

SWORN VIRGIN

by

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FADE IN

TITLE CARD: For centuries, in the closed-off and conservative society of rural, northern Albania, when the head of the household died without a male heir, a daughter was chosen take an oath of celibacy. She would transform herself into a man and become a Sworn Virgin.

EXT. ALBANIAN VILLAGE - NIGHT

As the moon ducks behind a cloud, a STRANGER darts out of the woods to a pair of closed wooden shutters in the back of a house.

The stranger raps on the shutter. TAP. TAP. TAP.

MARTA (O.S.)

Omar?

They talk in whispers.

OMAR

Marta, is everyone asleep?

MARTA (O.S.)

Yes.

OMAR

Hurry!

The shutters are opened by MARTA. She's a young woman, but it's hard to make out her features in the darkness. There are bars on the window, but they have been loosened long ago. Omar quickly removes two, helps Marta jump out of the window, then quickly replaces them and closes the shutters.

Marta and Omar slip off into the darkness, giggling at their cleverness.

Behind them, the shutter open quietly. Two EYES in the darkness watch them disappear into the woods.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Omar and Marta are huddled behind a large tree. Filtered moonlight reveal their features. Omar is 20, built like a bull from long days of hard work in the fields; but he's ruggedly handsome. The power in his compact body belies the smile on his kindly face which is lit up in the presence of Marta.

Marta is 19. She has a sweet face with delicate brows and dark raven hair. Her generous figure hints at voluptuousness. She's flush with nervous excitement.

MARTA

Omar, my mother would kill me if she found out --

Omar presses his finger to her lips.

OMAR

Soon you will walk with me hand-in-hand and by my side. We won't have to sneak out like children anymore.

MARTA

When? Are you ready to propose to my father? My parents want me to be married soon!

Omar frowns but doesn't respond.

MARTA (CONT.)

When, Omar?

OMAR

As soon as I can.

MARTA

How soon? I'm already nineteen!

OMAR

I should have your bride-price soon. I'm saving everything I make. I -- I hope to have it by next year.

Marta notices the uncertainty on Omar's face and hits his chest in frustration.

MARTA

Don't let me down. Don't let them give me to someone else! Do you hear me?

Omar nods with fierce determination on his face and digs into his pocket and brings something out. It's a small heart-shaped silver pendant, hardly ornate but of great worth to this poor farmer.

OMAR

Let me have your necklace.

Marta obeys wordlessly and takes off a thin, silver necklace from around her neck.

Omar slips the locket on and almost reverentially puts the necklace back around her neck.

OMAR

I claim you, Marta Bajrami. You
will be my wife.

Marta inspects the locket as if its the most precious thing in the world. She looks up at Omar with adoration.

He reaches out and touches her chin and looks into the deep pools of her almond eyes. After a moment's hesitation, he leans forward and kisses her.

Marta returns his ardor with passion.

INT./EXT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

The warehouse is of a modest size. Produce ranging from apples, plums, limes, potatoes to garlic and ginger are piled high into large wooden bins. A DOZEN LABORERS wash, sort, pack and load fruits and vegetables into baskets and then onto carts drawn by mules.

The foreman, STEFAN, a muscular man of 30 with a dark, handle bar mustache, supervises their work, while taking account of the amount of produce into a ledger sheet.

Presiding over them is BASHKIM, the owner and overlord of the business.

He goes down the line and urges each of his workers impatiently.

BASHKIM

Hurry! Hurry! I don't pay you to
work like snails!

Bashkim is a gruff man of 50 with a receding hairline, noticeable paunch, aquiline nose and trimmed beard streaked with gray. He has a confident swagger, clearly trying to overcompensate for the noticeable limp in his right leg. One of the few men of the village with some level of success, he's not afraid to exert his influence or express his opinions. His employees are clearly intimidated by him.

A farmer named BROZI, lanky and stooped with age pulls into the docking area with a cart full of freshly-picked peaches.

Brozi gets off his mule and greets Bashkim as he approaches.

BROZI

Ho, Bashkim, I've got a good batch for you today!

BASHKIM

I'll be the judge of that.

Bashkim inspects the peaches carefully with a practiced eye. They are yellow with patches of red, burgeoning with juice. But Bashkim snorts and tosses the peach back.

BASHKIM

You picked these too late. They're too ripe. Half will spoil before they get to the market.

BROZI

I've been growing peaches for thirty years and you tell me I picked them too late?

BASHKIM

Two thousand leks. That's the best I can do.

BROZI

Two thousand? Two thousand? That's almost half what you paid last month!

BASHKIM

There's a glut of peaches on the market. If you can do better, sell them in Tirana yourself.

