactly right for missing the content and catching only the gestures. Two people who no longer have anything new to say to each other and who, nevertheless, keep speaking.

(Juno, eventually, falls silent. She leaves the room. Glenn does not lift his head.)

NARRATION: They quarrelled over things they would forget the next day. Juno would say Glenn had changed. Glenn would say Juno had never been what he had believed her to be. Both were right, and both knew that being right was of no use.

NARRATION: There was a question Glenn never put to her: why she had chosen him. He suspected the answer was disappointing. That it had been out of boredom, or because of the colour of his hair, or because of anything equally arbitrary.

NARRATION: To spend eternity as the result of a whim was something one could live with, as long as one did not know it with absolute certainty.

QUICK CUT — A HUNT

NARRATION: He learned to hunt with Juno. Not because he wanted to, but because there was no other option.

(A dim alley. A man on the ground. Glenn standing beside him. The man is around fifty. He wears a wedding band. His face has an expression Glenn knows intimately: the look of a man who has just lost money he didn't have, rehearsing on the way home the lie he will tell his wife.)

NARRATION: Glenn kills him. Quickly. Without ceremony.

(Juno watches from the mouth of the alley.)

JUNO: Good. You're improving.

(Glenn does not move.)

JUNO: Let's go.

GLENN: He had a wife.

JUNO: *(smiling)* They all have wives.

GLENN: Children too, maybe.

JUNO: Yes, maybe.

(Glenn looks at her.)

GLENN: Don't you feel anything?

NARRATION: Juno took a second to think about it. It was one of the few moments in which Glenn could actually see her think.

JUNO: At first I did. Not anymore.

GLENN: How did you do it?

JUNO: Do what?

GLENN: Stop feeling it.

(Juno closes the distance. She places a hand on his cheek, cold, as always.)

JUNO: You don't stop feeling. What you feel simply wears down. Like everything.

GLENN: How much time has to pass?

JUNO: It depends.

GLENN: On what?

JUNO: On how much you resist it.

(Glenn turns his face away. Juno lets her hand fall.)

NARRATION: She was right. It wore down. The first time had devastated him. The tenth, no longer. The hundredth was like washing his hands: a hygienic habit, something one had to do. Glenn did not know when he stopped counting. He only knew, one night like any other, that the count had vanished.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The revelation horrified him for a minute, at least. Afterwards, the horror wore down too.

QUICK CUT — THE PEOPLE WHO STOPPED EXISTING

NARRATION: At some point in those years, he forgot Diana's face.

NARRATION: It did not happen all at once. It was an erosion of months. First he lost the exact shape of her hands. Then the cadence of her voice. Then some gesture. One night he tried to remember how her laugh sounded, and the sound did not come.

NARRATION: He forced his memory in several ways. The only thing his head gave back was the echo of Juno's laugh. And that was worse than silence.

(Glenn sits in the darkness of a rented room, completely still.)

NARRATION: He waited to feel something large. Pain. Guilt. Something.

NARRATION: He felt nothing.

NARRATION: That was what made him understand the exact size of his ruin. The tragedy had not been the night of his turning, nor the dawn on which he had fled his home. The tragedy was this: not being able to remember his wife's laugh, and discovering that it no longer mattered to him.

NARRATION: Johannes he lost too. The child's face was erased. Only the eyes survived, because he had painted them too many times. The rest of his son was a blank silhouette.

NARRATION: He told himself it was the same as having buried them. Widowers buried their families, stopped weeping, moved on, and no one blamed them.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He knew it was not the same.

QUICK CUT — MIRROR

(A well-lit room. A full-length mirror with a carved frame. Glenn standing in front of it, impeccably dressed for some dinner, some function in which he has no interest.)

(He looks at himself.)

NARRATION: He had now been immortal for fifteen years. More time spent as this than as a husband. More time spent as this than as a father.

NARRATION: That part of his life was beginning to be, statistically, the smaller one. And with time it would become the smallest of all. So small that one day it would become a margin of error.

(Glenn adjusts the collar of his shirt. He arranges his hair. The image gives him back someone he has learned to recognise as himself, although he no longer resembles in any way the man he was before.)

NARRATION: The worst part was not the change. The worst part was that the change suited him.

QUICK CUT — JUNO LAUGHING

(A crowded drawing room. One of those European high-society parties Juno insisted on dragging him to. The two of them seated together on a period sofa, looking ahead, like spectators.)

(Juno has one hand resting on Glenn's arm. With the other she points ahead, toward something happening off-stage. Someone making a fool of himself, surely. Someone who does not know he is being watched.)

(Juno laughs. Heartily. The laughter is real.)

(Glenn does not. He looks in the same direction as she does, but his expression does not move.)

NARRATION: She did it better than he did. That was the uncomfortable truth.

NARRATION: Juno had understood something about this existence that Glenn perhaps would never come to understand. Something about not resisting. About yielding to the weight and letting time turn you into whatever it had to turn you into.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn had spent fifteen years resisting, and the only thing he had managed was that the wearing-down hurt him twice as much. He was going to end up in the same place she was. Only later, and far more tired.

(Juno keeps laughing. Eventually, Glenn nods slowly and imitates her, sketching something very close to a smile.)

NARRATION: That was another novelty: smiles that came of their own accord, with no need to feel them. The body learning to act on its own.

QUICK CUT — THE WINDOW

(A room in some European city. Evening. The window thrown wide open, though it isn't warm.)

(Juno standing in front of it, her back to Glenn. Still in a way unrecognisable to him. She isn't even leaning against the frame, she is simply standing.)

(Glenn comes in looking for something or other: a coat, a hat. Something inconsequential. He stops in the doorway.)

NARRATION: He had seen her do many things in those years. Laugh out loud in a drawing room. Bleed a man dry in an alley. Dress for dinner like someone who knew the whole world was waiting for her.

NARRATION: What he was seeing now fit none of those categories. It was a much smaller picture: a woman looking at nothing.

(Glenn keeps silent. Not because he wants to spy on her, but because the words fail him.)

(Juno speaks without turning. The voice is the same as always, with a different shade to it.)

JUNO: I thought you were downstairs.

GLENN: I was.

(Pause.)

GLENN: What are you looking at?

JUNO: Nothing.

(Glenn takes a step closer. He looks outside: there is nothing. An empty street. An unlit lamppost. A stray dog crossing the cobbles.)

(Juno turns.)

NARRATION: Glenn had never seen that expression on her. And, even so, he recognised it at once. It was like recognising the sound of a foreign language without understanding a word of it.

NARRATION: The crack lasted three seconds. Afterwards, Juno was the same as ever.

(She comes closer. She places a cold hand on his cheek.)

JUNO: *(with her usual irony)* Were you looking for me? How sweet.

(Glenn sketches a faint smile. They leave the room together.)

NARRATION: Glenn did not ask her again what she was looking at. He knew, by instinct, that the answer would again be "nothing." That there were things Juno looked at that were not in the street.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He did not dwell on it either. The night ran its course. The days too. He forgot it with the same ease with which he forgot everything else.

QUICK CUT — A CONVERSATION OF NO IMPORTANCE

NARRATION: One night, Juno asked him a question. Some time later he would not be able to recall which. Something trivial. What he preferred for dinner, or what he made of some guest.

NARRATION: And Glenn realised, in the middle of his own answer, that he was saying exactly what Juno wanted to hear.

NARRATION: That was not the revelation. The revelation was the certainty that he had been doing it for years. He no longer knew what his real opinion was on matters where, before, he would have held a firm position.

(Glenn falls silent in the middle of a sentence. Juno looks at him.)

JUNO: What?

GLENN: Nothing.

JUNO: Why are you stopping?

GLENN: I forgot what I was going to say.

(Juno accepts the answer without making anything of it. She returns to her own concerns.)

NARRATION: Glenn spent the rest of the night trying to recall what he, really, thought about what he had been asked. He did not manage to.

QUICK CUT — THE PAINTING, AGAIN

(The same room he uses as a studio. Glenn standing before the easel. He pulls away the dark cloth. From the canvas, the blonde woman returns his gaze.)

NARRATION: He had painted her so many times that he now knew her better as a painting than as a person.

(Glenn holds the brush in the air. He draws no line. He confines himself to looking at her.)

NARRATION: That night he understood something it had taken him years to articulate. The canvas was not Diana. It was the only corner of the world where the man who had married her still existed.

NARRATION: He was painting her not in order to remember her, but in order not to forget himself completely.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The trick worked for a time, until it stopped working. He went on painting her all the same.

(Glenn covers the canvas again. He blows out the candle.)

QUICK CUT — THE INVITATION

NARRATION: Virginia. 1780.

NARRATION: He returned to Richmond without Juno. It was a habit he kept up from time to time, for bureaucratic matters. This time, something concerning a transfer of properties. Glenn took no notice of the details. He signed where they told him to sign.

(The study of his estate. On the desk, a heap of envelopes that had been accumulating for weeks. Glenn handles them listlessly.)

NARRATION: Invitations, most of them. Glenn had been receiving them for years in every city he set foot in. There was always someone who had heard of him and wanted to see him with their own eyes. The "legendary" Sheridan.

(He opens the envelopes. He discards them one by one. One. Two. Three.)

(He stops at one. A thick card.)

NARRATION: Holland. The reception was that very night.

NARRATION: The name meant nothing to him. He left the invitation on the table for no particular reason. Boredom, perhaps.

NARRATION: He accepted. He dressed in his best smile and climbed into the carriage.

(END OF INTERMEZZO)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Holland Party. *Virginia. 1780.*

QUICK CUT — THE ARRIVAL

NARRATION: John Holland's mansion was a predictable excess. Overloaded candelabra, marbles imported from Europe, and violins marking the rhythm of a hurried dance.

NARRATION: Glenn had accepted the invitation out of pure inertia, which was the only thing moving him from one place to another lately.

(Glenn crosses the threshold of the main hall. People turn as he passes, except for the odd one who does not notice his presence.)

NARRATION: Over the past fifteen years, Glenn had learned the dynamics of entering rooms like that one. It required no effort: the room took care of the rest.

(A pair of women intercept him before he can take any further steps. Glenn offers them a strictly courteous greeting. One of them holds his hand a fraction of a second longer than she should. Glenn slips his own free with such smoothness that she does not notice when he releases it.)

(A small man, stout, his cheeks flushed from too much rum, detaches himself from one of the little knots of guests. He advances toward Glenn with the determination of a host fulfilling his duty. He extends his hand several metres before arriving.)

NARRATION: John Holland did not have much information on Glenn Sheridan. He knew what the rest of the county knew: the rumours, the financial reputation, the women. He had invited him because his wife had suggested it, and because exhibiting Sheridan in his own drawing room was a seal of aristocracy for his estate.

MR. HOLLAND: *(laughing, his hand already on Glenn's shoulder)* I must say, Sheridan, your reputation as a man of the night precedes you. My wife was firmly convinced you were a myth, until you came through that door.

GLENN: *(sketching a hollow, practiced smile)* The sun lacks subtlety, Mr. Holland. The night is more generous to men of my nature.

NARRATION: Holland laughed with the laugh of someone applauding without quite understanding, just in case.

NARRATION: For the next few minutes, Glenn did what the event expected of him. He drank without ingesting. He listened without hearing. He had been performing that routine for so long that his consciousness no longer needed to be in the room to sustain it.

QUICK CUT — THE RECOGNITION

(And then, he sees him.)

(A young servant, at the back of the hall. Black livery. A tray with crystal glasses. His head tilted at the angle of heads that have spent years with no permission to lift themselves. He is barely a silhouette cut against the wall.)

(The sound of the violins begins to distort.)

GLENN: *(without taking his eyes off the boy)* That boy. The fair-haired one. Where did you get him?

MR. HOLLAND: *(glances over his shoulder, and laughs)* Taken a liking to the boy, Sheridan? He's one of my favourites. Possesses exceptional features, doesn't he? And very quiet. Won't utter a word unless he's compelled to.

GLENN: ...

MR. HOLLAND: Are you interested?

GLENN: *(calm intact)* Call him over, please.

MR. HOLLAND: You want to see him up close?

GLENN: Just for a moment.

(Holland raises a hand. He doesn't lift it very high.)

(The servant approaches. He stops at a metre's distance and bows. His gaze on the floor.)

NARRATION: Glenn waited to see the face the way a man waits for a diagnosis he refuses to receive.

(The boy lifts his gaze. Only an instant. He does it without permission, as if something in the air had pulled his chin upward.)

NARRATION: They were the same blue eyes Glenn had spent fifteen years painting badly, from pure memory, in shabby studios scattered across three continents.

NARRATION: The same defiant curve to the lip.

(Glenn's world tilts violently.)

NARRATION: And in that second, Glenn understood that the boy had seen him first. That he had been watching him for some time. That Glenn's exact position in that room had been filed away from the instant he crossed the door.

(The boy lowers his gaze. The fraction of a second closes.)

QUICK CUT — THE CONVERSATION

GLENN: He's... he's white.

(Pause.)

GLENN: You bought a white boy as a slave? As if he were a head of cattle at market?

MR. HOLLAND: *(letting out a small chuckle)* Technically, let's say I acquired him by way of debt. But in the Irish district of Richmond, a coin is a coin.

MR. HOLLAND: I came upon him about fifteen years ago. His mother was a woman of the streets. A desperate creature. She sold him to me for a handful of silver and the promise that I would feed him.

NARRATION: Glenn heard the word "desperate" and the term hung in the air for a fraction of a second before reaching his brain.

NARRATION: It contained the weight of one winter, and the arrival of the next. It contained the exact

value of a handful of silver coins. It contained a Diana alone, turning her back on the child for the last time.

NARRATION: Glenn knew that the boy, a metre away, was registering every damned word.

GLENN: *(in a strangled voice)* She sold him?

MR. HOLLAND: She didn't have many alternatives, I suppose. She said the boy's name was Johannes. She begged me to treat him like a son.

(Holland adjusts his coat.)

MR. HOLLAND: Naturally, I didn't. But look at him: clean, dressed, serving glasses to the finest men in Virginia. I'd say I did the woman a favour. Wouldn't you agree?

NARRATION: Glenn did not answer. He was no longer in the room.

MR. HOLLAND: I imagine that, at some point in your youth, you availed yourself of her services. The physical resemblance is rather striking, is it not?

NARRATION: Glenn did not answer because, physically, he was incapable of doing so. The impulse to wring Holland's neck rose in waves he had to contain and block, one by one.

NARRATION: Holland was handing him, from total ignorance, the most brutal translation of the past fifteen years. In the county, a woman who sells her son could only be catalogued one way.

NARRATION: Diana had not been that. She had been a woman cornered with a child, in an age that offered no infrastructure for women on their own, executing the only transaction that guaranteed the child would eat. Holland's mind did not distinguish the cause from the result. And that mind had functioned, for fifteen years, as the only biography of Diana available in the world.

NARRATION: Holland had kept her pigeonholed as a whore in front of Johannes for the whole of the boy's short existence, with details he probably modified according to the audience of the day.

NARRATION: The boy did not alter the position of his head. But something in the tension of his neck shifted by a micron.

NARRATION: Glenn knew that the boy had spent years hearing variations of that same sentence, that he had learned not to hear it. And he knew that, this time, he had heard it. He did not know where he drew that certainty from. He registered it as a fact.

NARRATION: The waves of violence kept coming. Glenn counted them. One. Two. Three. He calculated, with the only part of his brain that still operated coldly, how many more he could contain before the body skipped the protocols and acted on its own. The figure was: very few.

(Glenn turns to Holland. His eyes have a dangerous sharpness.)

GLENN: His name. Now.

(Holland blinks, taken aback. For a fraction of a second, something in Glenn's posture ceases to be wholly human. Holland perceives it without knowing what he perceives. Then the mirage dissolves and Glenn is Glenn again.)

MR. HOLLAND: Coltrane. Well, Coltrane Holland now.

(Holland sketches a small smile.)

MR. HOLLAND: My wife assigned him the name. She maintained that "Johannes" didn't sound appropriate for the service of our household.

NARRATION: Glenn registered the sentence. He filed it away in full.

NARRATION: Translated into the language of facts, it said the following: there is a woman in this house who saw a white child come in as a slave, and to whom it seemed the problem was the name.

GLENN: *(cold, flat tone)* I have to leave.

MR. HOLLAND: Already? But the musicians have only just begun to—

(Glenn sets the untouched glass on the nearest table and starts toward the door. He does not say goodbye to Holland. He does not say goodbye to anyone at all.)

MR. HOLLAND: *(dismissing the boy with a wave of the hand)* Back to your work.

COLTRANE: Yes, master.

(Coltrane bows for the last time. He turns. He moves off carrying the tray toward the opposite side of the hall.)

NARRATION: Glenn watched the back move away. He registered that the angle at which the boy stooped to serve was identical to the angle at which Diana used to stoop to pick anything up off the floor.

NARRATION: Glenn turned. He did not look back again. But he could feel the weight of the boy's eyes fixed on his own back. It was a hatred dense, rehearsed, directed at a surname the boy had long heard circulating through the house, and to which, that night, at last, he had been able to put a face.

QUICK CUT — THE CARRIAGE

NARRATION: Outside, the temperature of the night struck him head-on. For the first time since he had inhabited that body, the immortal felt a genuine cold.

(He reaches his carriage. The driver looks at him, visibly confused by the early departure. Glenn grips the door of the cab with such excessive force that the wood creaks.)

GLENN: *(to himself, in a voice he does not recognise as his own)* I've found him.

(Pause.)

GLENN: I've found our Johannes.

NARRATION: The "our" came out of him on its own. He was speaking to a woman who had not existed in his head for years, and who had just materialised again because of the piece of information Holland had let slip.

NARRATION: Glenn already knew what he was going to do. He had known it from the second he saw the boy's face rise toward him in the hall.

NARRATION: What he could not yet calculate was the total cost of the operation.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Transaction. *Virginia. ~1780. A few days after the party.*

NARRATION: Glenn did not negotiate. Men like Holland do not understand negotiation. They

understand one thing, and Glenn had amassed that thing over fifteen years in quantities no mortal life could justify. He would pay him with it, Holland would accept, and neither of them would have to look the other in the eye while it happened.

NARRATION: That was the truly important part of the calculation. The rest was simple arithmetic.

NARRATION: Glenn would not set foot in that mansion again. He did not trust what he might do with Holland nearby. He did not trust his own body, which had been obeying him with precision for fifteen years, but which this time would not heed the order to stay still.

NARRATION: He sent an intermediary.

QUICK CUT — THE PAPERS

(The Holland mansion. The study. The midday light filters in through a curtain that hasn't been fully drawn back in days. The "camera" stays in the doorway. We observe the scene from outside, without entering.)

(MR. HOLLAND sits behind the desk. THE INTERMEDIARY, an older man, grey coat, a leather portfolio under his arm, remains standing in front of him. He has not sat down. Nor has he been offered a chair.)

(The intermediary sets a bundle of banknotes down on the wood. He does so with the efficiency of someone who closes deals where words do not carry weight.)

(Holland looks at the bundle. He looks at the intermediary. He looks at the bundle again.)

NARRATION: The amount was excessive. Holland recognised it at first glance, without needing to count.

NARRATION: He had spent twenty years buying and selling men, and he had the jeweller's instinct for gems: he knew, with a single look, when a price was distorted by something foreign to the merchandise.

MR. HOLLAND: *(adjusting his collar)* That's a figure far higher than the boy is worth.

(The intermediary does not respond.)

MR. HOLLAND: Far higher. I mean, considerably so.

THE INTERMEDIARY: *(in a neutral voice)* My client has made his offer. It falls to the seller to accept or refuse it.

MR. HOLLAND: *(attempting to sketch a smile)* May I ask what occasions—

THE INTERMEDIARY: No.

(Holland blinks.)

NARRATION: The real buyer had not deigned to appear. And that absence, translated into money, was precisely the exorbitant figure he had on the table.

NARRATION: Holland signed that very afternoon. Faster than he had signed cheaper things.

NARRATION: Something in that exchange suggested to him that any delay would be a very bad idea. He would not have been able to explain why, but he had learned to obey that kind of intuition.

(A document changes hands.)

(Visual detail: the name at the header of the document is Johannes Sheridan. It is crossed out with a

thick line of ink. Above it, in some secretary's elaborate hand, the name Coltrane Holland appears.)

(The intermediary folds the document in half. He puts it away in the portfolio. He bows with a nod of mere formality. He leaves the study.)

(Holland remains alone, looking at the bundle of money.)

NARRATION: Glenn did not know the purchase had been completed until the intermediary returned to the estate at nightfall. He did not ask him how it had gone. There was no need. The portfolio came back with the bill of ownership.

NARRATION: And with the document came the boy.

QUICK CUT — THE ARRIVAL

(Glenn's estate. Nightfall. The carriage stops at the main entrance.)

(Glenn waits on the porch. He has not come down the steps. He keeps his hands clasped behind his back, a posture that is not his, but that prevents him from doing something stupid with them.)

(COLTRANE steps down from the carriage. He's wearing the same clothes he served in at the party, save for the livery coat. Linen shirt, coarse trousers, boots, a small bundle. He brings no luggage. There was nothing in the Holland mansion that belonged to him.)

(He stands by the carriage door. He examines the house. He looks at Glenn. He waits for instructions.)

NARRATION: Glenn had rehearsed several openings during the hours the journey lasted. None of them served. They were all variations on a welcome, and they all sounded, projected against the silence of the evening, like the illegitimate speech of a man who had lost the right to utter it.

