

THE SERVANTS

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OPENING

A single white flame hangs in darkness.

We hold on to it until every flicker becomes absorbing. Slowly, the frame widens. Two more flames hover beside it above an empty, three-branched candelabrum.

Beyond the candles, rows of empty chairs face a domed pavilion suspended in darkness, while white-gloved hands turn illustrated cards beside a porcelain cup and a towering cabinet opens to reveal shelves of identical glass vessels, each holding something that twitches.

CORPORATE VIDEO SET:

Cut to ELLE, early twenties, staring through a camera monitor. Her eyes unfocused. Distant. Hypnotized. A smiling executive stands beneath a corporate slogan: FIND YOUR PURPOSE.

He finishes speaking. Everyone is waiting for her to call cut.

ACT ONE

Elle makes her living filming corporate videos. Today, employees of a medical supply company are explaining how their jobs give their lives meaning. Elle adjusts a light while someone struggles to remember a line about belonging. They start again.

ELLE'S APARTMENT:

At home, she turns the camera on herself. She says she wants to make a documentary about her mental health. She isn't sleeping properly. For weeks, recurring dreams have left her exhausted and unable to concentrate. She forgets questions halfway through asking them at work. Everything takes more effort than it should.

She has begun recording what she remembers immediately after waking: a corridor, muffled music, the boy beneath the table. Sometimes the images have the unstable color and damaged edges of an old home video. She cannot place any of them.

She tries another take. She has spent years making films for other people. Perhaps making something personal will help her understand what is happening. Perhaps it will help someone else. Perhaps this is how she finds her purpose.

She stops. The phrase sounds exactly like the executive she filmed that morning. She looks down, embarrassed by her own pitch, and switches off the camera.

THERAPIST'S OFFICE:

In the waiting room of her therapist, CLAUDIA, Elle studies a photograph of a villa in the South of France. Beside it sits a stack of brochures. Elsewhere in the room, a framed landscape repeats the view from one of the villa's terraces. She picks up a brochure and keeps returning to a photograph of its long gallery.

In a therapy session with Claudia, Elle talks about work, sleep, and the suspicion that everyone else knows what their life is for. Claudia begins to answer, catches her breath, and briefly coughs. A small, unpleasant gag catches at the end. She continues speaking without apology, and the conversation moves on.

Elle says she wants to tell a story that matters to her. Claudia asks what she would need to feel she had found her purpose. Elle has no answer. "Sometimes I don't even know how I got here."

Before leaving, Elle asks about the house in the brochure. Claudia has sent patients there before to relax. It is quiet and beautiful. Elle asks whether she could bring friends. Claudia says she could. Elle folds the brochure into her bag but says she has too much work to commit just yet.

ELLE'S APARTMENT:

Elle drifts off while editing corporate footage, the executive's smile frozen beneath FIND YOUR PURPOSE. Her hand slips from the mouse. Degraded Hi8 footage replaces the screen: a low view beneath a heavy wooden table, its hanging cloth concealing the room beyond. Nearly monochrome fragments flicker—a tiled staircase ascending toward a motionless figure, pale hands arranging symbols beside a porcelain bowl, attendants dragging a shrouded weight across marble. A checkerboard corridor ends at a blazing doorway, where someone convulses in a chair beneath another figure's steady hands.

Elle wakes to her phone vibrating beside the laptop. Morning. Several missed calls from the client, followed by a message asking where the finished video is. The edit remains exactly where she left it. She opens the brochure, photographs the villa and sends it to Sloane. "Can you come with me?"

ROAD OUTSIDE NICE, FRANCE:

HARD CUT: Four young women drive along a winding road outside Nice, singing over each other and arguing cheerfully about the music. They are Elle, SLOANE, GIGI,, and CLEO.

Sloane reads the arrival instructions while Gigi supplies confidently wrong directions. Cleo turns down the music to explain the meaning of a bird crossing their path. Gigi turns it back up before she finishes. Elle films from the passenger seat, laughing.