BROZI

Three thousand lek.

BASHKIM

Bah! Two thousand. Take it or leave it. I have other suppliers.

Bashkim has a monopoly as the only produce wholesaler in the district and always drives a hard bargain. Brozi has no choice but to accept his offer. He nods curtly, clearly disappointed.

Bashkim calls out to Stefan.

BASHKIM

Pay him two thousand only. Make sure everything is sorted and loaded before the day is out. I'll be back. I have other business to attend to!

Bashkim limps off towards his horse.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - DAY

The surrounding high mountains are covered with snow and bleak in their magnificence. A dirt road bisects the valley, where peasant farmers have tilled and cultivated the harsh land into patches of fertile soil over generations. There are fields of fruits and vegetables and in a pasture a shepherd herds goats and cattle.

A handful of FIELD HANDS are tending to an olive grove, pruning the trees with delicate care.

ADNAN BAJRAMI wipes the sweat off his brow. He's a peasant farmer with a weathered face and rough hands, common to the people who inhabit this wild and lawless land. He's in his mid fifties, solidly built with streaks of gray in his dark hair. He's a proud man, quick to anger but also quick to laugh.

The sun is high overhead. It's a sweltering day. He calls out to the field hands.

ADNAN

Take a water break!

The field hands are grateful and instantly obey. SELMAN, the foreman (a short, wiry man of 50) fetches a jug from a cart and gives it to Adnan, who takes a long swig and hands it back.

Adnan picks an olive from a branch and shows it to Selman, clearly disgusted.

ADNAN

These are so small.

SELMAN

What do you expect when we have little rain?

ADNAN

Every year it's the same. God gives us little rain. I should try to soak the fields with my tears!

SELMAN

If we dig an irrigation canal from the stream in the woods, we could get a better yield and increase the harvest.

ADNAN

And if you agree to work for free for half a year, I could easily afford that.

Though Adnan is Selman's employer, there is an easy camaraderie and respect between the two men.

SELMAN

Pay me nothing if you wish... but if you promise the men a bonus at the end of the season, I can convince them to work extra to dig it. It will take a few weeks, but we can do it.

Adnan is intrigued by the idea.

ADNAN

You are serious?

Selman nods confidently. He points to the field across the dirt road. Omar is toiling away in the fields, plowing his field with an ox tied to a plow.

Omar waves to them. They wave back.

SELMAN (CONT.)

Tahiri's boy promised to lend us his ox and plow. He even volunteered to lend us a hand.

ADNAN

Omar? Why would --

BASHKIM (O.S.)

Adnan!

Adnan and Selman turn to see Bashkim approaching on his horse. They frown when they see him. Clearly, he is not favored by them. But Bashkim is an important man, the buyer of their olives and they have to feign warmth.

ADNAN

Bashkim, how are you today?

Bashkim dismounts from his horse, favoring his left leg. He gives a curt nod to Selman and focuses his attention on Adnan.

BASHKIM

I'm a busy man, Adnan. Business rules my life. A son would have greatly eased my burdens.

ADNAN

Inshallah, you shall have many someday.

BASHKIM

Inshallah, as soon as I find another wife.

ADNAN

God willing.

BASHKIM

How are your olives this season?

Selman answers, lying smoothly.

SELMAN

Our harvest will be bountiful this year.

ADNAN

We're hopeful for a good price from you. You should be able to sell our olives for a very good price. They'll be fat and plump.

Bashkim nods noncommittally and clears his throat.

BASHKIM

I have a proposal for you, Adnan...

ADNAN

Proposal? Yes, what do you have in mind?

Bashkim glances at Selman. He's not prepared to discuss it in front of him.

BASHKIM

It would please me if I may visit your home to discuss the matter tomorrow night... privately.

Adnan is wary but also intrigued. His dislike for Bashkim is trumped by his desire for what he perceives to be a business proposal and perhaps profit.

ADNAN

Yes, of course. It would be a great honor.

BASHKIM

I will see you tomorrow then.

Bashkim nods curtly and gets back on his horse.

EXT. COMMUNAL WELL - DAY

VILLAGE WOMEN are busy at a communal well. They all wear blouses, long dark skirts with aprons and white head scarves, the common outfit for women of the region.

Some wait in a queue to draw water from the well, while others wash clothes, pounding them against stone to clean them. No men are about. Fetching water and washing clothes are a woman's duty. In the absence of men, the women are free to express themselves freely and to gossip.

Marta washes clothes with her friend ARIANA, who is of the same age and also pretty, with sharp, angled features. They have been best friends since childhood. They sit on their haunches, beating clothes over a stone to clean them.

