



THETH

Written by

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*"Albania is strewn with the wreckage of dead empires - past powers
- only the Albanian goes on forever."*

-Edith Durham

EXT. THETH VALLEY - NIGHT

Jagged mountain range.
Half-frozen clouds loom high.
Cold air WHISTLES between peaks.

Winter creeps down from the mountains into a valley, where a modest hamlet crowds both sides of a dirt road. Smoke plumes from chimneys. Residents keep warm inside stone homes.

The edge of the hamlet is marked by a stone "lock-in" tower.

Two stories high. Distanced, in a way, from the rest of the village but still a part of the fold.

TITLES: THETH, ALBANIA. 1849.

A SHADOW dashes across the lookout window at the top--

INSIDE

A CLOAKED WOMAN (20s), lays her BABY (2) on a straw bed. Pain stabs at her heart. Tears well in her eyes. *This is goodbye.*

CLOAKED WOMAN
Beautiful boy--

She strokes his cheeks. Admires his green eyes. Walks across the room.

A wooden chest. She strikes a fire steel. Lights a candle.

Opens the chest, and peels back the wool blanket at the bottom, revealing a flintlock musket.

It's time.

She rises. Determination mauls her pain.

Whatever it's time for, she's coming with bad intentions.

She strides towards the doorway. Reaches inside her cloak.

Extracts a CROSS made of animal BONE. Twine cinches two pieces of bone together. Dry bone marrow flakes off the ends.

She leans it up against the door frame. Finally leaves.

Alone now, the baby's coos turn into CRYING.

A snowflake drifts inside, floats through the room, and melts on the baby's forehead.

TITLES: THETH**INT. BEDROOM - DAY**

Morning sun pours through half-open sheers. Last night's fire simmers. A sheepskin blanket covers the bed.

ELIRA (18) looks at her reflection in a mirror.

Red crown-like cap on her head. Tiny gold coins hang off the rim and dangle. A white veil covers her face.

The beautiful bride-to-be.

LULE (O.S.)
They're here. Ready?

LULE (20), Elira's sister pokes her head in. Older. Same almond-shaped eyes.

ELIRA
Ready to run away.

Lule won't address the sadness in her sister.

LULE
You look beautiful in Mom's veil.

She approaches. Reveals a bouquet of wildflowers.

LULE (CONT'D)
The last bit of color before
winter.

ELIRA
We'll have to harvest soon.

LULE
Soon. Let's get you married first.

EXT. MAIN ROAD - DAY

A çepa (drumstick) whips against a sheepskin drum in an unconventional time signature. Raspy, hard voices SING.

The ancient music carries across the valley floor as one hundred VILLAGERS march down the footpath.

Past a lock-in tower. Past stone homes. Past a--

COMMUNAL GARDEN

Wheat and barley. Maze. Potatoes. Beans. Seasonal fruits and vegetables. All mature, ready to be picked for the winter.

Oxen tied to wooden posts yawn. Primitive plow tools pierce the dirt nearby.

Leading the procession, Elira thumps atop a mule. Anxiously picks at her cuticle. Lule's wildflowers haphazardly smushed between her arm and body.

Three boys, GJON (15), AGIM (13), and LLESH (10), guide her mule and whisper to each other.

LLESH

Is she our sister?

GJON

Our new Mom, idiot.

Elira pretends not to hear. Instead watches:

AFRIM (40s), brow steepened by the weight of village life.

A white Albanian FEZ covers his shaved crown. A single braid hangs from a patch of hair on the back of his skull. Most importantly, a thick graying mustache crowds over his lip.

The groom.

Elira looks past Afrim at --

-- **THE LOCK-IN TOWER.** From the lookout window at the top --

A SHADOWED MAN watches the procession.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

Small but sturdy. Built with thick slabs of stone, like everything else in Theth. Complete with a steeple and cross.

The procession arrives.

Afrim dismounts his mule. Helps Elira down from hers. Without much between them, Afrim turns to address Elira's father.

AFRIM

Beautiful day.

BLENDAR (50s) lifts his chin. Warms his face in the sun, steadying himself on a cane, making up for his CRIPPLED LEG.

BLEDAR

Let's enjoy the warmth while we
can.

Afrim passes a document. Crudely written text. Signatures.

BLEDAR (CONT'D)

I inherited my grandfather's land
with a handshake. Nowadays, we need
ink.

AFRIM

I give you land. Your daughter
gives me sons. The old ways are
still true.

BLEDAR

Says the only armed man in Theth.

Afrim thumbs his bandoleer and plucks a bullet. Flicks it --
Bledar catches it.

AFRIM

Thank your priest for that.

Afrim WHISTLES at his eldest son (Gjon), who detaches two
goats from the mule and passes the reigns to Bledar.

A goat-dowry.

AFRIM (CONT'D)

If we're settled here, then let's
get the ceremony over with.

Bledar ties the goats to a post beside the church.

Afrim turns, passes Elira to enter the church --

SHEF (50s) slides in front of him. Black robe. White collar.
No need for a mustache on this Franciscan PRIEST.

A smugness wipes across his face as he sees Afrim.

SHEF

The last of our village to enter
the house of God. Life from now on
will be different.

AFRIM

No need for ambles. I've already
agreed to do this in the church.

Afrim steps forward again, but Shef stops him --

SHEF
 (re: rifle)
 You can't bring that in here. Not
 if you want to get married.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Rows of pews. Packed end to end. Paintings of saints line the walls. Afrim, rifle-less, stands on the altar beside Elira.