(Glenn comes down the steps. Slowly. He stops a couple of paces from Coltrane, at a distance shorter than is comfortable.)

GLENN: You are free.

(Coltrane looks at him. There is no reaction on his face. None.)

GLENN: I mean. The ownership papers. They've been signed. You are a free man.

COLTRANE: *(slowly)* Sir?

GLENN: No. Don't call me that.

COLTRANE: *(after a pause)* What am I to call you?

(Glenn opens his mouth. He closes it.)

NARRATION: It was the question he had been dreading since the night of the carriage, and to which he still had no answer.

NARRATION: *Father* was impossible. *Sheridan* was a cruelty. Glenn implied a level of intimacy for someone who, technically, had been bought that very afternoon. Every option was a lie or a wound.

GLENN: *(at last)* Glenn. That will do.

(Coltrane nods a single time. He does not pronounce the name. Glenn knows he is not going to say it that night. Nor the next. Nor the one after. But that is a problem of another order.)

GLENN: Your room is upstairs. To the right of the corridor, the first door. Someone from the household has already left you some clothes. If they don't fit, we'll have them altered tomorrow.

COLTRANE: Thank you.

GLENN: Don't thank me.

(It comes out too sharp. Glenn realises it the moment he says it.)

GLENN: I mean... There's no need. It isn't... it isn't something one thanks for in this house.

(Coltrane looks at him a moment longer, taking in the strange dynamic of his new master. Then he climbs the steps. He passes him without brushing against him, and enters the house for the first time.)

(Glenn remains standing on the porch for a long while.)

NARRATION: He had bought his own son with the same coldness with which one buys a racehorse, using the money he had accumulated over fifteen years performing acts he preferred not to recall.

NARRATION: And now that he had him, he was incapable of telling him why.

NARRATION: That was the only part of his logistics he had not foreseen: that the cost of silence was going to hurt more than everything else combined.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Cohabitation. *Virginia. ~1780.*

NARRATION: Coltrane stayed. Not because Glenn asked him to, but because it was the standard procedure when a white man bought your freedom and you did not know what to do with it.

NARRATION: They lived under the same roof for a couple of months. Glenn had no experience cohabiting with anyone who was not Juno, and Juno did not count: with her, cohabitation had always been a choreography of mutual evasions.

NARRATION: With Coltrane no choreography was possible. There was, simply, a house too large containing two people who had no idea whatsoever what to do with each other.

NARRATION: On the third day, Glenn informed him that at the estate he would have at his disposal everything he needed. Legal freedom. A roof. Food. Clothing. And education, if he requested it.

NARRATION: Glenn heard himself reciting the words and concluded that he sounded exactly like an overseer running through a supply list. Coltrane nodded. Neither of them bought the speech. Neither bothered to mention it.

QUICK CUT — THE LETTERS

(The study, in the afternoon. A slanting light comes in through the high window. GLENN and COLTRANE sit opposite each other at a long table. Between them rests a sheet of paper with the alphabet written out in Glenn's coarse hand.)

(Coltrane examines the letters with the same concentration he used to apply to serving a glass of wine without spilling it.)

GLENN: *(pointing at the paper)* This one.

COLTRANE: A.

GLENN: The next.

COLTRANE: B.

GLENN: Good.

COLTRANE: I already knew them.

(Glenn looks up and at him. Coltrane holds his gaze without challenging him.)

GLENN: Where did you learn them?

COLTRANE: Watching the Holland children when the tutor gave them their lessons. I would watch from the doorway.

GLENN: How long have you been able to read?

COLTRANE: *(works it out)* Eight years.

NARRATION: Glenn took in the datum in absolute silence. Eight years of scrutinising through gaps and filing away what he saw. Eight years of absorbing, in clandestine fashion, knowledge whose access was forbidden under physical penalty.

NARRATION: Glenn experienced something that did not quite amount to pride, but was not far from it either: the confirmation that this boy had developed survival methods he himself had never had the need to implement.

GLENN: *(after a pause)* Then it seems you don't need my alphabet.

COLTRANE: No.

GLENN: What do you need?

(Coltrane looks away and examines the library that extends toward the opposite end of the room: two storeys of shelves filled with volumes. It was the inventory Glenn had accumulated over fifteen years, buying entire lots of books in every European city where boredom had suffocated him.)

COLTRANE: *(without returning his gaze)* Time.

QUICK CUT — THE LIBRARY

(A still image. No dialogue.)

(Coltrane settled into an armchair. To his left, a stack of volumes that, with him seated, surpasses him in height. To his right, a second column, much lower: the ones he has already finished. A book open on his lap. The light indicates that he has been reading without interruption since dawn.)

NARRATION: Coltrane consumed the texts with the urgency of someone who has operated under a chronic time deficit all his life.

NARRATION: He read at a speed Glenn had difficulty understanding at first. It was not impatience or anxiety. It was his baseline rate, and his baseline rate belonged to a different scale.

NARRATION: He exhausted one volume and opened the next without granting himself pauses for assimilation. Greek philosophers, Latin texts, English treatises from the previous century. A manual of navigation. A herbarium.

NARRATION: Among the pile, he opened a natural encyclopaedia that had belonged to Holland's study and that Glenn had acquired with the whole lot from the mansion, without examining what was

inside. Coltrane identified it at once. He did not report it.

NARRATION: Glenn watched him from the periphery. He did not dare interrogate him about his readings. He suspected the answer would be either excessively long, or humiliatingly short, and that in either case he would come out losing.

QUICK CUT — THE STUDIO

(Glenn's studio at the estate. A space radically different from the makeshift one in Richmond: it has space, overhead light, a structured layout. Oil paintings mounted on stretchers leaning against the walls. Blocks of marble, half-hewn. An unfinished clay figure on a modelling stand. A long table with sketches in graphite, charcoal, sanguine, tempera. The whole inventory in view.)

(Almost all of it.)

(Coltrane crosses the threshold. Glenn has his back to him, concentrated on a canvas that cannot be seen from the door. Coltrane sweeps the room with his eyes, without touching anything. Glenn notices his presence, but does not turn around.)

COLTRANE: What are you trying to convey?

(Glenn's hand hangs suspended in the air, the brush millimetres from the canvas.)

GLENN: *(processing the question)* I'm interested in setting down human emotion. The intrinsic reality of each model. The particular circumstance of each one. The aesthetic of the moment. Turning ugliness into virtue. Representing the human essence...

(He interrupts himself. He corrects himself.)

GLENN: Mortal. The mortal essence. And drawing lessons from it.

(Coltrane does not answer at once. He fixes his attention on a painting at random: the portrait of a middle-aged woman, seated, with her hands clasped in her lap. She is neither pretty nor flattered. And nevertheless, she seems to return the gaze of the viewer, as if she knew more than she shows.)

COLTRANE: *(indicating with a slight gesture)* What's underneath those cloths?

(Glenn turns for the first time. His gaze goes to the three stretchers leaning against the far wall, veiled with dark cloth. They are the only ones not on display in the whole room.)

GLENN: Sketches.

COLTRANE: Of whom?

(A pause that exceeds the time of a casual answer.)

GLENN: Of no one in particular.

NARRATION: Coltrane did not press. He redirected his attention to the paintings that were on display. Glenn resumed the brushwork.

NARRATION: Neither of them voiced what both of them knew perfectly well: that the three veiled sketches were of Coltrane.

NARRATION: And that Glenn did not dare uncover them because doing so would oblige him to ascertain what he had been doing: whether he was reconstructing a memory that was now physically in this room; whether he was painting that face for the first time with its new features; or, worse, whether through the canvas he was demanding from his son something he did not know how to name.

QUICK CUT — A NIGHT LIKE ANY OTHER

(Evening. Glenn adjusts his coat in front of a mirror in the hall. He looks at himself longer than is strictly necessary.)

(Coltrane in the doorway of the library, holding a book.)

COLTRANE: Are you going out?

GLENN: Yes.

COLTRANE: *(returning his attention to the text)* Mm.

(Glenn turns. For a moment his posture suggests he is about to offer an explanation. He discards the idea. He arranges the collar of his shirt with precision and leaves through the main door.)

NARRATION: Glenn always returned before dawn. Sometimes carrying the scent of some woman on him. Sometimes with no scent at all.

NARRATION: Coltrane did not ask. Glenn did not justify himself. It was the only pact in the house that both of them respected to the letter, without ever having sat down to negotiate it.

NARRATION: Glenn weighed, more than once, putting a stop to bringing women back to the studio. He concluded that doing so would amount to admitting that it mattered to him how Coltrane saw him, and that cost was higher than the cost of keeping up the routine. So he prolonged the visits, with the exact regularity that allowed him not to have to think about whether his system had been altered.

QUICK CUT — A CLUMSY INSTRUCTION

(The kitchen. The following night. Coltrane standing by the window. Glenn comes in, helps himself to something and leans against the table.)

GLENN: Listen, about last night.

COLTRANE: What about it?

GLENN: You went to bed without eating.

COLTRANE: I wasn't hungry.

GLENN: Right. Even so. *(A pause to measure the words.)* You need to eat. Eat well. Three times a day. You know, don't you? Well. There it is.

(Coltrane looks at him. Not with mockery, but with something worse: with patience. With the resignation of someone who has to tolerate a man trying to assemble a machine with no manual and no tools.)

COLTRANE: Good.

GLENN: Good.

(Glenn leaves the kitchen. Coltrane remains motionless, looking at the space he has just vacated.)

NARRATION: In situations like that one, Glenn justified himself by saying that he was carrying out the role as best he could. That no one had taught him how to do this, and that a clumsy movement yielded a better balance than not attempting anything at all.

NARRATION: He was right about that.

NARRATION: What he kept silent about was the other part: something in him knew, with painful certainty, that if he had tried fifteen years earlier (with the child he had deliberately erased from

memory) the incompetence would have been exactly the same.

NARRATION: That perhaps he was never going to be able to. That this clumsy and belated semblance of instruction repaired no damage: it merely confirmed a ruin already consummated when it had truly mattered.

NARRATION: He told himself, when no one heard, that he was a fraud. A wretch. And he told himself this with the naturalness of someone who has accepted an immovable fact.

NARRATION: Then he would shut himself in with a glass he did not touch.

QUICK CUT — THE POSTPONEMENT

(The library. Night. Coltrane reading in the armchair. Glenn standing by the fireplace, his gaze fixed on the fire.)

(Several minutes pass without dialogue. The sound of a turning page. The crackling of the logs.)

(Glenn opens his mouth.)

(He closes it again.)

NARRATION: There were many nights like that. Glenn would come to the verge of saying it. He would form the first syllable in his throat. And at the last instant he would draw back.

NARRATION: He justified it by telling himself that the right moment was missing. That the proper occasion would arrive of its own accord. That when it arrived, he would know how to recognise it.

NARRATION: He went on waiting for it. The weeks passed. The months passed. The moment never arrived, and Glenn never made the decision.

NARRATION: He postponed the truth for eternity. He had one, after all. He would have time to spare.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: What he needed, what he was incapable of asking for out loud, was forgiveness. And since he did not have the courage to ask for it, he could not allow himself the scene in which it might be granted to him either.

NARRATION: So he packed the two things (the confession and the forgiveness) into the same mental drawer, closed it, and threw away the key.

QUICK CUT — THE QUARTERS

(Night. The estate. At the opposite end of the garden, outlined in the darkness, the slave cabins.)

NARRATION: Glenn had acquired them with the property six years earlier. Not out of any need for labour (he needed assistance for practically nothing), but because they appeared as assets on the bill of sale and he had not bothered to demand a different one.

NARRATION: He had ignored them since the signing. He never went near the quarters. They never came near the main house unless they were called. That was the transaction, and it had operated in silence for years.

NARRATION: Coltrane, by contrast, located the exact position of the cabins during his first week at the estate. He began to go there at night. He did not ask permission. No one in the house issued an order to prevent him.

(The camera accompanies him. He walks among the structures with the trained stealth of one who

knows he must not interrupt. He sits on a fallen log, a few metres from the last door. From there, he listens.)

(A woman's voice singing. Another joining hers. Then a man's. A melody not directed at anyone; a piece that has been repeating itself for decades in installations far worse than this one.)

(Coltrane closes his eyes.)

NARRATION: One of the few records of happiness he kept from childhood was listening to Annie sing. He used to say she had the voice of an angel, and he did not say it as a metaphor, but with the literalness of a child who has not yet learned to relativise what matters.

NARRATION: But Annie was not in these houses. Annie was still in the Holland mansion, two hours away by carriage. She was still property.

NARRATION: Coltrane had not stopped calculating why he had freedom papers and she did not. What he had definitively cancelled was the expectation of finding an answer to that question he could live with.

NARRATION: He came to listen to Glenn's slaves because those voices were the closest thing he had, on this side of the county, to the sounds he had grown up with.

NARRATION: But Annie's timbre was not there. That was the part he kept coming back to verify each night: to confirm, in silence, her absence.

(The singing carries on. Coltrane does not follow the melody. Nor does he weep. He listens, with his back too straight. His posture does not relax even in the darkness, nor when no one is watching him.)

QUICK CUT — THE WAVES

(The same night. A few hours later.)

(Glenn seated on the porch of the main house. He holds an untouched glass. With the acuteness of his recent anatomy, he picks up the same thing Coltrane is listening to on the other side of the garden.)

NARRATION: It was the first time, in the six years he had held title to the estate, that Glenn paid attention to the sound of his own slaves. He admitted it with a precision he found profoundly uncomfortable.

NARRATION: Six years. He had never set foot in the quarters. He had never looked at the faces. He had not even taken the trouble to count how many individuals made up the lot.

NARRATION: He had the exact figure, that much was true. Set down in an accounts ledger he signed without reading. The administrator handled the management. The administrator had the data.

NARRATION: This night, however, he did not retire indoors. This night, for reasons he refused to classify, he remained on the porch long enough to actually hear.

(Glenn closes his eyes. Something in those voices tears him open from inside. It is not a specific pain, but the recognition that there is a kind of human voice he had erased from memory.)

NARRATION: Everything he had blocked off for fifteen years tipped over onto him at once, in successive waves. Glenn sat paralysed in his seat, his gaze fixed on nothing, cornered inside his own memories.

NARRATION: He remembered, unable to restrain it, those days in the Irish district.

NARRATION: The modest little house. The plot where he grew corn and stones, trying to survive on the balance of the harvest.

NARRATION: He remembered the woman he had taken as his wife. The one who made him happy with that peculiar personality of hers: the mixture of a smile and a maddening bad temper, but always justified.

NARRATION: He remembered the days divided between sweat and canvas. The nights in the taverns, squandering money on beer, on small wagers and on cheap company to shorten the small hours.

NARRATION: He remembered his old friends, as ruined as he was, and the good times spent singing and cursing the rich, and the Black slaves they themselves would never get to own. He remembered the hardships, and the nights he went to bed with an empty stomach to hand over his ration to his wife and son.

NARRATION: Yes. Him too, he remembered.

NARRATION: The prickly little boy who had refused to resemble him in anything, and for whom, paradoxically, he felt an immense pride. The child who cried for hours because his hunger was insatiable, because he could not last four hours without eating something. The one he had seen take his first steps and heard say "papa" for the first time.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: And now the child was a man. Seventeen years of life and of accumulated survival. It was him. The son identical to his mother. The one who had disappeared from his life at the exact moment when the suffering began.

NARRATION: The same one now on the other side of the garden, listening to the singing in complete silence.

NARRATION: A boy filled with a hatred so accumulated that Glenn could smell it from the porch without intending to.

NARRATION: He thought he deserved to hear that hostility. That it was the smallest punishment the night was offering him, and that getting up from the chair to dodge it would be one more cowardice on an already long list.

NARRATION: He also thought, for the first time, that those voices belonged to human beings. To people.

NARRATION: His system had taken six whole years to process something so obvious.

NARRATION: He stayed holding the thought without knowing what to do with it. After a while he understood that this inaction was, in itself, also an answer.

(Glenn remains seated in the darkness. He does not move until the last echo of the singing fades.)

QUICK CUT — WHAT COLTRANE SEES

(The library. The following afternoon.)

(Coltrane reads. Glenn comes in looking for something: a book, an excuse. The object is the least of it.)

(Coltrane looks up. For a second he examines Glenn as if he were seeing him for the first time.)

(Glenn does not notice. He finds the book. He leaves.)

(Coltrane stays with his gaze fixed on the empty doorway.)

NARRATION: There was an anomaly in Glenn that Coltrane had spent weeks trying to classify.

NARRATION: It was not cruelty; Coltrane had been raised in cruelty, and this did not fit the

parameters. Nor was it coldness, although at times it imitated coldness. It was a structural failure of a much rarer kind.

NARRATION: It was the constant impression that Glenn, in the biological sense in which men are men, was not entirely one. That he housed something inside him that did not consume oxygen.

NARRATION: That, when the house fell silent, Glenn sank into a stillness Coltrane had only ever registered in people deeply asleep. Or dead.

NARRATION: He had discarded the hypothesis several times. He had told himself it was a projection of his own, accumulated fatigue, that the Holland mansion had thrown his nervous system out of calibration.

NARRATION: But the previous night, listening to the singing from the quarters, he had detected a frequency on the other side of the garden. A presence that did not correspond to that of a man listening. Something that absorbed sound without belonging to this world.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He did not assign it a label yet. He lacked the vocabulary to classify it.

NARRATION: But he filed it alongside the other irregularities that did not add up: the covered paintings, the late-night departures, the hermetic silence Glenn deployed in the face of a certain kind of question. It was all part of a puzzle whose edges Coltrane had not yet finished locating.

NARRATION: He suspected, without yet having the data to confirm it, that this puzzle contained the central piece: the exact reason why a man, apparently a stranger, had liquidated a fortune for a boy to whom he owed absolutely nothing.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Resolution. *Virginia. ~1780. Glenn's estate. The outer garden. Night.*

NARRATION: Coltrane had been at the estate for a little over two months. Glenn had given him a room, clothes, food and freedom of movement. Coltrane acknowledged receipt of all of it with the same inscrutable expression with which he accepted any order.

NARRATION: And, every night, he would go out into the garden to look at the forest. Without exception. Always pointed in the same direction.

NARRATION: It took Glenn several days to notice that the angle was not arbitrary. One afternoon, taking advantage of Coltrane's absence from the house, he verified it with a compass.

NARRATION: The instrument confirmed what he had already feared: the line was exact. From the stone bench to the Holland mansion. Two hours on horseback. A whole night, perhaps, on foot.

(The night is mild. The cicadas, the friction of the air; a distant horse in the stable. COLTRANE sits on a stone bench at the edge of the garden. His back straight, as ever. Scrutinising the darkness of the forest, as ever.)

(Behind him, GLENN approaches. It is not a threatening approach: he keeps a silent distance. He

carries a lantern, more out of courtesy than necessity: his night vision is impeccable; it gives Coltrane the chance to detect his arrival without being startled.)

(It is the kind of gesture Glenn has begun to calculate in the last few weeks. Not all of them come out as he plans.)

GLENN: *(in a low voice)* It's late, Coltrane. You shouldn't be out here.

(Coltrane does not turn his head. Glenn waits. When the answer does not come, he tries again.)

GLENN: What's troubling you?

COLTRANE: *(without turning, lowering his voice)* I can't sleep.

GLENN: Why not?

(A pause. Coltrane seems to evaluate whether it is worth giving the true answer or a fabricated one. He decides, without theatricality, on the first. Not out of trust, but to conserve energy: sustaining false answers wears one out more.)

COLTRANE: The overseer's whistle. The coughing in the damp. The constant shouting. I can't get them out of my head.

NARRATION: Coltrane did not move his eyes from the same point. The specific guilt of the survivor who managed to get out: the kind that no settlement clears.

COLTRANE: They are all I know.

(A pause.)

COLTRANE: Why am I the only one who's free?

(Glenn halts a few paces from the bench. He does not sit down. He does not dare: sharing the bench would imply a level of familiarity neither of them has yet authorised.)

GLENN: *(with a caution that feels foreign to him)* You're white. You didn't deserve to be a slave.

(Coltrane, at last, turns.)

(On his face there is something Glenn had not anticipated: there is no gratitude, no relief. There is pain. A pain that is genuine, visceral, furious.)

COLTRANE: *(in a voice saturated with that rage)* No one deserves to be a slave!

(Pause.)

COLTRANE: No one!

(Glenn does not retreat. He lets the sentence land in full. He registers, with a precision he finds uncomfortable, that this is the first time in two months that Coltrane has raised his voice to him.)

COLTRANE: I know you have enough gold and influence to free the rest.

(A short pause.)

COLTRANE: All of them!

(Coltrane begins to rise, but does not quite come fully to his feet: his body has not yet unlearned the rule of not standing before a white man without permission. The gesture stops halfway. He sits back down.)

(But the eyes, this time, do not lower.)

COLTRANE: Why only me?

(Glenn keeps silent. It is impossible for him to give him the true answer: the one that would require opening a confession he keeps under lock and key for the rest of eternity. And eternity, by definition, is not now.)

COLTRANE: *(swallowing, holding his gaze)* I am begging you. The ones at Holland's.

(A minimal pause. Coltrane's eyes drift for a fraction of a second toward the quarters at the back of the garden.)

COLTRANE: The ones here too.

(Glenn does not answer.)

NARRATION: Glenn had spent weeks trying to formulate an answer to some version of this question. He knew it would eventually arrive.