Ariana throws down a shirt in frustration.

ARIANA

My hands are raw! I can't do this anymore.

MARTA

You always complain. Hurry up, I have to get home soon. My mother will kill me if I'm late!

ARIANA

She threatens your life at least once a day. This whole village would be dead if she were a man. Why are you in a rush?

MARTA

My father is to have a visitor today. We have to clean the house.

ARIANA
Who?

MARTA
Bashkim.

ARIANA
Why does that crippled old man want
to see your father?

MARTA
Has to be for business.

ARIANA
He's killed two wives. Maybe he's
looking for a third...

Marta throws soapy water at Ariana.

MARTA
Shut up! That's not funny!

EXT. COMMUNITY WELL - MOMENTS LATER

The clothes have been washed and put into wooden
baskets. Marta leans over to pick up hers when her necklace
slips out, revealing the locket.

Ariana instantly sees it and snatches it. She sees the
heart shape and her eyes grow wide in surprise.

ARIANA
Who gave you this?

MARTA
My mother.

ARIANA
Liar! Who was it? Tell me!

Marta snatches the locket back and hides it in her
blouse. She picks up the basket and puts it on her back
with a grunt and starts to walk away with a smile on her
face.

MARTA
I'm late.

EXT. VILLAGE STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Ariana rushes up to catch up to the Marta, struggling against the bundle of wet clothes on her back. They walk together.

ARIANA
It was Omar, wasn't it?

MARTA
I told you it was my mother --

ARIANA
Fine, I'll ask her --

MARTA
Don't you dare!

ARIANA
It was Omar!

Marta nods.

ARIANA (CONT.)
You're so brave. He actually gave you something before you two are married!

MARTA
Swear to me that you won't tell anyone!

ARIANA
Has he asked your father for your hand yet?

MARTA
He will... as soon as he can. He promised me.

ARIANA
You're so lucky. He's so handsome. Those dark, brooding eyes... those muscles. Marry Bashkim and let me have him!

Marta slaps her friend's rump and Ariana cries out.

MARTA
Keep your hands off him!

They come around a bend in the road and run into TWO VILLAGE MEN with rifles slung over their shoulders and cigarettes in

their mouths. Marta and Ariana instantly move to the side out of deference. It was normal in this lawless land for men to carry firearms, where violence was common and women were subservient to men.

The men pass without even acknowledging them and the girls continue on their way.

ARIANA

Sometimes, I wish I were a man.
They have all the advantages. We
have no rights whatsoever.

MARTA

I would never want to be a man.

ARIANA

Why?

MARTA

Then I wouldn't be able to marry
Omar!

The girls come past a house and spot what at first appears to be a SHORT MAN in his sixties with close-cropped gray hair. He's wearing the traditional male skull cap, shirt and trousers; but the face has a feminine curve with lashes that are delicate and still dark.

The feminine-looking man is struggling to lift a basket on to the back of a cart attached to a mule. Without hesitation, Marta sets her basket down and helps the man to lift the basket into the cart.

The man is actually a woman, but she is a sworn virgin who has taken an oath to become a man and dresses like one. Her name is ELVIRA. She's grateful for Marta's help.

ELVIRA

My thanks to you. You're Adnan's
daughter?

MARTA

Yes.

ELVIRA

He's raised thoughtful and kind
daughter. Give him my regards.

MARTA

Thank you.

Marta picks up her clothes and goes back to Ariana who hadn't bothered to come over and help the old woman.

ARIANA

Do you know she took the oath over forty years ago? She never married or had children. What a sad life!

MARTA

You're the one who wants to be a man. Take the oath and become a sworn virgin and you won't have to be subservient anymore!

Marta laughs and keeps walking.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - LATER

The single story, stone house is modest in size with a slate roof and a fireplace. There's a small flower bed outside, framed by a weathered fence.

Marta rushes up the short stone steps and grabs the door handle. She turns and waves goodbye to Ariana, who is on the dirt road that will take her to her own house.

ARIANA

Tell me everything that happens tomorrow.

Ariana waves and continues on her way. Marta rushes inside.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - FOYER - CONTINUOUS

As soon as Marta steps inside, she's confronted by her mother MIRJETA, who is a stout woman in her forties, with big hips and fleshy arms. She has the demeanor of a she wolf on the hunt.

MIRJETA

Where have you been? You're late!

MARTA

I'm sorry!

Marta is clearly intimidated by her mother. She tries to walk around her meekly.

MARTA (CONT.)

I'll go hang the clothes in the backyard to dry.