The friendships have formed over the past few months. They disagree about which of them approached whom first. Each remembers Elle fitting into the group almost immediately. Sloane's

phone lights up with a work message. She turns it facedown. Gigi suggests going into the town to find a place to dance. Sloane gives her a look in the rearview mirror, then rejoins the song.

VILLA — ARRIVAL:

The villa stands beyond the winding road, surrounded by neglected gardens and a high stone wall. Its rooms are grand, faded, and flooded with afternoon light. BERNARDO, the caretaker, welcomes them. He shows them the terrace, kitchen, pool, and the side passage where he unloads their car. He lives in an apartment beside that passage.

Sloane gathers everyone around the bags. First they will pick rooms, then unpack, then make a cocktail. Gigi is scrolling through her phone. Sloane lightly calls her back to attention. Gigi pockets it and falls into line.

As they separate, Gigi nudges one of her bags toward Cleo. “Get that one for me?” She is already walking away when Cleo lifts it.

Gigi breaks into a terrible improvised rap about boss girls, bad bitches, and having their own money. Cleo turns toward Elle's camera. “Is she even working right now?”

“Are you?!” Gigi snaps, suddenly sharp. Then she resumes rapping. Cleo rolls her eyes and follows with the bag. Elle's camera catches Sloane trying not to laugh.

Bernardo tries to keep the tour moving while Gigi flirts with him. He resists, then smiles despite himself. She notices.

VILLA — PORTRAIT GALLERY:

Beside the gallery entrance hangs a portrait of a broad man in formal dress, one eyelid drooping beneath a heavy brow. A ruby ring rests prominently on his hand. The plaque identifies him as the Baron and dates the painting to the seventeenth century. Gigi imitates his imperious pose while Elle films, then moves on.

One severe-looking woman appears in several other paintings, aging across different clothes and settings. A brass plate reads MATHILDE DE ROCHEFORT IV. Gigi calls Elle over and makes her pose beside the frame. Elle hands over the camera and smiles for the picture. Then she looks back at the painted face. Something about its expression troubles her, but she cannot say why.

VILLA — KITCHEN:

That evening, they cook and take turns interviewing each other for Elle's film. Sloane takes charge of the operation naturally. Gigi accepts the easiest, opening the wine, and recruits Cleo to find the glasses. Cleo objects to an interview question about her worst date because it might still become a meaningful relationship. Sloane refuses to discuss her breakup until Elle puts the camera down.

Gigi takes over Elle's interview, turning sideways so the camera catches her long silver spike earrings. Cleo reaches over to admire one.

"Careful. Those are my going-out earrings."

"We're already out," Sloane says.

"Then why are we interviewing each other?"

The girls laugh. Gigi steals the camera and turns it on Elle. Her long thumbnail, red with a small silver star set into it, briefly fills the lens. Elle complains that she is getting fingerprints everywhere. Gigi tells her to answer the question.

Later, when they are alone, Sloane thanks Elle for letting her stay on the couch after the breakup. She admits she sometimes kept their late-night conversations going because she dreaded being left alone with her thoughts. Elle says she knew.

"You never made me feel like I was in the way."

For once, Elle has nothing to say. Sloane starts clearing the glasses. Elle takes half of them from her.

VILLA — ELLE'S BEDROOM:

Before sleeping, Elle sets the camera beside her bed to record whether she talks during the dreams. She switches off the lamp and settles against the pillows with an unlit joint between her lips.

In complete darkness, she flicks a lighter.

Close on her eyes, illuminated by the flame. It holds her attention. Her breathing slows as the room falls silent.

We move into the flame until its light fills the frame.

NIGHTMARE SEQUENCE:

Beneath a heavy wooden table, a frightened boy crouches behind the hanging tablecloth. He holds a small wooden bird against his chest. He looks directly at the camera.

"João!" a woman calls from somewhere in the room.

His lips move, but the music obscures his words. Adult footsteps approach. The tablecloth lifts.

At the window, the woman's hand raises the candlestick. The image flares before we see her face.