NARRATION: What he had not predicted was the form. He had not foreseen that Coltrane would reach the point of begging him. Him. The man who had just bought him.

(Glenn breathes in the air of the night.)

NARRATION: Any argument he might wield now belonged to a level of conversation he was not yet prepared to sustain.

(Coltrane studies him a moment longer. Then, very slowly, he redirects his gaze toward the forest. The movement distills an ancient resignation: that of a body that has begged too many things from too many people, and to which nothing has been granted.)

(In that movement, simple, without intention, barely a body turning on a stone bench, the linen shirt shifts. The tendon of the neck tightens. The cloth gives way at the left shoulder.)

(Glenn sees it.)

(It is only a fragment. A minimal strip of skin between the collar of the shirt and the start of the arm. But it is enough to reveal two parallel marks, one above the other. Thick, white against the fair skin, with that glossy texture exclusive to third-degree burns that have healed badly.)

NARRATION: They were not recent. They were old. They dated, probably, from when Coltrane was twelve. Or ten.

NARRATION: Old enough for an overseer to determine that a fair-skinned boy, but with the bearing of one raised by a Black woman, required a public correction that would make clear to the entire plantation what his place was.

NARRATION: Glenn had seen them before. Not that night: over the course of the two months. In passing, when Coltrane washed at the back of the kitchen, or changed his shirt on hot afternoons. He had seen them, and he had averted his eyes at once. He had registered them without processing them.

NARRATION: This time he was incapable of looking away.

(Coltrane, absorbed in the forest, does not notice.)

NARRATION: There existed a meticulous catalogue of scars on the backs of slaves, and Glenn, who had invested fifteen years in ignoring the backs of the slaves on his own estate, finished memorising it that night. There was the furrow left by the common whip. The irregular abrasion of the knotted lash. And the relief of the branding iron. Three distinct typologies. Each with its author's signature.

NARRATION: Coltrane's mark bore the signature of the iron.

NARRATION: Glenn deduced that a superior at the Holland mansion had determined, years before, that the white boy needed a sharper reminder than the rest. Because the others had a skin tone that allowed the scar to merge into the shadows of the body. He did not. On him, the marking had to stand out. It had to be a legible message.

NARRATION: And, in that instant, Glenn understood that he had been the owner of that information for two months and was deliberately choosing to do nothing with it. That he had bought his son, had brought him to his estate, had given him a room, clothes and a library, and had gone on "dining" in front of him every night without daring to ask what the hell had happened to him inside that mansion.

NARRATION: That omission was also a form of cowardice. The most comfortable form of all.

(Coltrane goes on looking at the forest. He is unaware of what Glenn has just seen.)

(He speaks again. The volume has dropped several tones, declaring a burden he has borne alone for too long. He lifts his eyes again to Glenn.)

COLTRANE: Annie is expecting a child.

(Glenn goes completely still.)

NARRATION: Glenn tried to preserve a neutral expression. A muscle in his jaw tightened without his body being able to prevent it.

NARRATION: In truth, he already knew. He had intercepted the echo of that information in Coltrane's mind days before and, as he did with so many other things, had chosen to ignore it.

NARRATION: But hearing it spoken aloud was another magnitude. Hearing it spoken aloud closed off every avenue of escape.

COLTRANE: *(in a low voice, vibrating with a very contained desperation)* And I know, in the depths of me, that the child is not John Holland's.

(A pause.)

COLTRANE: I believe it with certainty. He is mine.

(Glenn remained silent for several seconds.)

NARRATION: The distance between them tensed like something that has spent too long at the breaking point without quite snapping.

NARRATION: Glenn thought many things in those seconds. He thought of Annie, a woman he did not know, and whose name he had only registered by rummaging through Coltrane's thoughts in the rare instants when the boy let his guard down. He thought of the child on the way, and of the son standing in front of him. He thought of the brand scar.

NARRATION: But, above all, he thought (with a clarity that had been waiting weeks for its turn) that the verdict was already signed.

NARRATION: The decision had been made on the porch, the night he had heard the slaves sing. He had ratified it a moment ago, when the linen cloth slid down over Coltrane's shoulder. The confession about Annie was, quite simply, the last piece of the dossier. Not the one that tipped the balance: the one that gave him permission to execute what had already been decided in any case.

NARRATION: This time there would be no postponement. This time the instant existed. The instant was now.

(Finally, Glenn turned his back on Coltrane and set off toward the carriage house.)

(He did not run. He walked. But it was a walk that admitted no negotiation.)

COLTRANE: *(startled, springing to his feet)* Now?

(Glenn did not halt his advance.)

COLTRANE: Seriously? What are you going to do?

(Glenn stopped dead. Only for a second. He did not turn his body. He kept his head slightly tilted, in the posture of one appraising something in the distance. Not Coltrane's question: how many hours of useful darkness the night had left, and whether he needed to take any tool with him.)

GLENN: *(turning his face just enough for Coltrane to see his profile)* Wait for me in the carriage.

(Glenn resumed his march.)

COLTRANE: *(raising his pitch, run through by a disquiet entirely unprecedented in him)* Are you going to talk to him?

(Glenn answered him in a flat voice, without emphasis, which proved to be infinitely worse than a shout.)

GLENN: We're not going to talk, Coltrane.

(Coltrane stayed nailed beside the stone bench, watching Glenn's back dissolve into the gloom.)

NARRATION: He did not call him by his name. He did not try to stop him.

NARRATION: A part of him, very deep, that he would not acknowledge until much later, had already deduced what Glenn was going to do. And he knew he did not want to stop him.

NARRATION: That part was him too. And it was the part that was going to have to live with what came.

(SLOW DISSOLVE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Massacre and the Liberation. *Virginia. ~1780. The Holland estate and its surroundings. Night.*

NARRATION: There was no negotiation. Glenn had said they were not going to talk. He kept his word.

QUICK CUT — THE CARRIAGE

(The carriage stopped at the bend in the path, just before the estate came into view. Glenn climbs down. Coltrane remains inside. They do not exchange a single word. The distribution of roles had been assumed without debate.)

NARRATION: Coltrane had obeyed. He climbed into the carriage first and waited. A whole life of obeying without questioning is not unlearned in two months.

NARRATION: But this time the obedience mixed in him with something more opaque: the suspicion that, in some very deep layer, he too wanted to make that journey.

NARRATION: What Glenn was about to execute was not an act of passion. He had had fifteen years to

excise his taste for passion. What he had cultivated in its place was more efficient: a clinical precision that allowed him any task without his pulse trembling.

NARRATION: And his hands were enough. They were his only patrimony where gifts were concerned, and he had long since concluded that he needed to accumulate no more. While others of his kind invested years in learning to move objects with their minds, to bend fire to their will, or to enter another person's mind to disorder it, Glenn had settled for the initial allotment: a brute strength of a measure impossible to put into words, and two hands trained to apply it.

NARRATION: That night, that was going to be more than enough.

(Glenn walks down the path. Steady pace. No hurry.)

QUICK CUT — THE MANSION

(The Holland mansion stands in the night. Almost every window lit. The family is probably still at dinner, or preparing for bed. The unalterable routine, for the last time.)

(Glenn pushes the front door, which yields without resistance. In the hall, a butler turns his head at the sound of the intrusion.)

(He does not manage to utter a word.)

NARRATION: The first thing Glenn learned about his new strength, in those first months, was that human necks did not have the firmness he had assumed.

NARRATION: On the farm he had taken it for granted that the bones of a man would offer the same resistance as those of the cattle he helped to butcher. A saw's work. He had been wrong. The neck of an adult man gave way with less effort than breaking a branch requires. The first time he verified this, he was horrified. Afterwards, no.

NARRATION: That night he did not feel horror either.

(Glenn continues down the corridor. The overseer comes out of a side study, alerted by a barely perceptible noise. Glenn does not alter his rhythm. He intercepts him. He neutralises him in one movement, and goes on walking.)

QUICK CUT — THE KITCHEN

(The cook puts her head out to assess the source of the noise. She stops in the doorway and sees him.)

(Glenn observes her for an instant. Then he shifts his gaze to the back of the room, where three slaves: two women and an old man with flour-covered hands, have been left petrified in front of the table.)

(Glenn fixes his eyes on the cook again. Then he goes completely still, scrutinising the three at the back. He does not address a word to them. He makes no gesture. He only looks at them.)

NARRATION: Glenn gave them the precise amount of time. Lacking the technical ability to submerge himself beyond the most superficial layer of a mind, he read only that first coating. He registered what he needed. The slaves remained anchored, hands on the table, mute.

NARRATION: Glenn had not entered the house for them. If anything had survived intact through the years of pretending to be a drunken farmer, it was his instinct for distinguishing whom he owed what. And the man who that night required the settling of the debt was in another part of the mansion.

QUICK CUT — THE STUDY

(Mr. Holland in his study. He lifts his gaze from the paperwork. He discovers Glenn in the doorway.)

(He does not manage to get to his feet.)

(Glenn lifts him out of the chair with one hand, by the collar of his shirt. Not to hurt him yet, but to establish eye contact.)

(Two seconds.)

NARRATION: Glenn did not need to say anything. Holland found nothing that could help him. The conversation ended without having begun.

NARRATION: Holland expired absorbing two certainties. The first: that the margin of profit he had drawn from the fair-haired boy was, in the end, an unforgivable miscalculation. The second: that the intuition which weeks earlier had advised him to sign the sale quickly and without questions would go on record as the last useful intuition of his existence.

(Glenn drops the body, which falls to the floor as a useless mass.)

QUICK CUT — THE MAIN BEDCHAMBER

(Mrs. Holland wakes. She has heard something. She lights a candle. She comes out, in her nightgown, into the darkness of the corridor.)

(Glenn is waiting at the opposite end.)

(She does not scream. The hand holding the candlestick begins to tremble.)

NARRATION: Glenn did not consider her innocent.

NARRATION: He had deduced, crossing the remark her husband had let fall at the party with the superficial readings he had taken from him, that Mrs. Holland was the true architect of the daily suffering. She erased the original names to assign slave nomenclatures. She had stripped Johannes of his identity to impose "Coltrane" on him.

NARRATION: He had the certainty that she herself had ordered the first pair of shackles forged to his measure, when the child was eight years old. Glenn had managed to project the image: she, seated calmly across from the boy, measuring the diameter of his wrist and demanding of the blacksmith that he leave a margin for growth.

NARRATION: Glenn did not speak to the people he was about to liquidate. But with her, for one whole second, he weighed making an exception.

NARRATION: Discipline won.

(The candle falls. It goes out as it hits the floor.)

QUICK CUT — THE OAK

(The centuries-old oak, at the southern limit of the property. The same tree under which the Hollands received their guests in the warm months. The same one from which, according to what Glenn had extracted from the surroundings, more than one slave had been hanged by way of correction.)

(Glenn arrives at the trunk carrying both bodies, one over each shoulder, like a farmhand with two sacks of grain. He sets them down on the grass.)

(He pulls from the inside pocket of his coat two lengths of rope. He had knotted them himself on the

driver's seat, during the journey, while Coltrane remained inside the cab in absolute silence.)

(He throws the first end over the lowest, sturdiest branch. He secures the anchor. He lifts Mr. Holland by the neck and lets him hang. The branch creaks, protests, but holds. The branches of that oak were made to tolerate greater tensions.)

(He repeats with the second body. He finishes. He takes a step back. He verifies the result.)

NARRATION: Glenn had left no margin for improvisation. Hanging them from the oak had figured in his plan for weeks. The tree had belonged to them; from that small-hour onward it would belong to its dead, and so it would remain for every year it had left to be a tree.

QUICK CUT — THE FIRE

(Glenn turns back toward the main residence. He detours into the barn. He takes down one of the lanterns from the entrance. He opens it. The flame flickers, alive.)

(He tilts it and rests the edge against a heap of dry straw. He stays watching for a couple of seconds: just enough to certify that the combustion has begun. The straw is highly volatile.)

(He leaves before the heat becomes an inconvenience. He resumes his march toward the house.)

NARRATION: The fire asked for no help beyond the first spark.

NARRATION: The old straw, the beams desiccated by decades of summer, the heavy curtains, the imported tablecloths, the wood polished with wax year after year: the Holland mansion did not know it had been preparing its whole existence to burn.

NARRATION: Glenn only came to remind it.

(He crosses the hall again. He brings the flame to the hem of the dining-room curtain. To the dry flowers in a vase. He goes up the main staircase and brings it to the bed linen of Mrs. Holland's chamber, still as rumpled as she left it when she got up a few minutes earlier.)

(Glenn leaves through the front door, with the deliberateness of one who has just concluded the day's work.)

QUICK CUT — THE QUARTERS

(The slaves' dwellings, at the other end of the property. A child wakes with a start. His mother presses her hand against his mouth. "Shhh." Heavy footsteps over the gravel. A door opening.)

(An old man comes out into the yard. He lifts his gaze toward the mansion. And, in one second, he understands everything.)

(The old man closes the door behind him. He does not go back in. He stays planted in the middle of the yard, his face lit up, with an expression no one in his long life had ever seen on him.)

(Around him, the doors begin to open, one after another. At first with frightened slowness. Then with the growing certainty that what is happening out there is not a dream. Nor a nightmare.)

FIRST IMAGE

(CG: The front yard of the estate. In the background, the mansion burning: a violent orange light cut against the black of the night. To one side, bathed in the glow, the low branches of the oak hold two dark forms that hang motionless.)

(In the foreground, the slaves emerging into open ground: bodies in silhouette, faces half-lit. A man covering his mouth with both hands, not yet knowing whether what he is going to release is a laugh or a scream. A woman with a baby pressed against her chest, watching the mansion burn with dry eyes. A small child who does not understand what he is witnessing, but who is learning. An old woman who falls to her knees against the earth: not from fear.)

(And at the back of everything, at the edge of the yard, a standing figure, motionless, impeccable, with his back to the fire.)

(Glenn.)

NARRATION: Glenn did not run. He did not shout. In the midst of the absolute chaos, he was the only calm one.

NARRATION: The slaves came out into the night. Some broke into a run across the fields. Some laughed hysterically. Others wept. Most did not know what they were supposed to feel.

NARRATION: Some interrupted their flight when they made out the silhouette of the tree, and they stayed contemplating the bodies with an expression that has no name in any language.

NARRATION: One of the oldest of the women slaves approached the oak. She did not reach the bodies. She planted herself in front of them, hands on her hips, and assessed the scene for a long while. Then she nodded once, like someone closing a matter, and walked away without looking back.

NARRATION: Others went past. Many ran toward the edge of the forest and did not slow. Glenn intercepted none of them. His task that night was of another order.

QUICK CUT — THE CARRIAGE

(Coltrane at last opens the cab door. He steps down. The driver does not look at him. He has been on Glenn's payroll long enough to know that there are small hours when the work demands looking elsewhere.)

(Coltrane begins to walk toward the orange glow. He does not run. He is not able to. His body does not yet know how to quicken its pace without the express permission of a master.)

NARRATION: What Glenn had omitted to consider, in every phase of his plan, was whether the boy would or would not want to witness the result. He had taken it for granted: he, in his place, would have wanted to see it. It was still almost impossible for him to draw the line between what he himself would have wished and what his son truly wished.

QUICK CUT — THE FRONT YARD

(Coltrane crosses the last bend of the path that opens onto the clearing. He stops dead.)

(What stands before him burns in perfect order.)

(The dozens of slaves move in small groups, with no pattern, across the whole yard. Some try to approach him when they recognise him. Others are too stunned to go anywhere.)

(And at the very centre of the picture, cut against the fire, she is.)

QUICK CUT — ANNIE

(Annie finds him first. She comes toward him walking, not running. She is barefoot. She has a blanket over her shoulders. The volume of her belly shows under the cloth.)

(Coltrane recognises her and his body goes still.)

(She stops a few paces away.)

(They stay like that a moment. Each one calculating whether their own body still remembers how to do what was never permitted to them in front of the mansion.)

(Annie takes the first step. Coltrane the second.)

NARRATION: What happens next has none of the elegance of a reunion. It is clumsy. Annie raises a hand toward his face and leaves it suspended for a second, hesitant, as if what she were about to touch did not match the boy she had known.

NARRATION: Coltrane does not wait for her to decide. He takes her by the shoulders and draws her to him.

(They embrace.)

NARRATION: It is brief. And it is hard. Annie's belly comes between them and they both notice it. Coltrane feels the bones of her back, sharper than he remembered. Annie perceives in him something that did not figure in her memory: an unfamiliar density, a different way of breathing.

(They separate.)

SECOND IMAGE

(CG: Annie and Coltrane in the yard. She with the blanket over her shoulders, the belly marked under the cloth, her eyes fixed on him. He with his head tilted slightly toward her, his hands halfway between her body and his own, not knowing where to leave them. Behind, far off, the glow of the fire. The fire does not touch them yet: it reaches them as warmth at the edge of the skin.)

NARRATION: It was not a sustained embrace. There was no room for one.

NARRATION: That dawn they believed it was a beginning. They projected the months to come, the child about to be born, Glenn's estate as a perimeter where a life could fit. They had just embraced for the last time without knowing it. And that ignorance, seen in perspective, was an act of mercy.

ANNIE: *(in a low voice)* Cole. What happened?

(Coltrane does not answer.)

(Annie turns her head, slowly. She takes in the whole scene: the barn, the mansion in flames, the scattered groups. And at the end, without meaning to, her eyes come to rest on the tree.)

(She stays fixed on it.)

NARRATION: Annie had not accumulated many images in her life; to exist within a minute radius was part of being a slave. But she had seen enough.

NARRATION: She had seen other men hanged from that same oak, in other years, for other faults. Looking at the two figures now, she deduced at once that the same technique was at work behind it. She knew exactly how it was done. The only difference was that this time the hanged were the Hollands.

NARRATION: A man who wants to free slaves organises an escape. One who seeks revenge uses a firearm. One who burns a property ends up with burns or with ash on his clothes. And none of them lifts two adults to a high branch, alone, in the middle of the night, without a single trace of fatigue.

NARRATION: Nothing of what Annie had before her was the work of a man.

(Annie fixes her gaze on Coltrane again. She scrutinises him as if measuring how much of all this had been known to him beforehand.)

NARRATION: Whether he had left her alone at the Holland estate foreseeing that this was going to happen. Whether, under all that silence, he was still the boy who used to lie down beside her in the stable.

(Coltrane lowers his face. He cannot hold her gaze.)

QUICK CUT — THE FOOT OF THE TREE

(Coltrane advances. Annie does not follow him. She stays where she is.)

(He reaches the foot of the trunk. He lifts his face and looks.)

NARRATION: He fixed his eyes on the oak. He did not look away for a long time.

NARRATION: What he felt had no label in his archive. It was not relief: relief presupposes that the pain concludes, and this one was not going to conclude. It was not vengeance: vengeance one carries out oneself, and he had carried out nothing. It was not justice: he had long since stopped believing in that.

NARRATION: The closest he came to classifying it was years later, in a sentence he never said to anyone: that for one minute, beneath that tree, a part of him stopped weighing.

NARRATION: They had taken down a weight he had been carrying for years. And on taking it down he discovered that underneath was not what he had expected. There was no peace. There was something more rancid, more difficult to quantify, and that weight was never going to be taken down.

NARRATION: But for one minute he believed it would. He believed the cycle had ended.

NARRATION: And that was the exact minute in which the last human fragment inside him took its leave, without him managing to notice its departure.

QUICK CUT — THE TRIAD

(Annie approaches from behind. She does not place herself at his side. She places herself slightly behind. Not as submission, but for another reason: because she has not yet decided whether she wants to be beside him, behind him, or far from him.)

("Behind" is the only position from which she can go on observing him without being forced to decide.)

(Glenn enters the frame. He advances without haste. He crosses the yard with the naturalness of a proprietor who has walked it hundreds of times, even though it is his first time on the ground. He stops behind the two of them.)

THIRD IMAGE

(CG: The triad. Coltrane in the foreground, facing the oak. Annie one step behind him, ignoring the fire to fix her gaze on Coltrane's profile; her expression is pure horror tinged with a resolution still unnameable. At the back, Glenn, closing the group. Impeccable. Not a single speck of ash on his clothes. He turns to Coltrane one of those looks of his that grant no information. Then he lifts his gaze toward the tree.)

(None of the three speaks a word.)

(There is no need.)

NARRATION: Annie knew, without anyone confirming it to her, that the boy before her was no longer the one she had known. That this dawn had finished altering him. And that she did not know whether she could live with that.

NARRATION: There existed, once, a version of Glenn Sheridan (the drinking farmer of Richmond, the one who squandered canvases painting models in shabby rooms) who would have felt profoundly sickened by this scene.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: That version had been squandered for fifteen years.

(The fire goes on burning at the back. The static image extends on screen a few seconds beyond what is tolerable.)

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Conversion. *Virginia, ~1780.*

NARRATION: The authorities' investigation lasted less than a week. A slave revolt, they concluded.

NARRATION: The masters hanged, the mansion turned to ashes, the slaves vanished. The sum added up without need of further calculation. Case closed.

NARRATION: It was the most convenient explanation for everyone involved. In the Virginia of 1780, that was enough.

QUICK CUT — THE DISTRIBUTION

NARRATION: The house rearranged itself in the first days.

NARRATION: Annie was placed in the bedchamber on the first floor, the one that opened onto the east garden. The best room of the estate after Glenn's own: a large window, a wide bed, a door with a bolt on the inside.