SHEF
 People of Theth. We come together
 in God's presence to witness the
 joining of Afrim and Elira.

Elira peaks up -- mounted high above her -- ceramic Christ, forlorn on his crucifix, stares down.

EXT. CHURCH - SAME

Afrim's rifle leans against the church.

In the b,g, clouds slide in front of the sun. A blanket of gray takes over the village.

Unseen, horse hooves CLACK and CLOMP against gravel.

INT. CHURCH - SAME

Elira picks harder at her cuticles--

SHEF
 ... Let us pray. O God, who by your
 mighty power created all things out
 of nothing, and, when you had set
 in place the beginnings of the
 universe, formed man and woman in
 your own image, making the woman an
 inseparable helpmate to the man...

She peels the skin completely and draws blood. Ow.

SHEF (CONT'D)
 ...that they might no longer be
 two, but one flesh, and taught that
 what you were pleased to make one
 must never be divided.

Shef gestures. Afrim faces Elira. Removes her veil. Hardly reacts. Hardly appreciates her youthful beauty.

The blood from her torn cuticle pools on her fingernail.

EXT. CHURCH - SAME

The CLOMP and CLACK of horses pass by --

Horses tow carriages filled with OTTOMAN TROOPS.

A star and crescent flag flies high.

The militia marches toward the garden.

INT. CHURCH - SAME

A secret streak of blood stains Elira's dress from where she wiped her bloody cuticle.

Elira and Afrim hold hands. Rings on their ring fingers.

Flowery crowns sit on their heads. A ribbon ties them together.

SHEF

God, send down on them the grace of the Holy Spirit and pour your love into their hearts, that they may remain faithful in the Marriage covenant. Give your grace and guidance in their lives together.

(beat)

Afrim, do you take Elira to be your wife?

AFRIM

I do.

SHEF

Elira, do you take Afrim to be your husband?

Elira glances out at the spectators. Hesitates until she catches her sister Lule's gaze. *Do it.*

ELIRA

I do.

SHEF

Afrim. You may give your bride the kiss of peace. Symbolizing your love and commitment to each other.

Afrim presses forward. But before their lips meet--

THE DOORS SWING OPEN.

A wild-eyed VILLAGER catches his breath.

VILLAGER
It's all gone!

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Villagers LAMENT ancient songs. Women WEEP in horror.
What was once a bountiful harvest is now just upturned dirt.
Even the livestock is missing.
Except for Bledar's Goat-Dowry. They BLEAT.
Elira watches her new husband boil.
She focuses past him, at the lock-in tower.
The Shadowed Man at the top watches the scene unfold.
Afrim steps into the upturned dirt. Finds a single left-
behind tomato. He flips it over.

Rot.

In frustration, he spikes it into the dirt--

EXT. ACCURSED MOUNTAINS - NIGHT

Blue hour. High in the mountains.
The village below is a grain of sand.
A wild mountain goat clomps by --

INT. AFRIM'S KULLA (STONE HOUSE) - NIGHT

Hearty men sit on floor cushions. Relics of the old world
hang on the walls. Swords. Shields. A brass double-headed
Albanian eagle centerpieces the smokey fireplace.
Men smoke. Others sip Raki (Albanian Moonshine).
Afrim paces between it all in a plume of tobacco smoke.

AFRIM
We must go after them.

BLENDAR

With what -- stones and brooms?

Shef makes his round, blessing the walls with holy water.

AFRIM

I warned you. When they came for
your god, you traded your weapons
instead. Now look at you. Stuck
with your dicks in your hands--
(noticing Shef)
-- and magic water.

Shef caps the bottle of his holy water.

SHEF

Peace is the only way.

AFRIM

Peace may satisfy your soul, but it
won't fill your stomach.

INT. KITCHEN - AFRIM'S KULLA - NIGHT

Elira eavesdrops on the men. Behind her, Lule prepares food.

ELIRA

What do you think they'll do?

LULE

Smoke and drink and posture.

ELIRA

I have an idea.

LULE

Keep it to yourself.

Lule twists her face, not finding what she's looking for.

LULE (CONT'D)

Where's the lamb?

ELIRA

There is none.

She turns to face her sister. *Really?*

INT. LIVING ROOM - AFRIM'S KULLA - NIGHT

Elira, Lule, and other wives bring dishes of food. By any
standard, this meal is plenty.

Lentils. Bread. Furgese (Melted Cheese).

AFRIM
What's this?

ELIRA
Furgese, bread, and lentils.

Duh. Elira's tone irks Afrim. But he won't let his irritation crystalize in front of the other men.

AFRIM
We have guests. Where's the lamb?

LULE
There is none.

AFRIM
Of course, there is--

Confused, Lule sinks inside herself. Throws daggers at Elira--

ELIRA
It's a good idea to slow down. Save food for the long winter.

AFRIM
Oh. And who decided that?

Elira opens her mouth to speak, but not before Lule steps up.

LULE
I did --

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Lamb shank roasts over a fire.

Elira prods at the flesh. It's ready.

She pulls the pan from the fire. Haphazardly slides it onto a serving dish. Juices splatter across the plate.

LULE
You should not be so careless.

Lule delicately re-plates.

ELIRA
You should not be so proper.
(beat, then)
Why'd you take the blame?