VILLA — ELLE'S BEDROOM:

Elle wakes. Morning light fills the room. She checks the recording. It shows her tossing and turning, sleeping badly.

ACT TWO

VILLA — GARDENS AND POOL:

For a while, the holiday works. They make breakfast from the stocked kitchen, explore the overgrown garden, and spend the afternoon beside the pool. Elle films Sloane laughing so hard she cannot finish a story. As Sloane lifts her arms to tie her hair, a small blue swallow tattoo is visible along her ribs. Gigi tries to persuade her to finish the story on camera. Sloane splashes her instead.

Cleo makes Elle sit in front of the camera for once. She passes Elle her chunky amber glasses while she adjusts the focus, then immediately asks for them back because she cannot see the screen. Elle puts them on instead. Cleo laughs at how enormous they look on her, and the camera keeps running.

During a lively conversation, a cough abruptly cuts through the soundtrack: the same cough and gag we heard from Claudia. No one reacts. The dialogue continues without a pause.

VILLA — ROOMS AND LANDING:

Small disturbances follow. Sloane mistakes a portrait leaning in a dark room for someone standing there. When she turns on the light, she laughs at herself. Elle wakes certain that a child has just spoken outside her door, but finds an empty landing.

Elle tells Cleo more about João. He seems frightened of something beyond the room. Elle wants to understand why this particular boy keeps returning, why the sight of him leaves her feeling responsible for something she cannot remember.

Cleo takes her seriously. Recurring dreams, she says, can circle something unresolved. Perhaps the boy represents a feeling Elle has never dealt with. Perhaps she is picking up on someone else's. Elle asks how she could tell the difference. Cleo thinks an exercise might help.

VILLA — GALLERY:

They gather in the gallery. Cleo arranges crystals in a circle, asks everyone to put their phones away, and begins a guided visualization. At first, the others follow her lead. Elle closes her eyes and tries to picture the boy.

The instructions grow chaotic. Cleo consults a screenshot on her phone, corrects the direction they are facing, and borrows a phrase from astrology when she loses her place. She then

begins chanting. Gigi opens one eye. Sloane asks whether they are supposed to visualize a doorway or actually stand in one. Cleo insists that it is about intention.

Gigi provides an elaborate description of the spiritually significant man she is picturing. Sloane recognizes him as someone from a dating app and starts to laugh. Cleo tries to restart the exercise, mispronounces a word, and begins laughing too. Soon the sacred circle has collapsed into an argument about which star signs are the worst.

Elle is the only one who has not opened her eyes. When she does, none of them notices at first. She gets up. Sloane asks whether she wants a drink. Elle says she is tired.

VILLA — ELLE'S BEDROOM:

In her room, Elle calls Claudia. It rings until voicemail. She starts to leave a message, cannot find a way to explain what is wrong, and hangs up. She begins to cry. Laughter carries up from the gallery.

Elle sets up her camera and tries to record what happened during the exercise. She starts to describe the boy, but another burst of laughter interrupts her. She stops recording, takes the camera and goes looking for somewhere quiet.

VILLA — QUIET ROOMS AND SERVICE STAIRS:

Moving through the less-used rooms, she tests a frame beside an empty chair, then hears the others again through the wall. She moves farther away. Near the gallery she notices a narrow service door with a recessed handle. Beyond it, stairs descend beneath a low arch. Through a high opening at the bottom she can see daylight and leaves moving. She films the entrance, assuming it is another route to the garden. She does not follow it to its end.

VILLA — SITTING ROOM:

In a room adjoining the gallery, her camera passes over a cabinet of small ornaments. She stops and brings the frame back.

Among them sits a wooden bird. Its beak is broken. One wing is blackened.

Elle lowers the camera and picks it up. She rubs her thumb across the scorched wood. Behind her, a fire crackles in the hearth. She turns toward it, the bird still in her hand.

Close on her eyes as they settle on the flames. The crackling grows louder.