NARRATION: Glenn had ordered it prepared before dawn. Coltrane had not had to ask him.

NARRATION: Annie did not thank him for the room. But she walked through it with the eyes of a young woman discovering, after a whole lifetime, what it means to be able to close a door from the inside.

NARRATION: Coltrane stayed in his room in the west wing. Glenn in his own, in the north wing. The other women chose, out of habit, two rooms on the service floor.

NARRATION: The men settled into the annexed outbuilding, beside the houses of Glenn's former slaves. People who had been waiting years for a night like that of the fire without knowing they were waiting for it.

NARRATION: It was the first time in six years that the estate had real people inhabiting it. The calm Glenn had mistaken for an architectural virtue turned out to be absence.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The arrangement among the three of them settled without anyone having to articulate it.

NARRATION: Annie did not enter Coltrane's room. Coltrane did not cross Annie's threshold. Glenn did not enter either of the two. Each one remained on his own square, without invading those of the other pieces.

NARRATION: Glenn observed the arrangement for several days without understanding what unsettled him.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE THRESHOLD OF THE KITCHEN

(A night like any other. The kitchen of the estate.)

(Annie sits at the table. She has her hair tied back with a cloth. She is peeling something: potatoes, apples; that is the least of it. Coltrane speaks to her in a low voice, leaning over the wood. Glenn hears them from the doorway.)

(Annie laughs.)

(It is a brief laugh, soundless. It lights up her face for half a second and dies on its own.)

(But the laugh existed.)

(Coltrane smiles.)

NARRATION: Glenn watched them from the threshold long enough to register the complete picture.

NARRATION: The two young people in the kitchen. She, six months pregnant. He, seventeen years old, learning to move within a house that did not belong to anyone like him. The candlelight trembling over their outlines.

NARRATION: It was, perhaps, the first time since leaving Richmond that he had seen anything like this so close. A life, possible. Imperfect, cut short.

NARRATION: Exactly the kind of thing a man who was not him would have known how to safeguard.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn turned in the corridor without making a sound. The decision had already been made and admitted no witnesses.

QUICK CUT — THE INVITATION

(That same night.)

(Glenn stands in the doorway of Coltrane's room. He does not knock. He waits for Coltrane to lift his gaze from the book.)

(Coltrane lifts it.)

GLENN: Come with me.

COLTRANE: Where?

GLENN: To my studio.

(Coltrane closes the book. He sets it down on the bed with a marker placed inside: the methodical

gesture of one who knows he will not open it again the whole night.)

NARRATION: In the months he had spent in the house, Coltrane had learned a rule neither of them had stated aloud: Glenn did not cross the door of his room. The redhead had not yet learned how to be alone with him without interposing a book, a canvas, some physical excuse.

NARRATION: That this night he was standing on his threshold, breaking the rule, announced something.

(Coltrane stands up and follows him.)

QUICK CUT — THE STUDIO

(Glenn's studio. A single lamp lit.)

(Walls covered in books, an easel covered with a sheet in one corner, two armchairs facing each other across a low table. There is no fire in the hearth. It is October and the room is cold. The temperature no longer affects Glenn, and it does not cross his mind that it does affect Coltrane.)

(Glenn closes the door.)

NARRATION: He closed it slowly, drawing out the last seconds before what was coming.

NARRATION: Coltrane noticed. He had spent his childhood at the Holland mansion learning to read the delays of masters.

(Glenn turns toward the room. Coltrane remains standing near the armchairs, his hands falling at his sides, not knowing where to put them.)

GLENN: Sit down, please.

COLTRANE: *(he does not obey)* What have you called me for?

NARRATION: Glenn had rehearsed this moment, and he had rehearsed it badly. The speech prepared over weeks slipped out of him the instant he went to look for it.

GLENN: To talk.

NARRATION: It sounded clumsy. Hollow.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He closed his eyes for a second, without meaning to. When he opened them, the delay had run out.

GLENN: Come a little closer, please.

(Coltrane does not move a muscle.)

COLTRANE: What are you?

NARRATION: Glenn had not foreseen it. He had anticipated every possible question from an ex-slave. Not that one.

(Glenn does not answer. Not with anything.)

(Coltrane does not take his eyes off his face.)

NARRATION: In a few seconds Glenn understood that Coltrane had always known. That a boy capable of surviving the Holland mansion knew how to scent predators long before naming them.

NARRATION: And he understood that he would not have to explain anything to him now. That this

saving on words would be paid by Coltrane, not by him.

(Glenn stays motionless. Coltrane too.)

NARRATION: The boy was looking for something else. A validation the silence was never going to give him.

(A very long pause.)

(Coltrane takes a step toward Glenn.)

GLENN: *(almost inaudible)* This doesn't have to happen.

COLTRANE: I know.

NARRATION: It was not true. It did have to happen. The only one who still did not understand it was Glenn, and he finished understanding it there.

GLENN: I can leave you in peace.

COLTRANE: No.

(Pause.)

COLTRANE: Do it.

NARRATION: The face Coltrane was returning to him was not that of someone asking for something. It was that of someone who has spent years knowing that the things that happen to him do not ask permission, and whose only margin of will is to decide whether to oppose it or not.

NARRATION: Glenn could read what was beneath that face. He had done it a thousand times: on strangers, on debtors, on Holland himself. He could know with exactness whether this was what Coltrane wanted.

NARRATION: He did not do it.

NARRATION: He took refuge in ignorance. If he was going to convert him, he would do it without asking Coltrane's mind what his ears did not want to hear.

NARRATION: Coltrane did not oppose.

NARRATION: Glenn would have preferred for him to oppose.

(FADE)

QUICK CUT — AFTER

(The same room. The level of oil in the lamp has dropped, dimming the light.)

(Coltrane is seated in one of the armchairs. Still. Inert.)

NARRATION: Glenn did what he considered he had to do, with the repulsion of one who knows exactly what he is drinking.

NARRATION: It was the blood closest to his own that he would ever taste. A flavour he recognised against his will and that he expended unnecessary effort in not remembering.

NARRATION: When he stopped, Coltrane was still breathing. Barely, but breathing. It was all that the conversion required. The drainage calculation had been exact: not one millilitre too much, not one too little.

NARRATION: Then came the return of the blood. An exchange he found equally repulsive.

(Coltrane opens his eyes.)

NARRATION: They were no longer Diana's eyes.

NARRATION: Glenn had not counted on that loss. For months he had been crossing those eyes in the corridors, running into the last remainder of his wife in the face of his son, until the sight had stopped causing him pain.

NARRATION: The face was still the same. The gaze now belonged to another creature.

NARRATION: And what that gaze was absorbing was different too. Glenn did not need to read his mind: he had lived it himself, years before, beneath a tree.

NARRATION: Shadows taking on edges. A leaf in the garden, thirty paces away, returning his gaze with a detail in its veining that the human eye could not reach. The world trying on a whole new way of existing.

NARRATION: Glenn granted him the time necessary to look.

(Pause.)

GLENN: *(from the other end)* You're hungry.

NARRATION: It was not a question. Coltrane did not answer. But he was hungry: a kind of hunger he had never felt and that he recognised at once, as if he had been waiting for it since before being born.

GLENN: Come.

QUICK CUT — THE HUNT

(The scene remains black. There are no images.)

NARRATION: They left through the back door, so as not to wake Annie. Coltrane did not want to disturb her; Glenn preferred that she not see him in that night's light. For once, the interests of both coincided.

NARRATION: Of what happened in the hours that followed, neither of them would ever speak. Ever. It was not shame: it was operative prudence. To name it would have turned it into a cemented fact.

NARRATION: They preferred that the night be reduced to what it was: a long, dark stretch, a methodical tutelage Coltrane had not asked for and that Glenn imparted out of obligation.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: They returned to the estate before dawn.

QUICK CUT — THE STUDY, AGAIN

(Glenn alone. The lamp is out. The room is in absolute gloom.)

(He is seated in the same armchair Coltrane had occupied a couple of hours earlier. His hands in his lap. He has not washed them. It would have been incongruous to do so: in his new existence there is no stain that does not vanish on its own with the hours.)

NARRATION: He thought, for the first time in a long time, of his mother's face. He did not know why.

NARRATION: Coltrane had retired to sleep the way the newly turned sleep, which is the way those who have just died a little sleep.

NARRATION: Glenn knew this from experience. He had slept that way once, and Juno had watched

him from a corner without making a sound.

NARRATION: Him, tonight, no one was watching.

NARRATION: For years he had imagined that doing to another what Juno had done to him would be an instant of a certain cosmic concordance.

NARRATION: Until tonight he had not understood that what Juno felt on converting him bore no resemblance to this. She had been driven by a frivolous impulse, almost a distracted one. What he had done was of another category.

NARRATION: He had transferred the weight. He had been carrying for over fifteen years something baleful and without name, and tonight, without saying it, without quite knowing why now, he had dealt it to Coltrane.

NARRATION: Coltrane had not asked for it. He did not even have the means to measure what he was receiving. But he received it. Glenn had let it go, and anything let go ends up striking something.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The room felt emptier than a few hours earlier.

NARRATION: Glenn, too.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Two Farewells. *Virginia. ~1780-1782.*

(A night like any other. A week after the massacre.)

(Glenn passes through the corridor next to the kitchen. He was on his way somewhere else, but he stops in the doorway without having decided to. The scene is beginning to become routine: Annie seated at the table, peeling a piece of fruit. Coltrane opposite, with an empty stool marking the distance, speaking to her in a low voice about nothing in particular, only to keep the air in motion.)

(Annie laughs. It is a half-laugh. Her face lights up for half a second and goes out. Coltrane smiles.)

NARRATION: Glenn watched them from the doorway with an attention that astonished even him. He was trying to understand what he had in front of him, and it was costing him.

NARRATION: A boy with seven days of immortality, seated a metre and a half from the woman he loved. A woman six months pregnant.

NARRATION: A woman whose blood reached Coltrane through the friction of her dress, through the wave of heat she displaced in the air as she moved.

NARRATION: And Coltrane had not moved. He spoke to her in a low voice, with the concentration of one holding a fragile object. And Annie returned a half-smile.

NARRATION: Glenn thought, without having planned to, of Diana.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He thought of the dawn on which he had walked out of the house with nothing but what he was wearing. Of how he had not approached the cradle to say goodbye to the child. Of how he had not even dared to attempt to say goodbye to Diana.

NARRATION: He had handed Juno, during those first weeks, a cleaner version: that he had fled in order to protect Diana. So as not to risk doing her harm. Out of love.

NARRATION: Juno had nodded without believing him. She had spent centuries watching newly turned men tell themselves noble versions of their own flight.

NARRATION: The truth was simpler: he had not stayed because he lacked the courage. To remain at Diana's side while being what he was would have demanded an endurance he did not, then, possess. He had left because leaving was easier than trying.

NARRATION: Coltrane, by contrast, had stayed.

NARRATION: Coltrane, who had seven days as an immortal, who had asked for none of this, was seated a metre and a half from Annie, holding himself in, meeting her gaze when she laughed. He was doing, without anyone having told him it was possible, exactly what Glenn had not even attempted.

(Long pause.)

(Glenn draws back from the doorway before either of them sees him. He goes down to the studio. He sits in the armchair without opening a book.)

NARRATION: He had spent sixteen years believing, without ever having said it aloud, that his flight had been a form of nobility. That a less noble man would have stayed behind and done harm.

NARRATION: Coltrane had just dismantled that structure without intending to.

NARRATION: The information arrived too late. For Diana, for him, for everything. But it arrived.

NARRATION: And Glenn, who had learned to file everything away, discovered that he had no drawer in which to keep this.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE CONVERSATION GLENN SHOULD NOT HEAR

(Three weeks later. Glenn in his study. A single candle lit. An open book he is not reading.)

NARRATION: He heard it without meaning to. Immortals' ears do not switch off, and Glenn had never developed the discipline of ignoring what was not his to overhear.

NARRATION: Annie and Coltrane were sitting outside, on the bench at the edge of the garden. They spoke in low voices, with the calm of those who have stopped being in a hurry to finish things.

NARRATION: Glenn caught two words and knew at once he should catch no more.

NARRATION: The two words were: *what are you*.

NARRATION: He closed the book. Not in order to stop hearing (he knew there was no way), but out of a kind of respect he had not practised in a long time. It was Coltrane's conversation, not his.

NARRATION: He heard it whole, all the same.

NARRATION: Annie was not asking to condemn. She was asking to confirm what she already knew. Glenn had appraised too many voices in his life not to distinguish a question that seeks an answer from one that seeks a closing. Annie's was the second.

NARRATION: When Coltrane did not reply, that absence of a reply closed the conversation.

NARRATION: Then he heard something else. Annie saying something about raising the child far away. Coltrane, not answering. Annie saying something about not hating him. Coltrane, not answering.

NARRATION: And then, what Glenn did not expect.

NARRATION: Annie, choking back a cry.

NARRATION: It was too brief to reconstruct the scene from the study. But it was, this much he identified, a cry of horror. Not of fear. Of horror. Annie had just recognised something.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Whatever it was, it had confirmed the suspicion she had been harbouring for weeks. Glenn did not care what it had been. He cared about the effect.

NARRATION: The decision that woman had been silently postponing for three weeks had just been taken, and it was going to fall to him to sign a cheque before dawn broke.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE CARRIAGE HOUSE. THE SMALL HOURS

(Glenn stands inside the carriage house. The light has not yet broken. There are three women in the yard: Annie, another with a bundle and a third with a small pack. Annie is carrying little. Everything she owns fits into a cloth bag.)

(Coltrane is outside, some fifteen metres away, keeping his distance. He has not moved. Glenn watches him from the gloom with the private impression of seeing a young horse that has been split in half, and that goes on standing because it does not yet know.)

(Glenn approaches Annie. He holds out an envelope to her. It is not bulky, but it contains exactly what is needed. He has verified the calculation twice during the night.)

GLENN: *(in a low voice, without ceremony)* For the journey. And for the first few months.

(Annie looks at the envelope. Then she looks at him. Glenn holds her gaze without expecting anything: no thanks, no reproach.)

(Annie takes it. She does not say thank you.)

ANNIE: *(without raising her voice, indicating barely with her gaze toward where Coltrane stands)*
How long has he been like this?

NARRATION: Glenn understood the breadth of the question without asking for clarification. *How long has he been what he is. How long have you let me live with that under the same roof without warning me.*

GLENN: Three weeks.

(Annie nods, very slowly.)

ANNIE: And you?

NARRATION: Glenn was on the point of lying. It was the easiest course: a believable number, a sober story, and the matter closed.

NARRATION: But the woman already had one foot outside, and Annie was not among those who scattered information: she was among those who took it to the grave.

GLENN: Sixteen years.

NARRATION: From the outside, Annie seemed not to react. She processed it.

NARRATION: Glenn saw the gears moving. A woman accustomed to making silent calculations to survive, and he saw the exact moment when the calculations added up for her.

NARRATION: Sixteen years. Coltrane was seventeen. His mother had sold him to the Hollands shortly before his second birthday.

NARRATION: And a man with sixteen years as an immortal who turns up on one single night at a county party, identifies a particular slave among a hundred without ever having seen him, pays the debt without haggling and takes him home... that man was no casual buyer.

NARRATION: He was something else.

NARRATION: Annie did not say it aloud. He saw her store it away in the manner that women like her stored dangerous things: in a closed place, which would remain closed until the end of her days.

ANNIE: *(looking out toward the distance where Coltrane stands, but without looking at him)* Look after him.

GLENN: *(without thinking)* I will.

NARRATION: He said it too quickly. With too much sincerity. In over fifteen years he had not affirmed a thing without first running it through three filters, and that *I will* had come out on its own.

NARRATION: Annie noticed. And she noticed that, spoken with that nakedness, it was the only thing from that estate she was going to take with her and consider truly useful.

ANNIE: *(nodding once)* May God help you, then.

NARRATION: She did not say it with sarcasm; she had no energy left for that. She said it with the literalness of a woman who believes in God and dispenses blessings to whoever might need them, regardless of whether they deserve them or not.

NARRATION: Glenn did not remember the last time anyone had spoken to him of God without irony. He took a second too long to process that the sentence was meant in earnest.

NARRATION: By the time he accepted it, it was too late to respond. Annie had turned and was walking toward the other two women.

QUICK CUT — LAST IMAGE

(Coltrane outside the carriage house, keeping his distance. Glenn within, in the gloom. The three women moving off down a dirt road. Annie does not turn back. The other two do, once. The dawn opening on the horizon like a slow wound.)

NARRATION: Coltrane did not move until the figures disappeared beyond the bend. Glenn did not come out of the carriage house.

NARRATION: The two of them stayed like that, separated by the whole space of the yard, far longer than either of them would have known how to justify.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE HOUSE, AFTER

NARRATION: Glenn had lived alone with Juno for fifteen years. He knew what it was to share a space

with someone without real cohabitation.

NARRATION: Living with Coltrane was something else, and the difference was simple: with Juno he had been the pupil. With Coltrane, without having chosen it, he had become the master. And a master is watched.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The months passed in staggered interrogations.

NARRATION: Coltrane did not press. He would let questions drop at irregular intervals: two in a single night, none in five days, one in isolation in the library, three in succession during a walk through the forest.

NARRATION: He did it with the same silent technique by which he had learned to steal vocabulary from the doorway of the Holland children's schoolroom. Each question was cheap to ask and expensive to answer. Glenn noticed after a month. Coltrane had known from the first day.

COLTRANE: *(one night, with no prior context)* How old were you when you were turned?

GLENN: Thirty-five.

COLTRANE: And how old are you now?

(A pause.)

GLENN: The same.

(Coltrane looks at him for a moment.)

COLTRANE: Who did it?

GLENN: *(without looking away)* No one you know.

COLTRANE: Is she still alive?

(A longer pause.)

GLENN: Yes.

COLTRANE: Where does she live?

GLENN: In Europe.

COLTRANE: Does she know I exist?

NARRATION: Glenn was slow to answer. It was the first question of the night for which he did not have an evasive manoeuvre already formulated.

GLENN: No.

COLTRANE: Are you going to tell her?

GLENN: I don't think so.

COLTRANE: Why not?

GLENN: *(with a neutrality that functioned as an answer)* Because I don't think it's any of her concern.

NARRATION: Coltrane nodded slowly. Not to accept; to register.

NARRATION: Glenn had begun to recognise that gesture. The quantity of dossiers Coltrane was accumulating began to unsettle him, but in a slow way, without urgency, because no urgencies were left to him.

NARRATION: Glenn did not have a human life to defend. For fifteen years his whole life had been Juno; now the empty space was filling with Coltrane's presence. It was not exactly living, but it was not nothing either.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: It was, Glenn would discover one small-hour, a calm he had never experienced. The kind of calm that gets mistaken for happiness when one has spent too long not being happy.

NARRATION: He found it difficult to admit, because validating that calm would oblige him to admit too many other things he still preferred to keep in the dark.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE SIGNAL

NARRATION: They had been operating like that for a little over a year when the signal arrived.

NARRATION: It was an ordinary night at the end of summer. He had "dined" with Coltrane (the two of them executed the choreography of sitting at the table without tasting a thing, solely to give the day its shape) and had then retired to the porch with a glass of spirits that had been a symbolic object for months.

NARRATION: Coltrane was on his usual stone bench, at the edge of the garden, looking toward the line of the forest.

NARRATION: A half moon. Warm air. The distant smell of the horses in the stable. Glenn permitted himself, on evenings like that, a degree of mental inactivity that in other times he would have classified as a structural hazard and that now resembled simple maintenance work.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: And then, with no warning, Glenn's consciousness left the porch.

NARRATION: Not entirely. The body remained anchored where it had been a second before, glass in hand. But the attention had come loose from the flesh and was elsewhere.

NARRATION: The sensation was that of the lucid dreams of his biological life: one went on perceiving the acoustics of the room and inhabited another space at the same time.

NARRATION: The other place was a forest.

NARRATION: Trees that did not belong to Virginia. The light was different: further north, colder, older. A residence at the back, barely hinted at among the branches, with the silhouette of those European stone buildings he had long since stopped registering in his memory, because looking at them was inconvenient.

NARRATION: And then came the rest. With no name and no shape.

NARRATION: Decades of a residue accumulated in silence. A despair that was neither explosive nor scandalous, but domestic: the suffocation of one who has tired of harbouring hope and has found nothing with which to replace it.

NARRATION: Glenn deciphered it because it was real, and the real still managed to perforate him in spite of the sixteen years he had spent emptying himself out from within. He understood it beneath analysis, in that stratum where things that once were true still recognise each other.

NARRATION: Juno.

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: The transmission lasted a couple of seconds. Perhaps less. When it cut out, Glenn returned to the porch with the jolt of one who wakes from a dream that had felt real until the exact instant of waking.

NARRATION: The glass was still intact in his hand. He had not spilled a drop: the flesh had held the posture in the pilot's absence.

NARRATION: So paralysed did he remain that, after a few minutes, he registered something he had never before caught with such clarity.

NARRATION: From the far end of the garden, head turned, Coltrane was watching him.

COLTRANE: *(from the stone bench, without altering his volume)* Is something the matter?

GLENN: *(without moving a muscle)* No.

COLTRANE: Are you sure?

GLENN: Yes. I'm fine.

(A pause.)

COLTRANE: As you wish.

NARRATION: Coltrane did not press. Anyone else would have repeated the question a couple more times. He simply stored the datum for another occasion.