NIGHTMARE SEQUENCE:

A wooden bird turns slowly in a child's hands. Its beak is intact.

Children stand in a line beneath indistinct portraits. Each must carry a small polished ball balanced on a long-handled spoon, stop before a proctor, and offer a practiced greeting without

letting it fall. João conceals the bird in his free hand. He watches the spoon so intently that he misses an instruction. When the proctor repeats it, he startles. The ball strikes the floor.

The proctor hits him. João forces himself back into position, fighting tears. The adult notices what he is clutching and holds out an open palm.

João reluctantly surrenders the toy. Weathered fingers snap off its beak. The bird is tossed into the fireplace.

João breaks from the line and drops to his knees, reaching into the flames. His fingers close around the bird. A hand descends toward the back of his head.

“Elle?”

VILLA — SITTING ROOM:

Cleo stands in the doorway. Elle is kneeling before the hearth, gripping the scorched bird. For a moment, she cannot remember crossing the room. Cleo asks whether she burned herself. Elle shakes her head and gets up, keeping the bird in her hand.

Before dinner, Elle records the bird in close-up, turning its scorched wing toward the lens. She opens her earlier dream recordings, looking for anything that might explain where she has seen it before. Nothing supplies an answer.

VILLA — KITCHEN:

Over dinner, she asks whether the others still remember things they owned as children. Cleo remembers a stuffed rabbit and describes repairing its ear with her grandmother. Gigi remembers an extravagant birthday present. Elle asks how old she was. The conversation moves through particular birthdays, rooms, people. Elle keeps asking questions until Sloane asks her to answer one herself.

Elle remembers Sloane's last birthday clearly. It was three months ago. Asked about her own previous birthday, she cannot summon a single detail. She leaves the bird in her pocket.

She knows where she is supposed to have lived and the kind of work she has done. She cannot describe a particular day, conversation, or person from before roughly six months ago. The harder the others try to prompt her, the less certain she becomes. She asks whether everyone feels this way when they try to remember things.

Sloane stops trying to make the conversation comfortable. No. They do not.

The cough sounds again. Cleo glances toward the doorway. Gigi pauses with her glass halfway to her mouth. Then Sloane resumes her question and their attention returns to Elle.

Sloane wants another call to Claudia. Cleo suggests writing down the dreams because the boy keeps appearing, and perhaps there is something Elle has overlooked. Gigi asks whether

anyone is actually qualified to be giving therapy advice. When Sloane tells her to take it seriously, Gigi says she is taking it seriously: they have turned a holiday into a therapy session none of them can conduct.

The disagreement spreads. Sloane has spent weeks arranging cover at work so she could come. Gigi says taking a few days off is not a heroic sacrifice. Sloane rolls her eyes and says that at least she's self-sufficient. Gigi says she pays her own way. Cleo quietly asks whether the apartment her parents bought her counts.

Gigi turns on Cleo. Cleo has not worked for months and is still letting Sloane cover her share. Sloane says she offered and wishes Gigi would stop keeping score. Gigi points out that Cleo brought up money first.

Sloane lowers her voice. "Can we please do this another time? Elle's already struggling."

"Then maybe she needs an actual doctor instead of Cleo waving crystals over her."

Elle switches off her camera. The others turn.

"You know I'm right here, right?"

VILLA — ELLE'S BEDROOM:

Elle returns to her room and tries Claudia again. This time Claudia answers. Elle describes the gap in her memory and asks whether the dreams could explain it. Claudia gently cautions that dreams can feel like memories without being memories. She offers a session when Elle returns. Elle asks whether she should come home sooner. Claudia says they can keep their usual appointment.

For tonight, Claudia suggests giving the dreams a rest. If Elle wants to use her camera, she could film something ordinary: the garden, the rooms, her holiday. Something she can see in front of her. Elle takes comfort in having something simple to do. Sloane, listening from the doorway, thinks someone should be doing more.

VILLA — GALLERY:

Elle follows Claudia's advice. In the quiet gallery, she records the grain of a tabletop, a chipped tile, light falling across a curtain. She steadies her breathing and holds each shot. Then the cough and gagging sound returns for the third time. This time it is persistent.

She turns immediately. It comes again from the dark corridor beyond the paintings. Breath dragged inward, a cough, the wet effort of swallowing. Elle calls out, asking whether someone needs help.

NIGHTMARE SEQUENCE:

She follows the sound. The corridor extends farther than the house should allow. The image slips between her present camera and degraded video. Music becomes audible behind the coughing.

Through an open door, Elle sees an ancient man held upright in a chair. One eyelid droops beneath his heavy brow. A ruby ring hangs loosely on a swollen finger. A figure beside him shoves food down his throat. He struggles to swallow, producing the sound that has been intruding throughout the holiday.

The figure reaches for more food. The Baron looks directly at Elle.

VILLA — GALLERY:

Elle is back in the gallery, still filming a closed door. The recording's timestamp has jumped forward. She tries to describe what she saw into the camera and cannot make it sound different from a dream. She switches it off and goes downstairs.

VILLA — KITCHEN AND COURTYARD:

Downstairs, Gigi pours another drink and puts on music. She asks Cleo to join her on the terrace. Cleo says she is going to bed. Sloane returns from Elle's doorway, puts the food away and turns the music down. Gigi watches them, then carries her glass outside alone.

Across the courtyard, Bernardo is securing a shutter. Gigi calls to him. This time, when he smiles, she goes over.

VILLA — OUTSIDE BERNARDO'S APARTMENT:

Later, Sloane notices that Gigi has not come back. When she fails to answer her phone, Sloane and Cleo look for her. They find her leaving Bernardo's apartment, carrying her shoes, her hair disordered. Their alarm turns to anger.

Gigi jokes until she realizes neither of them finds it funny, then insists she does not need permission to sleep with someone. Through the closing door, Bernardo checks the service passage before disappearing inside. Gigi says he was jumpy the whole time; she took it as embarrassment and enjoyed getting him to relax. It meant nothing. She wanted him, he wanted her, and she is tired of every moment revolving around what might be wrong with Elle.

VILLA — GALLERY:

Elle sits alone in the gallery, camera in her lap. Sloane finds her there after the fight with Gigi, still rattled, and guides her to a bench. Sloane crouches in front of her.

Sloane guides Elle to a bench in the gallery and crouches in front of her.

“Look at me. Just breathe.”

Elle tries. Sloane reaches into her pocket for a tissue. A wet drop lands on the back of her hand.

She looks at it, then up.

Directly above them, a woman lies across the tops of two tall cabinets, her head hanging upside down into the gap. Her lips have rotted away, exposing clenched teeth. Saliva hangs from her open jaw.

Her eyes snap toward Sloane.

Sloane screams, dragging Elle off the bench. The camera swings upward as the woman’s head jerks back into the darkness. A heavy scraping moves across the cabinet tops, then stops.

Gigi and Cleo rush into the gallery. Sloane pulls them toward the stairs before they can ask what happened.

“Get your things. We’re leaving.”

VILLA — BEDROOMS AND ENTRANCE HALL:

Whatever their earlier disagreements, the women now agree to leave. It is nearly dawn. Sloane gathers the car keys while Cleo carries bags downstairs. Zipping her suitcase, Gigi catches her reflection in the mirror and touches a bare earlobe.

She tells Sloane she will fetch Bernardo. He knows the property; he can help them get out. Sloane tells her to be quick. Gigi touches her ear again as she crosses the courtyard toward his apartment.

BERNARDO’S APARTMENT:

The door is ajar. She calls his name. No answer. She checks beside the bed and around the washbasin, then follows the sound of television static into a smaller room farther inside.

A tape protrudes from a VCR beneath the television. Its handwritten label reads GUEST ARRIVALS / HOUSE PROCEDURES. Gigi glances around for Bernardo, then pushes it in, hoping to find instructions that will help them leave. The screen changes to an end card: BE KIND, PLEASE REWIND.