NARRATION: Glenn rose after a long while. He set the glass on the table. He crossed the garden and passed within centimetres of the bench, without uttering a word. Coltrane did not lift his gaze.

(FADE TO BLACK)

QUICK CUT — THE STUDY. THE SMALL HOURS

(Glenn seated at the desk. A single candle. Paper, ink, pen. He is not writing: he is thinking. He holds the pen suspended in the air.)

NARRATION: Glenn had not returned to Europe since the night of the Holland invitation. Two years had passed.

NARRATION: He had not avoided it out of fear. He had avoided it out of a retroactive shame he did not allow himself to examine: fleeing to Europe had been, at the time, the only effective tool for not looking back. And returning meant having to look.

NARRATION: But Juno was there, somewhere on a map for which he had no coordinates. And she had just emitted something that in fifteen years of cohabitation she had never emitted.

NARRATION: Juno did not ask. Juno took. Either she grew bored, or she laughed, or she turned on her heel and walked off. Asking was an organisational failure of the weak.

NARRATION: That she should have emitted a request (and that, without a single word, had been unmistakably a request) meant that something catastrophic had occurred. Something she was incapable of resolving on her own.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn considered ignoring it. Letting the small hours pass. Letting the week pass. Allowing the static to dissolve in time. He thought of returning to the administrative rhythm of the

blank dinners and the deferred questions. Of staying, in short, exactly where he was.

NARRATION: And then he ascertained, the way one ascertains a physical law, that it was already impossible for him.

NARRATION: The transmission had pulled him out of his torpor, and from an awakening like that there is no voluntary return to the previous sleep.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: He lowered his hand. He rested the pen on the paper. He began to write.

NARRATION: Not to Juno. To his accountant in Philadelphia.

(FADE TO BLACK)

NARRATION: It took him eleven days to organise what had to be organised. Accounts. Documents. Two letters to debtors in Boston whom Glenn was going to allow, for the only time in his existence, not to repay him.

NARRATION: He sent strict instructions to the accountant: during his absence, Coltrane would answer for the property, and the businessmen of the county would have to deal with him exactly as if they were dealing with Glenn Sheridan himself.

NARRATION: The estate could stand without him. Of that he was sure. What he was not sure of was whether Coltrane could stand within it.

NARRATION: Finally, he addressed him on the night of the eleventh day.

QUICK CUT — THE STUDY. NIGHT

(Glenn stands beside the desk. Coltrane in the doorway. A single lamp lit. Glenn has not asked him to come in, and Coltrane has not come in. From the rigidity of his posture, Glenn deduces that the boy anticipated this conversation long before being summoned.)

GLENN: I have to leave...

(Coltrane does not blink.)

GLENN: ... For Europe.

(Pause.)

COLTRANE: When are you leaving?

GLENN: The day after tomorrow. A ship sails from Norfolk.

COLTRANE: How long will you be over there?

(Glenn weighs the variables. None are in sight.)

GLENN: I don't know.

NARRATION: Coltrane had learned to mask almost everything. But there remained a very fine band, just beneath the eyes, where emotions surfaced for an instant before being filed away. Glenn had learned to watch that band.

COLTRANE: Is it her?

NARRATION: Glenn had anticipated the question for eleven days, and even so the precision of the shot disarmed him for a second.

GLENN: Yes.

COLTRANE: Is she in danger?

GLENN: *(slowly)* That I don't know either.

COLTRANE: But you think so.

GLENN: I do.

(Pause.)

COLTRANE: Are you coming back?

GLENN: Yes.

COLTRANE: When?

GLENN: I don't know yet.

NARRATION: Coltrane nodded. The same aseptic nod as ever.

GLENN: The estate is yours for as long as you wish to occupy it. My accountant in Philadelphia has precise instructions. The men of the county already know that in my absence you answer for everything. If you should come to need anything—

COLTRANE: *(cutting him off)* I'm not going to need anything.

NARRATION: Glenn let out a faint breath. It was true. Coltrane had learned not to need anything from anyone a very long time ago. Legal freedom had only served him to confirm an old survival habit.

(A pause. The two look in different directions, avoiding each other.)

GLENN: Coltrane.

(The one addressed lifts his gaze.)

NARRATION: Glenn wanted to add something. The sentence he had spent eleven days trying to articulate, the one that would perhaps make the next decade, or the rest of eternity, more bearable.

NARRATION: But that night it lacked form. He rummaged in the archive and took out the only thing he had to hand.

GLENN: ... Take care.

NARRATION: It was poor. Wretched. Glenn knew it at the exact moment of hearing himself. So did Coltrane. The two of them decided, by tacit agreement, to ignore the magnitude of the failure.

COLTRANE: *(nodding once)* Have a good journey.

NARRATION: It was a butler's sentence. Coltrane had used it hundreds of times in the entrance hall of the Holland mansion to see his masters' guests out. He was using it now on purpose.

NARRATION: Glenn understood the blow and acknowledged that he had earned it in full.

NARRATION: He left the study without another word. Coltrane stayed in the doorway, straight-backed. He did not follow him with his eyes.

NARRATION: Glenn walked down the corridor without looking back, which was the only manner he knew of leaving places.

NARRATION: When he fled Virginia the first time, sixteen years earlier, he had thought he heard Diana calling him from very far away. This time there was no call. The house sank into the silence in

which Coltrane had always kept it.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Broken Knight. *EUROPE. ~1785.*

QUICK CUT — THE VOYAGE

(Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean.)

NARRATION: The ship was one of the slow ones. Glenn had chosen it on purpose. He had four weeks ahead of him and had not had so much time to himself in a couple of years. He used them not to think.

NARRATION: The problem with not-thinking, when one has spent a lustrum being what he was, is that it has textures. The not-thinking of parties and card games did not resemble that of hotels, staring at ceilings in cities whose names one forgot the next day. And neither resembled that of being on board, because the ocean does not let one fully disengage: it is indifferent and, even so, does not let one go.

NARRATION: Glenn had known this since the outward crossing, the first, the one he had made with Juno. But this time the water had a different weight. It dragged two people in his head, not one, and the two of them were in opposite hemispheres.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The signal returned on the twelfth night.

QUICK CUT — THE CABIN

(At night. The ship's wood creaks. The candle is out: Glenn does not need it. He is lying down, fully dressed, his eyes open. He has not slept since Norfolk.)

NARRATION: The transmission arrived with no warning, as the first time had. The difference was that Glenn now knew what it was before it unfolded, and that was enough to lower the defences he had raised without realising.

NARRATION: The images returned: the forest, the residence, the northern light. But this time there was more.

NARRATION: Decades of an inventory Glenn had not even imagined. A woman confined without walls. It was not the Juno who laughed at parties, nor the one who would turn her face away, jaded, when he complained during their first year. It was a much older one, hidden beneath all the other Junos, layer over layer, like an object buried in the foundations of successive houses.

NARRATION: And at the back, slipping into the images, something Glenn could not name. Not a person: the place where a person should be, and where there was nothing he could recognise. He brushed against it only briefly, just long enough to know he did not want to brush against it again, and the transmission cut off before showing it to him whole.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn thought, briefly, of Coltrane. He thought of him the way one thinks of a door one has left ajar on going out: with a mixture of irritation and relief. *I'll come back*, he told himself. *It won't be for long.*

NARRATION: That sentence was going to return. *It won't be for long.* And each time it returned, it would do so with the shame with which one recalls a wager lost through excess of confidence.

NARRATION: But that night Glenn only opened his eyes in the darkness, heard the wood creak under the weight of the water, and began to count how many days he had left until dry land.

NARRATION: The ocean went on being indifferent.

(FADE TO BLACK)

NARRATION: Glenn spent close to two years searching for her without entirely knowing what he was doing.

NARRATION: He boarded a ship and crossed the ocean. He told himself he was returning to Europe because it was older than America, and therefore more hospitable to his kind of problem. It was an explanation. It was not the true one.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The strange episodes came uninvited. He was walking down a street in Paris when he was assailed by the scent of a perfume Juno wore sometimes. In Prague, in an inn, he thought he heard her laugh in a corridor, until he remembered Juno would never set foot in that kind of place.

NARRATION: By the third or fourth time he understood what was happening. It was not his memory recalling her by accident. It was her, sending fragments.

QUICK CUT — THE SIGNAL

(A rented room somewhere in the north. Glenn seated on a narrow bed, dressed. Untouched: he does not make a habit of sleeping.)

NARRATION: The first image was a forest of conifers, with nothing remarkable about it. But it carried a detail Juno would never have designed: the light fell at a slant, as if the moon could not quite penetrate it. A forest no one had entered in centuries.

NARRATION: Glenn deciphered the signal thus: Juno was asking to be found and, at the same time, begging him not to. He doubted Juno herself could have formulated it any better.

(Glenn rises. He stands looking through the window at an empty street.)

NARRATION: A signal so abstract admitted a thousand readings, and almost none of them demanded his intervention.

NARRATION: Glenn went out that very night.

QUICK CUT — THE FOREST

(Glenn walks among the trees. At night. A waning moon.)

NARRATION: Finding the forest took him three weeks, by pure elimination. None resembled Juno's, until one night he came upon it. Not only by the slanting light: by a warning his instinct set off and that his mind, as usual, decided to ignore.

NARRATION: He advanced among the trunks with the tactical patience he had learned hunting with

Juno. But underneath, something older was operating, almost animal: the Irish farmer who still knew how to recognise when he had set foot on someone else's property.

(Glenn stops and lifts his gaze.)

NARRATION: Two hundred metres away, among the trees, a house of thick walls. No ostentation, no lights. But he knew, without examining it, that within there was someone, or something, awake.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: And then, before taking another step, he felt the presence.

NARRATION: It resembled none he knew. Juno's was dense, but familiar; he had felt that of others like him before. This one was on another scale. Archaic, in no hurry, like something that has spent millennia watching time from outside. A being with lead in place of bones.

NARRATION: The most unsettling part was its inertia: an ocean-bottom stillness, motionless beneath an incomprehensible mass of water. Something that would not move unless it was worth the move.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn's mind dictated a clear order. *Go. Go without looking back. Forget the forest and the signals, because what is breathing in there does not operate under any rule you have learned in your entire existence.*

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn had been ignoring the "go" of his own body since before dying. It was an old human virtue: reckless valour, imprudence disguised as nobility, that the conversion had not erased. Only changed its handwriting.

NARRATION: He told himself Juno was there, and that if she had sent him a signal, it was because she needed him. It was the logic of broken knights.

NARRATION: He kept walking.

QUICK CUT — THE ROOM

(INTERIOR. A room with thick walls. Stone floor. A low table. Two chairs of dark wood. Few ornaments, of an origin unidentifiable to anyone born in the last millennium.)

(AISON sits in front of the table, reading an ancient manuscript resting on his knees. Dark tunic, sandals. The hair, white, falls over his shoulders. It is not greying.)

(JUNO stands a few paces behind Aison's chair. Neither close nor far. Like a satellite in orbit.)

(GLENN comes in. He stops in the doorway.)

NARRATION: The first thing he saw was not Aison, but Juno.

NARRATION: There remained in her nothing of the woman who laughed out loud, nor of the one who had told him "I am the queen of your dreams" with the poise of someone who believes herself regent of the night. It was a lesser Juno, reduced, who had been like that for too long to come back to fullness again.

NARRATION: Glenn understood in that second that she had been in that state for an incalculable time, long before the signals. The cry for help from the Virginia yard had been, quite simply, the first time in centuries that she had allowed herself to recognise that something was wrong.

NARRATION: Anger reached Glenn as a dilated echo.

(JUNO lifts her gaze. She sees Glenn in the doorway. Her face transforms.)

NARRATION: Juno's face did what it could in the scant margin it had. Glenn read it whole, at a glance: a warning repeated with different emphases. *No. No, no, no. What are you doing. Turn around. Go.*

NARRATION: And underneath, another, darker sentence Glenn was not yet in a position to process. *I'm sorry. I didn't tell you who he was. I didn't tell you what he was. All of this is my fault.*

(AISON goes on reading. He has not lifted his gaze.)

(Glenn at last notices AISON. A man who could be thirty years old, or any age. Handsome, in a serene and ancient manner Glenn has no interest in.)

NARRATION: What he did register was the absence of colour. The skin did not read as human skin. The hair seemed to have been white from the moment of conception. And the eyes, fixed on the manuscript, had a discoloration Glenn had never seen, neither in humans nor in others like himself.

NARRATION: Anyone with a minimum of instinct would have read that strangeness as the final warning. Glenn had stopped counting that night's warnings long before.

GLENN: *(advancing a step, raising his voice toward Juno)* Come.

(Pause.)

GLENN: Let's get out of here.

NARRATION: He had been rehearsing the intervention for weeks. He had prepared arguments, calibrated threats. He articulated none of them against the density of that room.

(JUNO closes her eyes for an instant. A gesture of pure resignation.)

GLENN: *(to Juno, refusing to look at Aison)* Let's go. Now. Whatever it is that's keeping you here doesn't matter. We'll sort it out later. Come.

NARRATION: Juno did not move. She already knew what was about to happen and was calculating, in the last functional corner of her mind, how to manage the damage afterward.

GLENN: *(raising his voice, getting it more wrong)* Juno, look at me!

(AISON does not lift his gaze. His discoloured eyes go on travelling the text.)

AISON: *(without altering his rhythm, his eyes moving down to the next line)* Be quiet.

NARRATION: The word fell in the room at the same time as Aison's left eye finished the sentence and dropped to the next line. He did not blink. He did not mark the page. Nothing indicated that his attention had been interrupted.

NARRATION: What was going to hurt Glenn most was not the act itself, but not being worth enough for the other to lift his gaze. It was one single word, said in the tone in which one orders a stray dog to stop barking.

NARRATION: It did not work. Glenn opened his mouth to give one more order.

(He does not manage to utter it.)

NARRATION: The sound came first, and it did not come from outside, but from within Glenn himself. A sound for which no organism is prepared, and that nevertheless his body produced. He heard it resonate from inside his own chest cavity, with the acoustics of someone listening to it from the next room.

NARRATION: The pain arrived late. For a fraction of a second, the noise of his own destruction struck

him as simply curious.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Then, the real pain. And then, the floor.

NARRATION: Glenn did not register the fall. He remembered having been on his feet, he remembered being on the floor, with no bridge between the two states.

(GLENN on the floor. Face up. His cheek pressed against the cold stone. He cannot move. No bone responds. Only the skull seems to have stayed intact.)

NARRATION: Glenn tried to take inventory. The old reflex of a farmer: to check which parts still worked after a fight, to know which ones to take to the healer.

NARRATION: He started with the feet. They did not respond. The legs either. The ribs no longer had the shape of ribs. The arms were not there. The fingers...

(Aison turns a page. The brush of paper is crisp in the silence.)

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Then Glenn saw Juno. From the floor, in a fragmented sequence: first her feet advancing toward him, then her knees bending. Last of all, her face entering the field of vision from above.

NARRATION: Juno had not planned the movement. And nevertheless she had moved.

NARRATION: That was the anomaly. In the centuries she had spent orbiting around Aison, she had learned not to move without first calculating it, to put every gesture through an internal customs check that measured whether Aison would authorise it. This time the customs check dissolved. The body acted, and the mind was informed of the disobedience a second later.

(JUNO kneels beside Glenn. She places a trembling hand on his face.)

JUNO: *(in a low voice, almost to herself)* Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

NARRATION: One for him, for having come. One for her, for having sent the signal. The third already with no addressee.

(Behind Juno, AISON lifts his gaze. He observes the pair for a second. He resumes the reading.)

NARRATION: Juno looked at him for a while. She was not asking him for permission. For centuries she had been asking, convinced that this permission was what kept her in the house. This time she looked at him the way one looks at an object one is about to part with.

(Aison does not lift his gaze again.)

NARRATION: On kneeling beside Glenn, Juno had left suspended in the air (just over the empty chair where she had spent centuries standing) the version of herself that had inhabited that house. The one who got up was going to be another woman. She decided this while she tended to him.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: She slid her hands under his back and the bend of his knees. She lifted him, surprised for an instant by his lightness.

(She walks toward the door.)

NARRATION: At the threshold, Juno paused for an instant. She did not turn back.

NARRATION: It was the last gesture she would carry out under that roof, and she was not going to do

it looking at Aison. To look at him on leaving would have meant acknowledging that the farewell belonged to him. And Juno had decided that the farewell was owed to herself.

NARRATION: She walked out toward the forest carrying Glenn.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Aison turned another page.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Nurse. EUROPE. ~1785–1786.

NARRATION: Juno had been many things across the centuries. Daughter. Fugitive. Widow of a wedding that never took place. Creature. Lover. Mirror. Queen of the drawing room.

NARRATION: A nurse, only once, with a dying man.

NARRATION: She was going to be one a second time.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: She would do it with a clumsiness rigorously internal. Her hands knew how to move; her instinct did not. She was going to get it wrong with her whole body present.

QUICK CUT — THE HOUSE IN THE FOREST

NARRATION: It was a small house Juno had bought from a ruined peasant two centuries earlier, in one of those impulses with which an immortal of means fills the map with places to which she does not intend to return.

NARRATION: That night, at last, she returned. And she did so carrying a sack of bones in the shape of a man.

(EXTERIOR. NIGHT. A clearing among conifers. The house: low stone walls, a thatched roof, a single chimney. The window unlit, because there is no one to light it.)

NARRATION: Juno pushed the door with her elbow. The wood gave way. The lock had spent two centuries being a mere iron ornament.

(INTERIOR. Gloom. A bed of carved wood. A low table. A chair. A cold hearth. The air dense with the dust accumulated over centuries.)

NARRATION: The bed had been there from the start. Juno had commissioned it from an Italian cabinetmaker when she still thought she was going to use the house. She never did. The piece had been left waiting for a guest no one had bothered to summon.

NARRATION: That night, two centuries later, the guest arrived.

(JUNO comes in. She is carrying GLENN in her arms. She lays him on the bed with the meticulousness reserved for a very fragile object. It is not yet the care given to a beloved body: it is the urgency of one holding something on the verge of breaking completely.)

NARRATION: She arranged his arms at his sides. She straightened his legs. She did what she intuited had to be done with a body in the state in which Aison had left Glenn's.

NARRATION: She did it with the inexpert caution of a woman who had never been permitted to approach a cradle, trying to assemble a child too large for the task.

(JUNO stands by the bed. She looks at Glenn. She does not sit down.)

NARRATION: She did not know how to sit, either. Not like that. Not to keep vigil.

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: She would learn.

QUICK CUT — WHAT'S NOT IN THE MANUAL

NARRATION: The first thing she learned was that an immortal with all his bones splintered does not heal on his own.

NARRATION: She learned that he heals with blood. A great deal of blood. Quantities that far exceeded what a healthy body would ask for in order to sustain itself. The drainage operated differently when the objective was reconstruction and not simple maintenance.

NARRATION: She learned, too, that it was going to be she who had to bring it. She had no one to delegate to.

(EXTERIOR. NIGHT. A path. Juno returns carrying a human body. She bears it on her shoulder without effort, the way one carries a sack of grain. She enters the house. She lets it fall beside the bed with a dull thud.)

JUNO: Drink.

(Glenn does not move. His eyes search for hers. His whole body still refuses to obey any order.)

JUNO: Don't make me do it for you.

(Pause.)

GLENN: *(his voice barely a thread)* I'm sorry.

NARRATION: Juno let out a short breath. She decided not to remark that, in practical terms, she was acting as a mother for the first time in her life. It would have sounded absurd.

NARRATION: But she took on the burden. She had discovered that tasks one carries out without putting a label on them get done all the same, and sometimes even better.

(Image: Juno leaning over Glenn, one hand cradling the back of his neck with care, the other bringing close something the frame does not show. Glenn drinks with visible effort, his eyes closed.)

NARRATION: Glenn would remember almost nothing of those first weeks.

NARRATION: He would remember the smell of the blood, which turned out to be strangely different when one consumed it without having had to hunt for it.

NARRATION: He would remember the ceiling of the house and the crack in a beam that drew a shape resembling a pine branch.

NARRATION: He would remember Juno coming in and out of the room at hourly intervals that seemed to answer to no logic.

NARRATION: But he would remember, above all, one single thing: that Juno, throughout all those

weeks, did not speak to him of anything that was not strictly practical.

NARRATION: She did not tell him she was sorry. She did not say thank you. She did not utter a single word that could be registered as a settling of accounts between them.

NARRATION: That, when Glenn had time to think about it afterwards, was what sustained him most. That Juno was not trying to liquidate any debt. That the care, for the first time in his existence, was not a transaction.

QUICK CUT — THE FIRST MOVEMENT

NARRATION: One morning, at some indistinct point in the second month, Glenn moved a finger.

(INTERIOR. The room is the same. Outside, a grey tint confirms that it is winter. JUNO is seated in the chair. Her pale hands work on a frame, tracing an embroidery of exquisite complexity, stitch after stitch, in absolute silence.)

(GLENN lies on his back, as always. And then, suddenly: the index finger of his left hand lifts a few millimetres into the air and falls back onto the blanket.)

GLENN: Look.

(Juno stops the needle. She lifts her gaze. She sees it.)

JUNO: Did you do that on purpose?

GLENN: I think so.

JUNO: Do it again.

(Glenn tries. The finger does not respond. He tries again. Still nothing. On the third contraction, the finger obeys and moves.)