She presses rewind. The mechanism hums. She checks beneath a chair, opens a drawer, and looks back at the television. The tape keeps turning. In the silence around the machine, the wait becomes uncomfortable.

Finally, it stops. A mechanical click. Blank screen. Then an image.

TRAINING FILM — THE ORDER’S CLASSROOMS AND DINING ROOM:

Degraded home video. A neatly dressed instructor demonstrates how to welcome a visitor, then makes a pupil repeat the greeting. An unseen voice explains that attention must be offered before trust can be expected. Ask questions. Remember preferences. Find a shared interest.

The image widens to reveal children rehearsing in pairs. A boy asks a girl what she misses about home, then pretends to share her answer. The instructor corrects his smile.

“Learn what they need. Become the person who provides it.”

Children practice remembering birthdays, offering favours, making invitations sound like someone else's idea. One hesitates. A hand strikes the side of their face. The camera holds its frame as the exercise begins again.

Gigi steps back from the television. This is not going to help. She turns to leave, then recognises a portrait appearing on the screen: the Baron, his heavy brow and ruby ring. She stops.

The painting cuts to its living subject. The same man, impossibly aged, sits supported in a chair. An attendant steadies his head while another feeds him strips of flesh. Other portraits follow, each paired with a living aristocrat whose body has survived centuries.

Food is arranged on silver platters. Severed human fingers are washed, dried and laid straight. Behind the preparation table stand glass vessels and tarnished instruments, maintained with more care than the room itself.

“The servants sustain the masters. The masters serve the Three.”

Three portions are placed before empty chairs. The narrator explains that living sacrifices purchase another season of life. The guests brought into the household are its offerings.

Gigi reaches for her phone. Before she can call, Sloane's name lights up the screen. At the same moment, a new title appears on the television: DISCIPLINE.

An attendant removes a captive woman's necklace.

“The offerings belong to the Three. To claim one for pleasure is theft.”

A servant's wrists are bound behind him. A rope descends. The camera adjusts to record his punishment.

Gigi touches her bare ear. Her phone keeps vibrating. She backs into a chair, knocks it over and runs before answering.

She takes the wrong doorway in her panic and stumbles into Bernardo's hanging body.

He hangs from a ceiling beam, his wrists bound behind him. He has been washed and dressed with meticulous care. Gigi's long silver earrings have been driven into his eyes.

She recoils, touching her own bare ears. A figure suddenly grabs her.

VILLA — DRIVEWAY:

Cut to Sloane closing the car boot. Cleo asks where Gigi is. Elle looks toward the side passage.

ACT THREE

Sloane calls Gigi again. They hear her phone ringing somewhere inside the passage, but she does not answer. Sloane moves toward it. Beyond the bend, a door closes. Footsteps approach. A figure steps between them and the driveway. Another appears behind it.

Sloane calls out for Bernardo. Neither figure answers. Cleo reaches for her arm. The women retreat into the villa as the figures follow after them.

Elle says there is another way out. She saw stairs beneath the gallery while she was filming, with daylight and garden foliage at the bottom. If they can get outside, they can get help for Gigi.

Sloane looks back toward the approaching footsteps, then at Elle. She trusts her. They run.

VILLA — SERVICE PASSAGES:

Elle finds the recessed handle. They descend beneath the low arch. At the bottom, the high opening proves to be a narrow lightwell. Leaves brush across it from above.

Sloane braces one foot against the wall and reaches upward. Her fingers cannot find a grip.. Even if she could climb to it, the opening is too narrow. Cleo turns toward the stairs. Footsteps are descending.

Elle spots another passage continuing beneath the garden. She looks back at the approaching shadows, then takes Sloane's hand and pulls her toward it. Cleo follows.

They reach a door. Elle opens it, expecting freedom.

VILLA — DINING ROOM:

It opens into a DINING ROOM laid for a feast.

The aristocrats wait around a long table, their bodies supported by cushions and discreet braces beneath formal clothes. The Baron is there, ruby ring catching the light. So is the woman from the paintings of Mathilde de Rochefort IV, impossibly old, corpselike and unmistakable.

The doors close behind them.

Cleo grabs the door handle to escape. An attendant catches her, and Sloane punches at his arm. Elle turns toward the struggle as another diner rises with unexpected speed. He catches Cleo's face between his hands and bites. Her amber glasses strike the floor.

Sloane pulls at Cleo until an attendant tears them apart. Cleo is pulled away behind a service door. It violently slams shut. Elle stares at the glasses still lying beneath the table. A servant bends to collect them.

Sloane grabs Elle and runs toward the remaining doorway. They almost reach it. An attendant catches Sloane from behind, and the struggle sends Elle's camera swinging against her chest. Sloane tells her to keep moving. Elle tries to pull her free. They are separated. Sloane is dragged through the doorway, still fighting.

Elle is caught at the far end of the table. She looks from one closed door to the other. Neither friend comes back.

An attendant turns her toward the waiting diners. She is certain she is next.

From off camera: "Elizabeth. Put the camera down."

MEMORY SEQUENCE — THE VILLA, PAST:

The hand at the window lifts the candlestick. Claudia's face emerges into its light. She is younger, looking directly into the image.

"Elizabeth. Put the camera down."

For the first time, we see the small girl holding the Hi8 camera. It is Elle.

The childhood sequence continues beyond the point where it always broke off. João has failed the obedience test. He has been hit, his bird broken and thrown into the hearth. He kneels to retrieve it. The descending hand grips his head and smashes the side of his face into the burning coals.

Young Elle lowers the camera and starts toward him. Claudia catches her. Behind Claudia, an attendant drags João away from the fire. He is alive, screaming, still clutching the scorched bird. Claudia returns Elle's hands to the camera. The image shakes as the recording continues.

Later in childhood, Elle stands beside the actual Mathilde de Rochefort IV beneath her painted likeness. The ancient woman sits in a high-backed chair. Claudia smooths Elle's hair. "You belong to her. Make her proud." Mathilde takes the child's hand without looking at her.

The images progress forward. Elle learns to frame the children's exercises. She records the preparation of a table, then an attendant feeding Mathilde. Claudia corrects a greeting and makes Elle practice it with another child. The camera skills and the social instruction are taught together.

As a young woman, Elle sets a camera on a tripod facing an instructor and a pupil. He demonstrates the greeting Gigi watched on the tape. Elle adjusts the frame. This time we see the room from outside the recorded image. She made the training film.

She films Mathilde's care, records the order's ceremonies. Claudia supervises each task. Elle's camera and traveling bag wait for her.

VILLA — DINING ROOM, PRESENT:

Claudia takes the camera from Elle and seats her at the end of the table.

Across from her, a man turns toward a passing platter. One side of his face is drawn into deep burn scars. His uninjured eye meets hers. It is João, grown older.

“João?”

He stops chewing. Recognition passes across his face. Elle leans toward him, her voice barely audible. “Please. My friends—”

He lowers his eyes. He cuts another piece of meat and resumes eating. Elle waits for him to look up again. He does not.

Mathilde extends an empty glass. Elle reaches automatically to fill it. She catches herself watching her own hand, then finishes the movement. Mathilde withdraws the glass. Elle sits again.

An attendant brings a platter past her. Among the food is a hand. On its thumb, a small silver star remains embedded in red polish.

Elle's eyes move from the nail to the aristocrat receiving it. He bends over the hand and begins to eat. Another diner grips a foot in both hands. A servant rearranges the silver beneath him to catch what falls.

Elle searches the faces around the table. They chew, swallow, reach for more. The Baron works through a mound of meat until his teeth meet something hard. He stops, reaches into his mouth, and removes a lens still attached to a broken section of amber frame glasses. Cleo's glasses. He places them beside his plate and continues.

Elle pushes back from the table. Claudia's hand settles on her shoulder.