JUNO: *(without smiling, but with a new shade in her voice)* Good.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn closed his eyes. For a man lying with his skeleton in pieces, in a borrowed bed, inside a house in a forest he did not know, that single word had the weight of a peace treaty.

QUICK CUT — THE QUESTION OF TWENTY YEARS

NARRATION: Glenn had been wrestling with a question he had been asking himself since shortly after his conversion. He had kept it hidden behind other, more manageable ones, such as, for example, why he had not been able to approach Diana, while Coltrane had been able to remain a metre away from Annie.

NARRATION: The question underneath was smaller, but much more insidious. It was this: *why me*.

NARRATION: Glenn had answered it in many ways over those twenty years, and all of them wrongly. That it had been because of his features. That it had been because of his hair: that red that drew attention in the taverns. That it had been a question of timing.

NARRATION: Or that it had been for nothing. That had always been the worst of all possible answers: to have been the result of nothing.

NARRATION: That particular night, at some unspecified point in the fourth month, Glenn dared to put the question out loud.

(INTERIOR. NIGHT. The room. The hearth lit: one of Juno's few concessions to comfort; not to her own, to that of the room itself. GLENN sits against the wooden headboard, his arms over the blankets. He still cannot walk, but he can hold himself sitting up for several hours. JUNO is in the chair. She is not embroidering. She is looking at the fire.)

GLENN: Why me?

(Juno does not take her eyes off the fire. She is slow to answer.)

JUNO: I'd been waiting for that question for a while.

GLENN: How long?

JUNO: About as long as you have.

(Pause.)

GLENN: And do you know the answer now?

JUNO: Almost.

NARRATION: It was the most honest answer anyone had ever given him, and Glenn did not fully understand it.

NARRATION: For Juno to say "Almost" meant that she possessed only half the answer. The other half, the real wound that had prompted her decision, she was incapable of seeing.

NARRATION: But she handed him the half she had, which was already more than anyone had ever given him.

JUNO: I saw you in a tavern. It wasn't the first time I'd seen you. You'd been there for months, you and your friends. But that night I noticed you.

GLENN: Why?

JUNO: Because you laughed like someone who had nothing left to lose.

(Pause.)

GLENN: That isn't true.

JUNO: Yes it is. Laughter is the last thing to go. When you laugh the way you laughed that night, it's because there's nothing left behind it.

NARRATION: Glenn wanted to protest. He could not: he knew it was true, even if he would not have wanted to see it then.

NARRATION: The Diana of those days was already exhausted. Little Johannes was already sensing the absence that inhabited his father. And he himself was laughing in the taverns with an intensity that managed to fool everyone else, but not himself.

(Pause.)

JUNO: I didn't pick you out of caprice, if that's what you wanted to know.

GLENN: *(relieved)* Yes.

JUNO: I picked you because I saw something in you I recognised. Something specific.

GLENN: What was it?

(Juno is slow. She thinks about it. She turns and, for the first time that night, looks at him.)

JUNO: That you'd be able to carry what was going to happen to you. Most can't. They break in the first few years. You didn't.

NARRATION: Glenn did not answer. It was true: he had not broken. Although he had been within a few millimetres of doing so. He let the answer settle in the room.

NARRATION: What Juno did not say, because she did not know how to put it into words, was the rest.

NARRATION: That she had needed to choose someone after centuries of having been, herself, the chosen one. That the verb "to convert", in her mouth, meant something radically different from what it meant in Aison's mouth.

NARRATION: In Juno's mouth it meant "to be the cause of". And for someone who had spent two and a half centuries being only the effect, to be the cause of something was as urgent as breathing.

NARRATION: Glenn was not going to hear that, not that night, not any other night. But the half he did hear was enough.

NARRATION: It was enough that Juno had seen something. It was enough that this something had a name, even if the name was vague. It was enough to know that his eternity had not depended on the colour of his hair.

NARRATION: That night Glenn allowed himself to close his eyes the way an exhausted immortal closes them: the body still, the mind switching off in tracts. It was the first time in years that he did it without the weight of the question pressing at the back of his neck.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The question did not go away entirely. It only shrank a little. He considered that that was all he could ask.

QUICK CUT — WHAT JUNO HAD NEVER SAID

NARRATION: The reciprocity arrived two months later, with no warning.

(INTERIOR. Afternoon. Glenn can walk now, though slowly. He is sitting on the floor in front of the hearth. It is an unusual choice, considering that he has a bed and a chair, but sometimes bodies in convalescence choose the floor because the floor does not demand balance. Juno is sitting next to him. The two of them look at the fire.)

GLENN: How did he find you?

(Juno is slow to understand. When she does, she closes her eyes for a moment.)

JUNO: You mean Aison?

GLENN: Yes.

(Long pause.)

JUNO: I was dying.

NARRATION: It was the most naked sentence Juno had spoken about herself in two hundred and fifty years. Across that span she had told the story in many ways: adorned, made ironic, hidden in mundane jokes. But never like that, without wrapping.

JUNO: The plague. In France. I was young. I was lying in a street, in a corner. I stank as if I were already dead. And then he appeared.

GLENN: And what did he say to you?

JUNO: He asked me if I wanted to live.

GLENN: What did you answer?

JUNO: I told him yes.

(Pause.)

JUNO: I've spent more than two and a half centuries asking myself if it was the right answer.

NARRATION: Glenn did not answer. He knew better than anyone that there was nothing to say. That there were questions an immortal puts to the fire, and not to another immortal.

NARRATION: But he did one thing that Juno, in two hundred and fifty years, had never been given: he took her hand.

NARRATION: He did not do it with drama. He took it the way one takes the hand of someone sitting beside one in front of a hearth: with no further implications than the very existence of the gesture.

NARRATION: Juno looked at both their hands joined with genuine curiosity. As if she were observing an unknown phenomenon, one she had not experienced before and that was occurring with total independence from her will.

NARRATION: She did not withdraw it. And that, for a woman who had spent centuries calculating every gesture, was the closest thing to an experiment.

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: They stayed like that until the hearth asked for more wood. When Juno got up to feed it, she let Glenn's hand go with the naturalness of one who assumes she will pick it up again later.

NARRATION: And Glenn understood, without needing to confirm it, that so it would be.

QUICK CUT — THE EMBROIDERY

NARRATION: The piece was finished one afternoon in March, six months and eleven days after the first stitch. Juno cut the thread with her teeth. She looked at the frame just long enough to confirm that the work was complete, and set it down on the table without further ceremony.

(GLENN is standing for the first time in a long while. He still walks with a certain stiffness, but he walks. He approaches the table and looks at the cloth.)

NARRATION: What he saw was an intricate field of minute flowers on a dark ground. Dozens. Hundreds, perhaps. Each one resolved with a patience Glenn did not know how to begin to appraise.

NARRATION: He recognised some (the daisies, the violets) and did not know the names of the rest. What he did know, without ever having seen a piece like it, was that he was looking at something not produced in any place to which he had ever had access in his life.

GLENN: Juno.

JUNO: What?

GLENN: What is this?

(Juno looks up. She appraises the cloth in its entirety. She takes it with a quick, efficient movement and folds it. She holds it out to Glenn.)

JUNO: You can keep it.

GLENN: ...

JUNO: But don't go getting ideas. I didn't make it thinking of you. I only needed to keep my hands busy.

NARRATION: Glenn received the cloth with both hands, because something in the weight of the piece (which was physically light) demanded that he use both hands. He did not know what to say. He chose silence.

NARRATION: What Glenn did not know, and what he would never come to confirm, was that this was the first piece Juno had ever deliberately handed to anyone in her whole existence.

NARRATION: She had not left it behind in an armchair, nor passed it off through carelessness to some passing chambermaid. It was being handed over, with the hand extended, looking the other person in the eye, and pronouncing the word *keep it*.

NARRATION: All of Juno's previous works had scattered across the world through abandonment or indifference. This one, no.

NARRATION: Of course, Juno never formulated it in those terms either. Having handed over the cloth, she turned toward the fire, because the flames were already beginning to die down, and the logs, after all, did not feed themselves.

QUICK CUT — THE HOUSE WITHOUT A PATIENT

NARRATION: A little over six months after the night of the bones, Glenn walked to the door without supporting himself on anything.

NARRATION: He pushed it with his elbow, as he had seen Juno do. The wood gave way. The lock was still a useless mechanism.

(EXTERIOR. EVENING. The clearing among the conifers. Glenn stands in the doorway. Juno, behind him, remains inside the house.)

JUNO: Where are you going?

GLENN: To see if I still know how to walk.

JUNO: You already know that you do.

GLENN: Let me confirm it.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn walked. Not far: a hundred steps, in a straight line, to the trunk of the first tree. He touched the bark with his hand, like a child touching the wall at the end of a race. Then he turned back.

NARRATION: When he reached the door again, Juno was still there.

JUNO: You're ready.

(Glenn nods.)

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Neither of them articulated what both of them knew: that "ready" meant something more than being healed. It meant that the cabin, from that moment on, ceased to have operative justification. That a healed invalid is, by definition, a guest who leaves. And that a guest who does not leave is something else: a category for which neither of them had any available definition.

NARRATION: Glenn did not leave that day. Nor the next.

NARRATION: But both of them knew the departure was a settled matter.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: They would leave several weeks later. They would walk the road together as far as the first crossroads, and then take opposite directions.

NARRATION: Juno would return to the capitals and to the drawing rooms, picking up from outside the thread of what she had set down the day she dragged Glenn into the forest. Glenn would go elsewhere, still not knowing exactly where.

NARRATION: The house was left empty. The bed of carved wood was left waiting, again, for a guest who would not arrive for centuries. The lock would go on being useless.

NARRATION: What was not left behind, neither in the house nor in either of them, was the other thing. The other thing they carried with them for the rest of their respective existences.

NARRATION: Glenn would not again suffer under the weight of his question. And Juno would not again let go of anyone's hand assuming she could pick it up again later.

NARRATION: It was the deepest bond they were going to have. And both of them, in strict silence, knew it.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

Glenn, Alone at Last. *EUROPE. 19th Century.*

NARRATION: There is a kind of solitude one chooses and a kind of solitude one inherits. Glenn's, that first morning after the crossroads, was of the second kind.

NARRATION: At first glance it looked like freedom: he had a body that obeyed him again. He had money enough to cross borders without offering explanations. He had the two tongues he had been raised in and a couple more half-learned.

NARRATION: And above all, he had no one waiting for him anywhere. For a man who had spent twenty years calculating the exact hour of his returns, that absence felt, during the first months, like having shed a weight.

NARRATION: What took time to register was the other side of the matter. The problem with shedding all one's weights is that one forgets the weight was also the counterweight. And a body without a counterweight, although at first it seems lighter, ends up over time spinning on its own axis.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn spent most of the nineteenth century like that.

QUICK CUT — THE CROSSROADS

(A road in the north. The dawn breaks without enthusiasm. There is mud in the cart ruts and two pairs of footprints that part there: Juno's heading east. Glenn's heading south.)

(Juno pauses for a moment. She does not look back. Neither does Glenn. They had exhausted everything they had to say to each other over the previous six months, and both knew that anything they added now would be mere ornament.)

JUNO: *(without turning)* Write to me.

GLENN: Where to?

JUNO: You'll find a way.

NARRATION: It was the most generous sentence Juno knew how to utter, and Glenn recognised it as such. It meant that she trusted him to find her, and that she, for her part, was not going to allow herself to be found easily. A pact of seeking and resistance disguised as a farewell.

(Glenn nods although she does not see it. He adjusts the collar of his coat. He begins to walk.)

NARRATION: At a hundred paces he realised it was the first time in his existence that he had walked with neither a destination nor a person waiting on the other side.

NARRATION: It was a concrete freedom.

NARRATION: It lasted him about ten minutes.

QUICK CUT — THE FIRST OFFICE

(A port city in the north. An indeterminate year, the end of the eighteenth century leaning into the nineteenth. Glenn has rented a room above a printing house. He has acquired a desk, a lamp, two chairs, a ledger and a pen. A strictly functional office. Ugly, without mitigation.)

(GLENN sits behind the desk. Opposite him, a MAN of around forty, a moneylender or something of that ilk, is visibly sweating.)

THE MAN: I assure you the sum will be complete by the end of the month.

GLENN: It will be complete this week.

THE MAN: That's impossible.

GLENN: *(calmly)* It's impossible for you.

NARRATION: Glenn had discovered, with the surprise of a man who at fifty discovers he has a good ear for a language he has never studied, that he possessed a specific talent for this.

NARRATION: The talent was in the stillness. Force was something any dockside thug had; what was rare was the capacity to remain seated, watching, without altering a single muscle, while everything that had to pass through the other man passed through him.

NARRATION: It was because he was a little dead. Only a dead man can hold a pause like that.

NARRATION: The living always end up filling the silence with something, even with a sigh, because they have a clock against them. Glenn no longer had one.

NARRATION: Men like the one now sweating in front of him sensed the difference without being able to catalogue it. They understood that the person on the other side of the desk seemed to have no hurry, no fear, nothing at stake. That was what undid them.

GLENN: This week. I'm repeating it for the record.

THE MAN: *(after a long pause)* This week.

(Glenn nods.)

NARRATION: He did not raise his voice to that man. He had to do so with almost none of them. It was enough to sit and wait. It was almost indecent how good he was at it.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: And equally obscene how little it cost him.

QUICK CUT — THE METHOD

NARRATION: Glenn learned early on that the trade had few rules, but that none of them admitted any margin for exception.

NARRATION: The first was not to appear angry. Anger was an amateur's recourse. A man who grows angry is asking the other to be afraid of him, and men who ask for fear almost always end up not receiving it. Glenn asked for nothing. That was what was terrifying.

NARRATION: The second was not to threaten what one was not prepared to execute. Empty threats were like cheques without funds: sooner or later someone would go to the bank to cash them. Glenn never issued a cheque without funds.

NARRATION: The third was not to intervene in person if it could be avoided. Not out of delicacy, but for operative efficiency. Glenn's presence during an event was a compromising datum the operation did not require. Any drunk could break another man's arm. Glenn did not hire drunken thugs. He hired methodical men, assigned them good pay, and left for another city when necessary.

NARRATION: The fourth, and the most important, was to leave no debts alive. If a man owed him money, either that money came in, or that man stopped existing. There was no third category.

NARRATION: This, though it sounded barbaric, was in reality the cleanest part of the trade. Other moneylenders lived on renewed debt, on prorogued interest, on the perpetual anguish of the debtor. Not Glenn. Glenn did not want anguish. He wanted closure.

NARRATION: Every account closed on a deadline, and from that deadline onward it no longer existed. It was almost a work ethic, if one looked at it from a certain angle. Not from any other.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn did not bother to look at it from any other angle.

QUICK CUT — THE WEAPONS

NARRATION: The weapons came to him by accident, like almost everything that would end up defining his fortune.

NARRATION: A client, unable to pay in coin, offered him a consignment of muzzle-loading rifles he had stored in a warehouse in Antwerp. Glenn accepted thinking he would resell them in a week and have the matter off his hands.

NARRATION: It took him three days. He tripled the figure of the original debt.

NARRATION: He thought about it that night, sitting in an inn, smoking with his gaze fixed on the ceiling. He thought: *this is easier than money.*

NARRATION: He thought: *money is an idea a country may stop backing tomorrow. A rifle is not. A rifle is a rifle. It weighs the same here as anywhere else. There is always someone who wants it, somewhere, for some reason that is no concern of mine.*

NARRATION: That last sentence was what sealed the trade for him. *For some reason that is no concern of mine.* He adopted it as an administrative mantra, a natural extension of his rule of not

asking.

NARRATION: When a buyer came to ask the price, Glenn gave the price. When the buyer paid, Glenn handed over the goods. He did not find out at whom the rifles were going to be aimed, nor in what war, nor under what flag. The century was prodigal in wars and flags. There was always a new one. There were always new buyers.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn had been an Irish farmer. He had grown up watching his father haggle over a cow. The matter of the rifles, thought about coldly, was exactly the same as the matter of the cow, only with more zeroes. There was no greater difference.

NARRATION: That was what he told himself.

NARRATION: He told himself so for a long time. And he almost always believed it.

QUICK CUT — THE PROXIES

NARRATION: The first time Glenn did not appear in person for an important negotiation, he felt exposed. It did not last long. A week later, he felt relieved. Later, he simply forgot that it had ever been necessary to be present.

NARRATION: By the year eighteen thirty he had five men answering for him in five cities. By eighteen fifty he had fourteen.

NARRATION: None of them knew the others. None of them had seen Glenn in years. Some were not entirely sure that he existed: they received instructions by letter, remittances by valise, itinerary directions by courier. They did what was asked of them. They were well paid.

NARRATION: Glenn learned, during those years, that there is nothing more efficient for the exercise of power than a well-organised absence.

NARRATION: A man present can be wounded, bribed, read. An absence cannot. An absence can only be obeyed.

NARRATION: For someone who, by nature, already inhabited the halfway point between presence and absence, it was an almost comfortable discovery. Almost natural. As if the trade had been designed for creatures like him, and the humans had only been clumsily imitating it for decades.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: That was one of the things Glenn thought sometimes, sitting alone before the hearth of some villa that belonged to him and to which he had not returned in two years. That money, debt and threat were human inventions emulating, with difficulty, something the dead did without effort.

NARRATION: That he, quite simply, operated at an advantage. That it was no merit. It was a structural inequality.

NARRATION: That last thought, the one about the structural inequality, was the kind of thought a younger Glenn would have rejected as unpleasant. This Glenn accepted it with a lightness he himself noticed.

QUICK CUT — THE AUDIENCE

(A private office. Late in the century. Probably Brussels, or Vienna. The light is the same in all those cities. Heavy curtains. A low fire in the hearth. Gas lamps. GLENN's desk, too clean, is the clear

indication that almost all the work has already been done before reaching it.)

(Glenn smokes. He signs a document. He does not lift his gaze when the door opens.)

(Two MEN in dark coats come in bringing a third. It is KAUFMANN: fifty years old, a good suit ruined, four days unshaven. Neither bound nor free. They set him in the chair facing the desk. The two men take two steps back and remain flanking the door. They do not leave.)

(Glenn finishes signing. Then he lifts his gaze.)

GLENN: Mr Kaufmann.

KAUFMANN: Sir.

GLENN: I've owed you this conversation for several days. My apologies for the delay.

NARRATION: That a man like Glenn should apologise for a delay tended to throw his interlocutor off balance. Courtesy was a form of violence. Glenn knew it and used it, without cynicism.

KAUFMANN: It's of no importance, sir.

GLENN: It is for you. You've spent the last four days in a windowless room. I'm certain it has not been comfortable.

KAUFMANN: I've been in worse places.

GLENN: *(without smiling)* I don't doubt it.

(Pause.)

GLENN: Do you know why you are here?

KAUFMANN: I have an idea.

GLENN: I'd like to hear it.

KAUFMANN: *(slowly)* Because of the March operation.

GLENN: Be more specific.

KAUFMANN: Because of the decision I took, in March, without consulting you.

GLENN: That phrasing is too generous to your person, Mr Kaufmann. Rephrase it.

(Long pause. Kaufmann breathes through his nose.)

KAUFMANN: For having disobeyed you in March.

GLENN: Better.

NARRATION: By demanding the correction, Glenn was teaching that man, in the last lucid minutes he was going to have before his throat closed up with fear, to call things by their name. A pedagogy, the only one Glenn now offered in those years, and only in this class of circumstance.

KAUFMANN: Mr Sheridan, if I may—

GLENN: Don't use my surname. No one does. This isn't a good moment to start.

KAUFMANN: Forgive me.

GLENN: There's nothing to forgive. I'm only explaining it.

(Pause.)

GLENN: Go on.

KAUFMANN: I've been in your service twelve years.

GLENN: Eleven years and seven months, according to the contract. Go on.

KAUFMANN: I've worked well for you.

GLENN: *(tilting his head)* In general, yes.

KAUFMANN: The matter in March was a hasty decision. I had partial information, and—

GLENN: The information was complete. The messenger I sent to Lyon handed you the six envelopes himself. I have the receipt signed by your own hand. What you had was haste, not partial information. And haste, in your case, cost eighteen thousand francs and the confidence of a client who had been doing business with this house for forty years.

GLENN: I'll give you another chance.

(Kaufmann closes his eyes. Glenn waits: he is not in a hurry.)

KAUFMANN: *(in a low voice)* I have a wife.

GLENN: I know.

KAUFMANN: I have four children.

GLENN: Mm-hm.

KAUFMANN: Do you know what they're called?

GLENN: No.

NARRATION: It was a question that always arrived, at some point, in these conversations. The cornered man tries to become, in the other's eyes, something more than an entry in a ledger. He offers a specific wife, specific children, ages, occupations, believing the detail will defend him. It never defended him.

KAUFMANN: Helene. And the children are Friedrich, Maria, Anna and the youngest is called Otto.

GLENN: I don't recall having asked.

KAUFMANN: I've told you anyway.

GLENN: Quite.

(Pause.)

KAUFMANN: Doesn't it matter to you?

NARRATION: It was a good question. Glenn himself had put it to Juno several times, decades earlier. He could not offer Kaufmann the right answer, but he could offer something close to it.

GLENN: It does matter to me, Mr Kaufmann. It is, in fact, quite the opposite.

KAUFMANN: *(confused)* How so?

GLENN: If it didn't matter to me, I could be flexible. Indifference, contrary to what's believed, is what allows for room to manoeuvre. Discipline does not.