FINALE

The service door opens. Attendants carry Sloane into the room and throw her onto the table like a roasted boar.

Her head falls backward over its edge, upside down, mouth gaping. Her eyes find Elle at the end of the table.

She is still alive.

“I thought it went outside,” Elle says.

“Help me.” A look of sad betrayal fading from her dying eyes.

Elle looks at Claudia's hand on her shoulder. She pulls away from it. She rises and reaches across the table toward her friend.

Sloane's head slumps to the side.

Behind it, revealed for the first time in this sequence, the three white flames hover above the empty candelabrum.

Elle's gaze catches on them. Her reaching hand stops. The rest of her body becomes still.

A tear rolls down her motionless face.

Claudia leans close to her ear.

“This is your purpose.”

We push into the central flame until its pale interior fills the frame.

END.

UNDERPINNING STORY LOGIC

The villa houses an ancient aristocratic order whose continued existence depends upon consuming human life. Ceremony, occult practices, and the conditioning of people raised to serve it preserve the system. The elders require attendants, record keepers, and suppliers. Their privilege leaves them dependent on the people and rites that keep them alive. Everyday acts of service among the friends introduce the hierarchy that the estate carries to its extreme.

Elle, short for Elizabeth, was raised within the order and assigned to serve Mathilde de Rochefort IV, the ancient woman depicted in the portraits and present at the feast. She is specifically assigned to document Mathilde's life and rituals and supply her with victims. The numeral belongs to Mathilde's aristocratic designation, not a succession of recruiters. Elle's present documentary is a sincere attempt to understand her mental health, made with a skill whose origin she cannot remember.

Before this trip, Elle can access roughly the most recent three to six months of her life. Earlier autobiographical experience is suppressed, although learned skills, social habits, and general information remain available to her. Her affection for her friends is real. She does not consciously choose them as sacrifices, and no footage shows her surveilling them. She leads Sloane and Cleo toward the feast because she mistakes a passage she explored during the holiday for an escape route. When its lightwell proves unusable and pursuers block their return, she chooses the continuing passage under pressure.

Claudia is Elle's handler and former instructor, not her biological mother. The waiting-room imagery encourages Elle to initiate the trip herself. The flames are part of the conditioning that

suppresses her memories and overrides resistance. The cough is a sensory connection to the traumatic feeding imagery, not an obedience command: introduced by Claudia, heard three more times during the holiday, and finally embodied by the Baron being force-fed.

João was another child subjected to the order's training. He failed an obedience test and was physically punished. A proctor broke his wooden bird and threw it into the fire. When he tried to retrieve it, the proctor smashed the side of his face into the coals. He survived and remains within the order. Elle's recurring images are memories of him, not proof of a haunting. She wants to understand the boy; Cleo's interpretation offers an uncertain explanation. His appearance as a scarred adult completes that thread. Elle appeals to him for help, but he returns to eating. His submission precedes her own decision to help Sloane.

Gigi's encounter with Bernardo expresses her impulsiveness and his failure of discipline. He is executed for sleeping with an intended sacrifice. Gigi goes to fetch Bernardo to help the group leave, privately intending to retrieve her earrings as well. A tape labelled as household instructions draws her in; recognition of the Baron keeps her watching until she understands what the order does. She flees, finds Bernardo's corpse and is captured. The film reveals the cannibalistic aristocracy here, reserving Elle's authorship of the tape, her upbringing, and Claudia's role for the climax. The others never receive Gigi's information.

The friends' identifying details establish that the feast consists of people Elle knows. Sloane remains alive until her final plea. Elle chooses to help her and is stopped by the flame conditioning. The film ends with that choice visibly overridden. There is no city epilogue, escape, or reversal of the hierarchy.

The film combines present recordings, conventional cinematic scenes, degraded video, and subjective memory. The early childhood imagery does not identify a camera operator. The climactic memory passage reveals Elle behind the camera and progresses through her training before returning to the present. Gigi's solitary discovery and the final feast can use conventional cinematic coverage.