GLENN: I can't permit myself to treat differently a man with four children and a man who lives alone with his dog. The moment I permitted it, the others would know by tomorrow, and the next decision wouldn't be mine to take: it would be taken by the first man who guessed which argument softens me.

(Pause.)

GLENN: And from that point on, my business ends in six months. And with it, the wages of several hundred men like yourself, who also have Helenes and Friedrichs in their houses. That is what matters to me. Not your children. Other men's.

KAUFMANN: That is a rationalisation.

GLENN: It is. I don't see the problem.

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: Kaufmann did two things in the seconds that followed. The first was to look at Glenn the way one looks at a building one understands one is not going to be able to scale. The second was to let his shoulders drop, because there was no one left to convince.

KAUFMANN: Is there a way to pay for it?

GLENN: Of course.

KAUFMANN: How?

GLENN: With what is going to happen to you now.

NARRATION: Glenn did not specify. There was no need: what was going to happen to him was known by the men at the back of the room, was known by Glenn, was going to be known by Kaufmann in a matter of minutes. Saying it aloud was not going to change anything.

GLENN: I'll only ask one last favour of you.

KAUFMANN: *(with an echo of bitter irony)* Of course.

GLENN: Don't resist. It will do you no good and will only prolong the inevitable.

KAUFMANN: *(after a pause)* All right.

GLENN: Thank you, Mr Kaufmann.

NARRATION: The "thank you" he said in earnest. It was the only part of the conversation that was not strictly necessary.

(Glenn makes a small gesture with two fingers. The two men come closer. Kaufmann rises without their having to touch him. He walks toward the door between them. Before going out, he turns for a moment.)

KAUFMANN: Are you going to remember my name next week?

GLENN: *(without rising)* No, Mr Kaufmann.

KAUFMANN: *(defeated)* Good.

NARRATION: The word "good" came out of Kaufmann's mouth in the same exact tone in which Juno had used it, years before, the day Glenn had managed to move a finger for the first time after having had his whole skeleton in pieces.

NARRATION: He noticed. He had not been granted permission to notice things like that for decades, but he noticed them all the same.

NARRATION: Which did not mean, at all, that he was going to do anything with them.

(Kaufmann leaves. The door closes. Glenn remains seated.)

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: The only thing Glenn did that afternoon outside the foreseen procedure was the

following.

NARRATION: When the men at the back returned, an hour later, to confirm that everything had run its course, Glenn already had on his desk a sheet with detailed instructions: a monthly allotment, modest but sufficient, to an account in the name of Helene Kaufmann, widow, with no sender.

NARRATION: That it be maintained for twenty years. That it bear no name and no signature. That if any of the Kaufmanns (Friedrich, Maria, Anna, Otto) should ever ask who was sending it, the official answer was to be: "a creditor of your father's who preferred to settle the debt."

(He hands the sheet to the man. The man reads it. He lifts his eyebrows, a millimetre and a half, before returning them to their original position.)

THE MAN: Anything else, sir?

GLENN: No. You may go.

NARRATION: When he was alone, Glenn crushed the cigar in the ashtray and lit another. He did not look out of the window. He did not get up. He did not go to the mirror. He stayed seated for one exact hour, which he measured by the chimes.

NARRATION: That hour he confessed to no one. He had no one. And even if he had had someone, he would never have called it by its true name: grief.

NARRATION: And grief, in the internal balance of the Glenn of those years, was a dangerous column he under no circumstances allowed himself to open. So he did not linger in it.

NARRATION: The hour ended. The ink had not dried. He poured himself a brandy he was not going to drink and went on signing the papers he had had pending since the morning.

NARRATION: If anyone had said to Glenn that night, *what you did today will be added to the rest*, Glenn would have nodded politely and would not have known what was being said to him.

QUICK CUT — THE STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

(An ordinary street. An ordinary city. Late winter afternoon, almost evening.)

(Glenn walks without hurry. He wears a good overcoat, the kind that absorbs light.)

(In the doorway of a closed building, a MAN sits on the ground. Fifty-odd, in rags, a blanket over his knees, a thin dog beside him. He has asked three people for alms before Glenn passes by. The three have walked on.)

(Glenn stops.)

GLENN: Good evening.

THE MAN: *(blinks, unaccustomed to being addressed)* Evening.

GLENN: Have you been here long?

THE MAN: *(with a certain suspicion)* Are you from the police?

GLENN: No.

THE MAN: Are you a priest?

GLENN: *(with a minute smile)* No, that either.

THE MAN: Then what concern is it of yours?

GLENN: Fair point.

(Glenn crouches. The way he does it, without uselessly creasing the overcoat, without touching the ground with his knee, indicates he has learned how to lower himself to the level of men like this one without making a show of it.)

GLENN: A proposal. I pay for a hot meal and a drink. You tell me how you ended up here. What do you say?

THE MAN: *(after a long pause)* And if the story doesn't please you?

GLENN: The meal is paid up front. The story is a bonus.

NARRATION: The man hesitated a few seconds longer, calculating the offer. Glenn waited without pressing him.

NARRATION: It was exactly the same stillness with which he waited for the surrender of moneylenders; but that stillness, directed at a beggar in a doorway, produced a different collateral effect.

NARRATION: The man, who had forgotten what it was to be waited for by anyone, nodded.

QUICK CUT — A TAVERN. AN HOUR LATER

(The man eats like an animal. The dog, under the table, waits for the crumbs. Glenn watches him without impatience, smoking.)

NARRATION: The story the man told him that night had the expected parts (a lost job, a sick wife, an expensive doctor, a loan, another loan) and one part Glenn did not expect.

NARRATION: The man had been a watchmaker. He had made small watches, pocket watches, with mechanisms he had invented himself. His hands were ruined now, but he explained the mechanisms with a vivacity the rest of the account did not contain. Glenn listened without interrupting.

NARRATION: When the man finished, Glenn took from an inside pocket a considerably greater quantity than what corresponded to a meal with a story. He left it on the table.

THE MAN: It's too much.

GLENN: Perhaps.

THE MAN: Why?

GLENN: *(slowly)* Because I liked the watches part.

NARRATION: Glenn rose. He adjusted the overcoat. Before leaving, he left the dog the meat from his own plate, which he had not touched.

NARRATION: Out in the street, walking toward his carriage, he registered a thought he did not want to dwell on for long: that night, listening to a ruined watchmaker speak of mechanisms, he had been more awake than in all the previous months.

NARRATION: It was a datum that would make him doubt his entire trade if he allowed himself to look at it head-on.

NARRATION: He did not allow himself to. He got into the carriage. He told the driver the address of the villa.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Even so, over the years, in different cities, he repeated the experiment. A meal, a story, an envelope with money. He did not help the same person twice.

NARRATION: It was, throughout the century, the only habit that produced no dividends and protected no territory. The only column in the ledger that always ran in the negative and that he never bothered to balance.

NARRATION: If anyone had asked him why he did it, he would not have known how to answer. If anyone had asked Coltrane, Coltrane would probably have resolved it in a single sentence; but no one was going to ask Coltrane, and, in any case, Coltrane was not there.

QUICK CUT — THE FIRST WALLS

(A villa somewhere in central Europe. Vast drawing rooms. Glenn, alone, with a cigar, walking the walls newly populated with works.)

NARRATION: He bought the first painting because the wall was empty and the emptiness bothered him.

NARRATION: He bought the second because the dealer with whom he had been negotiating had struck him as agreeable.

NARRATION: He bought the third because he was beginning to understand that canvases had their own market, and that this market obeyed laws he already knew well: supply, scarcity, desire, patience.

NARRATION: By the fifth painting, he had stopped thinking about the walls. He was beginning to think about the paintings.

NARRATION: Glenn was learning to look at paintings with the attention another man would give to a field or a woman. He was learning to stand motionless for half an hour in front of a portrait that had not come from his own hands. He was learning to study people painted by others.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: What use that skill was going to be to him, Glenn did not know. He assumed it would be of no use at all.

NARRATION: Most of the things an immortal learns are of no use to him.

QUICK CUT — THE UNWRITTEN LETTER

(A desk. A lamp. Clean paper. Ink. A pen. Glenn seated, pen in hand. He looks at the paper with the expression not of one who has nothing to say, but of one who has too much and does not know where to begin.)

(He writes at the top:)

Coltrane,

(He looks at the two syllables. He crosses them out. He writes underneath:)

Johannes,

(He looks at the three syllables. He crosses them out too. He starts over.)

Coltrane,

(This time he leaves the name. He sets down the pen. He waits.)

NARRATION: What Glenn wanted to tell him reduced, in reality, to one single thing: he wanted to communicate that he was well.

NARRATION: Not the "I am well" of social formula. He wanted to say it in a strictly literal sense: that he still existed. That he had not died in a Paris gutter. That the Virginia estate could go on counting on the monthly allotment, and that no creditor was going to appear at Coltrane's door demanding what was not his to answer for.

NARRATION: What Glenn did not want to tell him, what even then he knew he would never put on paper, was the rest of the balance.

NARRATION: That he had not thought of Diana in years. That he had thought of the son the two of them had had even less often. That he owned villas in places the farmer of seventeen sixty-four could not have so much as pronounced.

NARRATION: That he had ordered the deaths of men he had never seen. That he had sold rifles to buyers he had never looked in the eye.

NARRATION: That the Irishman who had once accepted an invitation to the Holland party no longer existed, nor would ever exist again. That this Glenn, the one now, was the only thing that had been left in his place. A balance he was no longer sure was worth signing with the same name.

NARRATION: He could not write any of that in a letter. The problem was not the space: it was that the moment a line was drawn, the next already demanded the one after.

NARRATION: By the fifth line, Glenn would no longer be writing to Coltrane, but confessing to him. And Coltrane had not offered himself for such a role, nor would he ever, nor would he forgive Glenn the mere fact of having considered it.

(Long pause.)

NARRATION: He crossed out "Coltrane" again.

NARRATION: That night he wrote, instead, a brief letter to his accountant in Philadelphia. It ordered that the monthly allotment to the estate be increased by twenty percent, with no explanation offered.

NARRATION: The accountant, who had not asked for explanations in years, would execute the order the next day. Coltrane would notice the increase. He would not ask. He would invest it.

NARRATION: That would be the conversation between the two of them for the next several decades. Figures that rose in silence. Trust that bore no words. Affection that went unsigned.

NARRATION: It seemed to Glenn, that night, that it was almost enough.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Almost.

QUICK CUT — THE MIRROR, AGAIN

(A room. A full-length mirror, similar to the one at the estate in Virginia. Glenn stops in front of it for a moment.)

NARRATION: What had changed since the last time he had stood in front of a mirror like this was not in the reflection. It was that it no longer surprised him.

NARRATION: Looking at himself had ceased to be an act of comparison with the past. It had become, quite simply, a confirmation of inventory.

NARRATION: *Still here. Good. Onward.*

NARRATION: He looked away long before a living man would have. He had documents to sign.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The Confrontation. *A European city. Some moment in the twentieth century.*

NARRATION: Glenn saw it coming three days before, though at the time he did not know what he was seeing.

NARRATION: The first clue was an anomalous silence on one of his lines. A proxy in Hamburg who had spent two decades operating with the punctuality of a Swiss watch did not report on Tuesday, but on Wednesday. Glenn did not demand explanations: to do so would have been to show concern, and showing concern was losing one's posture.

NARRATION: The second clue was an innocuous conversation in a Prague cantina. A man Glenn did not know mentioned an American who had been moving through the district for days, asking questions. Fair-haired, of impeccable manners, with a very strange English and a German vocabulary superior to that of the locals themselves. The stranger gave no names. He offered sums.

GLENN: And what kind of questions was he asking?

THE MAN: Old things. From the thirties. The forties. He was looking for certain people.

GLENN: And did anyone answer him?

THE MAN: Some did.

(Glenn nods. Not a single muscle of his face betrays interest.)

NARRATION: Glenn settled the bill, left the man twice the value of his coffee, and stepped out into the cold of the street. He lit a cigarette. The first draw against the frozen lung came to him with a clarity he had not experienced in decades. An almost nostalgic clarity.

NARRATION: The third clue never arrived, and that absence was what confirmed what he already suspected. That the American had asked two questions and not the third meant he already had what he needed.

NARRATION: Glenn knew in that instant that Coltrane would knock at his door that same week. He did not wonder about the methods. Nor did it matter to him.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: What he did think that night, while smoking leaning against the window-frame of his empty flat, was that he had spent a hundred and seventy years waiting for this to happen. He thought that to feel the slightest trace of relief at knowing the reckoning had finally arrived was something obscene.

NARRATION: And he decided he was going to feel it anyway.

QUICK CUT — THE DOORBELL

(A flat in a European city. Deep night. The lights low. GLENN is seated in an armchair, holding a glass he has no intention of drinking. In the background, a radio plays a music programme he is not listening to.)

(The doorbell rings.)

NARRATION: One single ring. The exact pressure of an educated finger, of someone who does not need to insist because he knows he is expected.

(Glenn sets the glass down on the table. He stands up. He walks toward the door.)

NARRATION: It took him four seconds to reach the entrance hall. In that minuscule journey, Glenn's brain processed several things at once, all of them irrelevant. That his tie was badly knotted. That he should have switched off the radio. That the floorboards of the hallway creaked at a spot he had never bothered to repair.

(He opens.)

NARRATION: Coltrane had stopped being seventeen years old almost two centuries earlier, but his face was still that of a boy. What had changed was what sustained it: he now wore a tailored overcoat, a grey silk scarf and the weight of a man who has crossed an ocean deliberately.

COLTRANE: Glenn.

GLENN: Come in.

NARRATION: Glenn was not surprised by the firmness of his own voice. In the three nights of vigil that had preceded, he had decided not to feign anything. To act a part in front of Coltrane would have been useless, and would have struck him as a lack of respect.

(Coltrane crosses the threshold. He makes no move to take off the overcoat. Glenn closes the door behind him.)

(Shot of the entrance hall: the drawing room is glimpsed at the back. Coltrane stops just at the boundary between the two rooms. He does not advance into the drawing room. Glenn does not make the mistake of asking him to.)

GLENN: Can I offer you anything?

COLTRANE: No.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn had already scanned him, in the half-second between opening the door and hearing his name. Coltrane was holding himself in. A man at ease does not clench his jaws, and his were clenched.

COLTRANE: I know everything.

GLENN: All right.

COLTRANE: *(raising his eyebrows slightly, incredulous)* All right?

GLENN: Yes. All right.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: In his preparation for that night, Glenn had also decided not to ask how on earth he had found out. To demand the details of the leak would have been the reaction of an administrator looking

to plug a breach. And the last thing Glenn wanted to be in that room was an administrator, although at that point in his existence it was the only thing he knew how to be.

COLTRANE: Aren't you going to ask me how I found out?

GLENN: No.

COLTRANE: Why not?

GLENN: Because it doesn't matter.

NARRATION: In another mouth, "because it doesn't matter" would have sounded like an evasive manoeuvre. Coltrane decoded it for what it really was: the first act of real acknowledgment Glenn had ever granted him in his life. Glenn Sheridan, the man who had spent a century demanding accounts of his thugs and his spies, was voluntarily relinquishing control of the information.

COLTRANE: *(slowly, evaluating him)* Good.

NARRATION: Glenn registered the word. And the tone in which it was said.

(Coltrane takes one single step into the drawing room. He sweeps the furniture, the canvases on the walls, the lit hearth, with the cold scrutiny of a valuer calculating the worth of the spoils before a seizure.)

COLTRANE: Nice house.

GLENN: One of many.

COLTRANE: I know.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn understood the nuance. Coltrane did not only know there were others; he knew exactly how many. Probably with more precision than Glenn himself.

COLTRANE: The suit you're wearing is fine, too.

GLENN: Coltrane.

COLTRANE: Yes.

GLENN: Say it now.

COLTRANE: Say what?

GLENN: What you came to say.

NARRATION: Glenn did not alter the voice nor the posture. Not out of bravery, but to spare himself: he had been waiting for this for three days and the ceremonial preamble exhausted him.

(Coltrane watches him in silence. Slowly, he takes off the silk scarf. He folds it and puts it in a pocket. The overcoat stays on.)

COLTRANE: "Coltrane" is the name imposed on me by the wife of the man my mother sold me to. For thirty-five pounds sterling.

NARRATION: Glenn felt the first pang beneath his ribs. He knew where the conversation was heading. But there are impacts for which, however much one rehearses, one is never prepared.

COLTRANE: Thirty-five miserable pounds, Glenn.

(A very long pause. The air in the room turns to lead.)

COLTRANE: Do you have the faintest idea of the kind of life (if you can call it that) I dragged through on the Holland plantation?

(Glenn remains silent. His eyes fixed on Coltrane.)

COLTRANE: You came back fifteen years later.

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: You found me in a drawing room. And you decided to buy me.

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: Like a piece of furniture. Without saying a single word to me.

GLENN: ...

NARRATION: It was the interrogation technique Glenn had perfected in his own office over decades: stringing together the assertions without waiting for a reply, without leaving a gap in which to fabricate a lie. He had used it on hundreds of cornered men. Being on the other side was almost pedagogical.

COLTRANE: Do you know how long that damned question kept circling in my head? *"Why me?"*

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: *(raising his voice for the first and only time, tearing his own control) "Why me?" "Why me!?"*

GLENN: ...

(Pause. Coltrane composes himself.)

COLTRANE: Why did you keep silent about it?

(Glenn does not answer immediately. Of the whole interrogation, this is the only answer he has had to assemble himself, in real time, and it is costing him.)

GLENN: Because I took it for granted that you were never going to forgive me.

COLTRANE: And that was excuse enough not to tell me?

GLENN: At the time, it was.

COLTRANE: That's cowardice.

GLENN: It is.

COLTRANE: *(scrutinising him, in the tone of one who is stating rather than asking)* You're not going to defend yourself.

GLENN: No.

(Coltrane exhales slowly.)

COLTRANE: *(lowering the volume)* You're making this harder than I thought.

(A very long pause. Coltrane fixes his eyes on the wood of the floor. Glenn does not take his off him.)

COLTRANE: I've spent two months deciding what to do to you when I finally had you in front of me.

GLENN: I can imagine.

COLTRANE: I thought about killing you.

GLENN: I would have understood it.

COLTRANE: It wouldn't have done me any good.

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: I thought about dismantling you. I know exactly how to do it. I've known for years. I learned it watching you, all this time, without you knowing I was watching.

GLENN: I can imagine that too.

COLTRANE: I thought about never appearing again. About leaving you forever with the gnawing of not knowing whether I had found out the truth or not.

GLENN: *(in a murmur)* That would have been the worst.

COLTRANE: I know. That's why it was the option I contemplated the longest.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: Glenn closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them again, Coltrane was still observing him with those blue eyes that seemed to exist for the sole purpose of judging him.

COLTRANE: I'm not going to do any of those three things.

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: Not because you don't deserve them.

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: But because all three would cost me. A wearing-down I'm not interested in taking on. And I think I've already paid enough for you.

NARRATION: That sentence did touch him. Glenn felt something in the centre of his chest he had not felt in decades and for which he no longer had a name. Beneath everything, intact, the pain had been waiting. The nearly two centuries between the Virginia estate and this room in half-light had not been a cure. They had been a postponement.

(Coltrane turns toward the door. Just before crossing the threshold, he stops. He does not look back.)

NARRATION: And it is right there. In that suspended millisecond, in which Coltrane is on the verge of leaving and Glenn has no idea what words will come out of his mouth when the boy turns.

[DECISION 2]

(Coltrane...)

[PATH A] (He forgives the debt)

[PATH B] (He leaves the account open)

PATH A — The immediate concession

(Coltrane turns. Not entirely: only half his body. Just enough for Glenn to see him in profile.)

(A pause Glenn has trouble measuring.)

COLTRANE: What was she like?

GLENN: Who?

COLTRANE: My mother.

NARRATION: The question struck Glenn from an angle for which he was not prepared. He had anticipated rage, calculation, even indifference. Not this. Not a son asking about his mother.

NARRATION: Glenn sat down. His head had not decided it. His knees gave way on their own.

GLENN: She was... *(he interrupts himself)* She was short. She came up to me here. *(He touches his own shoulder.)*

(What follows he says with the urgency of one uncovering a canvas he had spent fifteen years keeping turned to the wall.)

GLENN: Her hands were very rough for someone so young. She'd been working in the house for years by the time I came along. When someone said something she thought was stupid, she had a way of pressing her lips together... She must have got that from your grandmother, I suppose, though I never met your grandmother.

(Coltrane does not move. Only his gaze fixed on him.)

COLTRANE: Go on.

NARRATION: Glenn spoke for an hour. He did not weep: physically he could not. But his voice broke three times, on small details, on sentences that seemed to have no cost. Once on mentioning a blue dress Diana had worn one Sunday. Another on acknowledging that she had been better than him at everything. The third on remembering the last time he had seen her, without saying anything to her, beside the window of the house.

NARRATION: Coltrane listened without interrupting. When Glenn finished (only then), he took off the overcoat and laid it on the back of the chair.

COLTRANE: *(after a long silence)* I ended up doing almost the same.

GLENN: What do you mean?

COLTRANE: With Annie. With my son.

NARRATION: Glenn did not know how to process the datum.

COLTRANE: Annie didn't want to see me again as soon as she found out what I was.

GLENN: I know that.

COLTRANE: I watched the boy from a distance. I tried to speak to him once, when he was already a grown man, twice my apparent age. It didn't work.

(Long pause.)

COLTRANE: I haven't come here to forgive you. I've come to tell you I no longer have the strength to keep up the resentment. But don't be mistaken.

GLENN: I'm not.

COLTRANE: This is what there is.

NARRATION: Glenn accepted it. Coltrane sat down for the first time in the entrance-hall chair. It was two in the morning. The radio was still on. Neither of them switched it off.

NARRATION: They talked until dawn. Not of Diana, nor of Annie, nor of the estate: of small things. What each of them had been reading. A deep-sea fish that seemed to have come from another dimension. A painting Glenn had bought in March. The ash of an erupting volcano. An Asian city in the

thirties.

NARRATION: The conversation had the air of two men who have been through an earthquake and confirm, without saying it, that the building is still standing.

NARRATION: When Coltrane left, before daybreak, he did not say "I'll come back". There was no need. He had taken off the overcoat.

NARRATION: He did come back. Many times. For the rest of the centuries, Glenn would have him near. Not always in the same city, not always on the same continent, but always within reach. A call that was answered on the first ring. A letter that did not delay. Spaced dinners, but real ones. The shape of a relationship that has been through the worst and has sat down at the table.

NARRATION: What was left between them was something rarer than tenderness, and possibly more durable: two men who no longer had anything to hide from each other.

(FADE TO BLACK)

PATH B — The distance

(Coltrane does not turn. Glenn looks at his back, with his hand on the doorknob, and understands that he is not going to turn.)

COLTRANE: I don't know when I'm going to see you again.

GLENN: I understand.

COLTRANE: It may be years.

GLENN: ...

COLTRANE: It may be many years.

GLENN: ...

(Pause.)

COLTRANE: I'm not going to look for you. If we meet, it will be because one of us happens to be in the same city as the other. Nothing more.

GLENN: I understand.

COLTRANE: Is that the only thing you know how to say tonight?

GLENN: Yes. I'm sorry.

NARRATION: Coltrane breathed in. It was a strange breath: with a small laugh at the end, no joy in it. The laugh of someone who recognises, in the middle of a dreadful situation, a small and exact truth.

COLTRANE: Good.

NARRATION: The word fell on Glenn again, as the two previous times. This time it carried no concession behind it. It was a closure.

(Coltrane opens the door. He goes out. He closes it behind him with the same care with which he rang the bell.)

(Glenn remains standing in the middle of the room for a long while. The glass he poured earlier is still where he left it. The radio is still playing a piece he does not hear.)

NARRATION: That night Glenn did not sit down. He remained on his feet, smoking, until the light began to come in through the east-facing window.

NARRATION: When it came in, he put out the cigarette and the radio, and went to the bedroom. He slept, for the first time in decades, the fourteen straight hours an immortal's body can sleep when it has nothing left to keep watch over.

NARRATION: When he woke, he was a different kind of man. Not better, nor worse. Only different.

(Pause.)

NARRATION: The years passed without his counting them.

NARRATION: The first time they coincided was in Rome, in a narrow street near the Campo de' Fiori. Glenn was in a hurry. He saw him from behind and knew, without seeing his face, that it was him. Coltrane turned.

NARRATION: Their gazes met. Glenn thought for an instant that he was going to smile. Coltrane did not smile, but he nodded once. Glenn nodded too. They walked on.

NARRATION: That night, in the hotel, Glenn felt his chest burn with pain.

NARRATION: The next coincidence was four years later in Istanbul. The next, eight years after. The next, two. There was no pattern.

NARRATION: Each time they greeted each other with a more complete gesture. The sixth time they spoke. The seventh, they met in a café. By then enough lustra had passed for neither of them to keep count.

NARRATION: What was left between them was a relationship with the shape of things that survive a wound that never quite closed: warm, real, slightly fragile. With a millimetre of air between the two bodies that others perhaps did not notice, but that neither of them would ever cross.

(FADE TO BLACK)

CHAPTER 1 — GLENN

The First Encounter with Paul. *Spain, second half of the twentieth century.*

NARRATION: Geography had never been of any use to Glenn. Cities differed from one another only in the language of their insults and the value of their currencies. Hamburg was worth the same as Lyon, and Lyon the same as Trieste. He slept in rooms he would forget in a couple of years. He fed without hunger. He collected. He paid.

NARRATION: After Coltrane (who had become the only measure of time on his internal calendar), the map turned even more unintelligible. Certain streets suddenly weighed more than others. Particular lights, at particular hours, would leave him paralysed in the middle of a pavement without his knowing why. He preferred not to ask himself: to answer would have implied admitting he was waiting for something, and Glenn had signed an unbreakable pact with himself. Never to expect anything from anyone again.

NARRATION: How he ended up in Andalucía was a question without an answer. He took a train south out of inertia. He got off at a station that was barely a wooden bench and a faded sign. He ordered a caña and a tapa he never touched, and stayed looking at the olive groves on the other side of the tracks until the few shops began to close. Then he walked with no direction, only so as not to rot from

boredom.

QUICK CUT — THE MARKET

NARRATION: The traders were already packing up, calling the day finished. Paul was on the other side, in front of a flower stall. He appeared to be nearly thirty, according to the biological clock that had stopped for him several centuries earlier. Tall, fair-haired, with that specific serenity of men who have been beautiful for so long that they have forgotten they are.

NARRATION: What stopped Glenn was a series of gestures: Paul did not look at the flowers as he chose them; he touched them. He ran his fingertips over the petals, tilted a stem, pressed the base to test its firmness. He was looking at a bouquet with his hands.

NARRATION: He moved closer to confirm it. Paul had his eyes open and his head oriented toward the stall, but the pupils did not follow the bouquets: they were fixed, without the involuntary microscopy with which a living eye examines the world. And they shone too much. The gleam of the street lamps stayed still on them, as on a polished surface without the liquid film of a human eye. Glenn had seen eyes like that at a wedding in Prague, on a gentleman who had left his own in a trench. Prostheses. Good ones, but prostheses.

NARRATION: Glenn registered the datum without flinching. People lost things all the time.

NARRATION: The vendor, an old woman with a kerchief on her head, turned toward him for a couple of seconds, for no apparent reason, and went back to what she was doing. It struck Glenn as strange and he gave it no importance.

NARRATION: Paul paid for the bunch of white gladioli, refused the change and set off toward the exit with a sureness improper to a blind man, as if following invisible instructions.

NARRATION: And Glenn, who had spent fifteen decades calculating every millimetre of his decisions, did something he had not planned. He went up to the stall, pointed at some white lilies, left a few pesetas and followed him out.

QUICK CUT — THE PATH

(PAUL walks ahead of GLENN, some forty paces in front.)

NARRATION: It took Glenn a kilometre to understand that Paul knew he was being followed. Worse: he was allowing himself to be followed. With the same indifference with which a man permits a stray dog to walk him home. The detail struck Glenn as slightly humiliating, but it did not alter his pace.

NARRATION: Paul was carrying a long bundle on his back, wrapped in a wool that seemed older than the path.

NARRATION: What really baffled him was the logistics. How did a blind man make his way among the olive trees, without a stick and without help? Paul negotiated the old roots with the naturalness of someone walking from memory; but he also avoided the new stones, the ones the latest storms had only just dragged in. The roots could be memory. The stones could not. The stones were information in real time.

NARRATION: The only source of updated information on that stretch of the grove was Glenn's eyes, which were following behind.

QUICK CUT — THE TREE

(A clearing. An immense holm oak, its trunk split by the weight of the decades. A crown that covers three times the spread of a common tree; in daylight, the shadow would draw a perfect circle on the earth.)

(At the foot of the holm oak lies what was once a slab. Four thick roots now surround it, forming a crown of living wood that embraces it without smothering it. Lichen does not grow over the stone: it has fused with it. A few engraved letters survive only with difficulty under the wear. The grave looks like a tiny petrified organism, breathing on a scale human time does not register.)

(Paul kneels in front of it.)

NARRATION: He did it without hesitation. With his free hand, he felt the stone. He did not try to clean it. It gave Glenn the impression that this man had carried out that same gesture so many times that the slab no longer required maintenance, but accompaniment.

(Paul lays down the white gladioli. He arranges them by sliding his fingers along the stems until he finds the exact angle, and stops, satisfied. He rests his open palm on the slab and keeps silent.)

NARRATION: Glenn understood that this was a prayer, and that it had been repeating itself for a very long time.

NARRATION: The red-haired man had walked through enough cemeteries in his life. He had seen men and women broken in front of headstones, paying homage to bodies that had once been everything to them.

NARRATION: What did not square for him were the temporal calculations. He too had loved people who were already dead. But at the end of the nineteenth century he had discovered, with displeasure, that he was unable to keep that affection intact: time wore it down. In his mental architecture, nothing survived more than a century.

NARRATION: The stone had been rooted at the foot of the holm oak for centuries, and the man kneeling before it was still whole. The proportion was inconceivable to Glenn: he did not understand how a love could refuse to die for so long.

QUICK CUT — THE GUITAR

NARRATION: After a long while, Paul withdrew his hand. He did not get up. He undid the thick folds of wool: it was a guitar, older than any Glenn had seen in his whole existence.

(Paul sits with his back against the trunk, leaning against the bark. He settles the guitar in his lap.)

NARRATION: He tuned the strings by ear. Thumb and index of the left hand on each pair; the right hand plucking to confirm. One tuning peg. Another peg. A quarter turn.

NARRATION: Glenn stayed where he was, several metres from the tree. He did not sit; he was not sure whether it would be disrespectful.

(Paul begins to play. A simple modal progression of four chords. Then the voice comes in. Low, intimate, singing almost to himself.)

PAUL: *(singing)* "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines..."

NARRATION: Glenn did not understand the words; he knew enough Spanish to get by, but not for poetry, nor to distinguish a folk song from a religious one.

NARRATION: What immobilised him was the voice.

NARRATION: It was the first time in two centuries that he had heard someone sing with that degree of unselfishness. Without asking for attention, without projecting toward an audience. An immaculate voice, monastic, that was not directed at him or at anyone breathing in that olive grove. It was singing to the slab, to what lay underneath, and to the holm oak.

NARRATION: Glenn's shoulders loosened without asking his permission. Only then did he realise that he had been going about with his muscles tensed for an eternity, and that they had just yielded just enough to leave him exposed.

(Paul continues. A second verse. Glenn remains petrified in the half-light.)

NARRATION: The piece was brief. And when it ended, it ended without formalities or grandiose closure. The last note simply vibrated in the air and went out.

(Silence.)

NARRATION: The silence that followed resembled the air in a room just after someone has finally finished a task that had been postponed for years.

(Paul leans the guitar against the trunk carefully, looking for an angle in which it will not slip. He stands up. He turns toward Glenn.)

NARRATION: It was then that Glenn made out the eyes.

NARRATION: It was then that Glenn made out the eyes and confirmed his suspicion from the market. Prostheses. Excellent for the period: the iris carefully replicated, a matte finish that did not betray itself at three metres. The pupils, identical, did not respond to the light. No two human eyes are the same. These were.

NARRATION: Glenn did not ask. In the kind of existence the two of them shared there was an unwritten protocol: at a first encounter between immortals, no one enquires about the wounds of the past.

NARRATION: Even so, the logistics remained: how did Paul see? In that instant, without Glenn yet knowing it, Paul was looking at himself through the red-haired man's eyes.

NARRATION: What he was not prepared for was the spareness of what came next.

PAUL: Paul.

(Pause.)

PAUL: That's my name.

NARRATION: He said it just like that. No "I'm Paul", no "my name is Paul, and yours?". The bare given name, without surname, like someone marking a fence around himself. The same voice that had just been singing to the grave, now directed at him.

NARRATION: Glenn had spent two centuries cataloguing voices: voices that lied, that begged for clemency, that gave orders, that negotiated rates of interest. Paul's negotiated nothing. It was placid, deep, with no second intentions. The kind of voice that lowers one's guard without one noticing. A voice on which a home could be built.

GLENN: *(trying to recover his posture, his voice rougher than usual)* Glenn.

(A pause.)

GLENN: Glenn Sheridan.

PAUL: *(barely sketching a smile; the voice shortening the distance between them without taking a step)*

Pleased to meet you.

NARRATION: He said it with the courtesy of someone who has memorised the formula and executes it correctly. Glenn recognised the mechanism. But beneath the hollow courtesy, the timbre was still intact: calm, magnetic, unbearably serene.

NARRATION: He did not yet know it, but he was going to follow that sound to the end, and he was not going to have a shred of dignity left along the way.

PAUL: Are you going to do something with those flowers?

(Glenn lowers his gaze. He is still holding the bunch. He had forgotten about it entirely.)

NARRATION: And then he saw it. What had left the old woman's stall as a handful of white lilies now carried an uneven belt of wildflowers. Yellow and white camomile. Red poppies. Small green leaves clumsily caught on the stems.

NARRATION: Glenn only recognised the lilies. He had no idea at what moment of the pursuit through the olive grove he had been picking those flowers to add to the arrangement. He lifted his gaze to Paul.

GLENN: No.

(Pause.)

PAUL: There's no need for you to bring them next time.

NARRATION: The sentence disarmed him. First, because Paul took a next time for granted (when Glenn had given no sign of returning) and treated it as a meteorological phenomenon, as guaranteed as the next rain. And then, the more humiliating part: that Glenn did intend to return. He had decided so without consulting himself, and Paul had known it before him.

QUICK CUT — THE HOUSE

(Paul orients his face toward a point beyond the clearing.)

NARRATION: Following the orientation of that blind face, Glenn made out, some hundred metres away, a low house among the olive trees. Whitewashed, although the whitewash had gone so long without a hand that it had turned from white to an ashen ochre. The roof kept its tiles except for a sunken corner. He did not know whether the door still closed.

PAUL: That was our house.

GLENN: Ours?

PAUL: Yes. It belonged to the two of us. To her and to me.

NARRATION: Glenn joined the sentence to the slab. In silence.

GLENN: How long has it been?

(Paul sighs. He lets a short pause fall.)

PAUL: A long time.

NARRATION: The phrase "a long time", in the mouth of an immortal, weighed differently. Paul did not go into detail, and Glenn did not ask for any.

NARRATION: Glenn looked again at the ruined house among the branches and had a thought he had not requested: that they had been happy there. That happiness stays in the walls even when the bodies disappear.

NARRATION: And then he thought that he had never lived a happiness like that. That his human life in the suburbs of Richmond had been a strident simulacrum. That this kind of peace was one more casualty in the catalogue of his existence.

NARRATION: Paul did not suggest they approach. Glenn did not propose it either.

QUICK CUT — THE IMAGES

(The distance between the two men is short. Three paces. Four at most.)

PAUL: Let me show you something.

GLENN: What thing?

PAUL: Things that happened. Some, as I remember them. Others, as I believe they happened.

NARRATION: He said it in passing, without underlining it. Glenn did not catch the difference that night.

NARRATION: The first image that assailed his mind had the unmistakable texture of human memory.

(A monastery in a Nordic forest. The rough grain of the wood in the doors. The sharp cold of a cell at dawn. Melted wax, damp, the distant aroma of a stew. The vibration of a bell. A fair-haired boy going over Latin declensions in front of a desk too high for him, the soles of his feet freezing on the stone.)

NARRATION: An architecture of brutal sensations: temperature, taste, the stomach contracted waiting for breakfast. Glenn took them in with the intrusive sharpness of a memory of his own.

NARRATION: Then the geography changed.

(A coastal plain. Limestone reverberating under a sun that fell vertical, with an almost physical weight. A group of prisoners tied in a courtyard. A Saracen approaching with a barber's blade. The brush of steel against skin. The beard falling onto the pale stone. And a disembodied voice, whispering in a language Glenn translated without knowing how: "You don't look like a barbarian anymore.")

(And then, an upright figure standing before Paul, framed from the perspective of someone who still has his own eyes.)

NARRATION: Then the transmission cut off. Dry, violent, like the slam of a safe-deposit door. Glenn did not see what came afterwards. Access to that part was barred.

NARRATION: When the images returned, the texture had changed. It was like going from a photograph to a hyperrealist painting. The intensity was still there, sometimes greater, but with structural failures: the periphery was missing, the background noise of the surroundings was missing. The surfaces had too polished a finish, as if someone had composed the scene from second-hand descriptions and not from experience.

NARRATION: He saw a woman in a bed. Very old. Skin like parchment, eyes closed, hands still on the sheets. No rings. Not a single object that fixed a date, a name, a place. The room, small and neutral, with the curtains drawn. Glenn understood that this cropped framing was all he was going to be allowed to know of her. The rest belonged to Paul.

NARRATION: Then came the most unsettling fragment: Paul's face shedding tears of blood, seen from outside.

NARRATION: An immediate discomfort rose in Glenn. That face wore no prostheses: it had blue eyes, alive. Human eyes. It took him a moment to fit the discrepancy together, until he caught what it meant: he was seeing Paul as Paul still believed himself to be. Every time the German projected his own

image, he resorted to the version of himself at twenty-seven. In spite of the centuries, in spite of the amputation, that young human was the only tenant at the back of his mind.

NARRATION: He saw the tree. A spade. A figure wrapped in what looked like a shroud, descending into the grave. And then the centuries compressed into a stretch of seconds: the trunk of the holm oak widening, ring by ring; the roots dragging themselves toward the slab until they formed the crown; the lichen flourishing only to be later absorbed by the stone; the dirt path dissolving under the undergrowth and forming again.

NARRATION: Afterwards, a succession of minor gestures, scattered across the map. A hand sliding an envelope under a door. Another checking the fever on a child's forehead. A signature traced on the back of a cheque with no recipient. An anonymous official filing a dossier away. A row of beds in a hospital. Blurred faces that did not stay long enough to be remembered.

NARRATION: He saw an immense desert, of a dry and blinding white, on another continent. He saw a man digging a hole in it. He saw the descent into a prolonged darkness, without dreams.

NARRATION: And at the end, without warning, the texture changed again. Not to the sharpness of the first memories: it was an image of the present, with the whole periphery intact (the bustle of a market, the smell of frying, the damp of cut flowers), but from an angle that struck Glenn as wrong.

NARRATION: It was the flower stall. But not from Paul's perspective.

NARRATION: The view was coming from behind the counter. The vendor's hand rested on the bunch of gladioli in the foreground. And as the field of vision turned, on the other side of the market, cut against a whitewashed wall, there appeared a man dressed in too many clothes for the climate. Red hair tied back. Hands in his pockets. Watching.

NARRATION: Glenn saw himself. And in that instant, two certainties clicked into place at once.

NARRATION: The first: the angle was the old woman's at the stall. That two-second glance that had seemed to him casual. The second: Paul had used him, with an almost humiliating efficiency, as a guide dog to cross the olive grove.

(The transmission cuts off cleanly. The clearing comes back. The night air. The slab at the foot of the trunk. The guitar leaning against the bark.)

NARRATION: Glenn had not moved a muscle.

PAUL: Now you know who I am.

(Pause.)

PAUL: They are memories. Or memories of memories. The division gets somewhat blurred for me at times.

GLENN: Why have you shown me all this?

(Pause.)

PAUL: I don't know.

NARRATION: Of everything that afternoon, what most disturbed Glenn was not the images (those he would take weeks to process), but the sentence. He had before him a man who outranked him by centuries, with all the time in the world to fabricate a speech or rehearse a perfect excuse, and he had been handed, without makeup, an "I don't know". He said it with the sincerity of one who genuinely does not have the answer.

NARRATION: Something creaked in Glenn's chest: a gear he could not identify.

NARRATION: The first symptom of a miscalculation that was going to cost him very dearly.

QUICK CUT — THE EXIT

(Paul bends and picks up the guitar. He wraps it again in the same old wool, with measured movements, without thinking them through. He slings the bundle over his back.)

NARRATION: Before leaving the clearing, he paused. Without turning:

PAUL: As I said before, there's no need for you to bring flowers next time. The ones I bring will be enough.

NARRATION: Glenn registered the sentence. And he stored it as one of the two or three most generous things anyone had ever granted him in his whole existence.

NARRATION: Paul set off among the olive trees. Glenn closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them again, the path was already empty.

QUICK CUT — THE WAY BACK

(Glenn walks alone, back toward the village. The bouquet still hangs from his hand. He had forgotten he was carrying it.)

NARRATION: Before reaching the first houses, he stopped at the side of the road. He lowered his gaze to the flowers.

NARRATION: He began to undo the arrangement. The white lilies (the ones he had bought) he left in the verge, weighted with a stone so the night wind would not scatter them. The camomile and the wild poppies stayed in his hand.

NARRATION: He thought, with that reluctant clarity of things one does not want to admit, about what was coming: that he was going to come back. He did not know when, nor under what pretext, but he would manufacture some excuse, and the excuse would be obviously false. And Paul would know it from the first second.

NARRATION: He thought that in two hundred years of immortality no one had managed to pierce his defences in that way, and that a man he barely knew had just dismantled him in a single night. He sensed that the whole matter violated some basic rule of his own, but he did not know how to name which one.

NARRATION: He thought, finally, that he had no choice but to learn to carry it. Carrying weight had always been his only natural skill, one he had never asked to have.

(Glenn's rented room. The light is meagre.)

NARRATION: He brought the wildflowers into the room. He did not look for water for them. He did not throw them away. He set them on the wooden table and stayed looking at them, in silence, for a time he did not bother to measure.

(FADE TO BLACK)

FEEDBACK FORM

<https://forms.gle/3QTSjRcBZWmLhrjH9>