Mirjeta snatches the wooden basket out of Marta's hands.

MIRJETA

I'll do it. Sweep this whole house. I want it spotless!

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Marta walks into the kitchen to fetch a broom.

The room is small and cramped with a single window, no running water or electricity. There is soot on the ceiling, and the white-washed walls, but everything is kept tidy.

Her grandmother, MAGDA, 70 and shriveled, sits on a stool stirring a pot simmering over a clay oven on the floor.

She smiles when she see Marta and takes a spoonful of broth and holds it out to her.

MAGDA

Taste this.

Marta blows on the hot broth and takes a careful sip.

MARTA

Mmm... that's good. You're the best, nana.

MAGDA

Your mother has been raising a storm waiting for you, child.

MARTA

I know.

Marta grabs a broom and walks out.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - FOYER - MOMENTS LATER

Marta rolls up a rug and starts to sweep the stone floor, careful to get every nook and cranny. This room too is spotless, owing to her mother's stern hand, but it is modest in size and sparsely furnished. The kitchen, *oda* (men's room) and three bedrooms branch off a short hallway. The privy is out back. While their family is not poor, they live modestly.

A grill of 14 walks in. It's Marta's sister MIRA. She's a younger copy of her sister, with dark hair and a weathered complexion.

MIRA
I didn't hear you come back.

MARTA
Where were you?

MIRA
Helping mother to hang the
clothes. She's working me to
death. What's so important about
Bashkim coming over?

MARTA
He's rich. Mother wants to impress
him.

Mira starts to move furniture aside, so Marta can sweep.

MIRA
You know...

MARTA
What?

MIRA
You need to be careful.

MARTA
About what?

MIRA
Our bedroom window. Mother noticed
that the bars were loose. She just
asked me about it.

Marta stops sweeping, frozen with anxiety.

MIRA (CONT.)
I saw you sneaking out through the
window the other night.

Marta grabs her sister's wrist.

MARTA
Did you tell her about it?

Mira smiles mischievously. Marta's grip tightens. Mira
wrests her hand away.

MIRA
Ouch!

MARTA
Did you tell her?

MIRA
Of course I didn't! She'd kill you
first and then kill me for not
stopping you.

Marta is visibly relieved.

MARTA
Thank you. What did you tell her?

MIRA
I told her the house is too
old. It's falling apart. Who was
that boy? Was it Omar?

MARTA
Does everybody know?

MIRA
It's a small town, Marta. People
talk. Just be careful, all right?

Marta nods and hugs her sister. They're close and cover
each other's backs.

MIRJETA (O.S.)
What's this? Do you know how much
work we still have to do? Get back
to work!

Mirjeta has returned.

Marta gives a sly wink to her sister and gets back to
sweeping.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - FOYER - EVENING

Adnan opens the door and Bashkim is enthusiastically ushered
inside.

Bashkim is dressed in a pressed brown suit and a skullcap,
covering his baldness. Silver chains cross his breast and
gold rings glitter on his fingers, an ostentatious display
of his wealth.

He removes his shoes according to custom.

BASHKIM
As-Salamu Alaykum.

ADNAN
Alaykum As-Salaam.

The entire family is gathered there, the women standing quietly to the side. By Balkan standards, their family is small, where large, extended families often share the same house and are more common.

Bashkim hands over a box of sweets to Mirjeta.

MIRJETA
 You shouldn't have.

BASHKIM
 My pleasure.

Bashkim sweeps his eyes across everyone. Magda, Mira and Marta. His gaze lingers on Marta and she shifts uncomfortably, looking away.

Mirjeta notices. Her eyes narrow in suspicion.

Adnan holds his hand out, showing Bashkim the way into the next room.

ADNAN
 Please, let us eat and talk.

Bashkim gives Marta a final appraisal and follows Adnan.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENT'S LATER

The *oda* is traditionally reserved for men's discussions and entertaining visitors - where they are served meals also.

Bashkim and Adnan are seated on the floor at the *sofra*, a low table on which meals are served. As a guest, he's been given an honored place near the hearth, the central focus of the room.

Marta and Mira come in wordlessly with platters of food. Mirjeta watches from the doorway, making sure they are attentive to their guest.

Hospitality is a very important part of the culture and they are keen not to offend him and bring shame to the family.

The girls set down plates of apples, plums and olives. They also bring in sweet Turkish coffee and a bottle of *raki* (strong alcoholic drink), and then wordlessly depart.

Bashkim surreptitiously follows Marta with his eyes, appraising her.

The men will talk alone. Adnan glances at Mirjeta who still lingers. She withdraws reluctantly, pulling the door behind her... but not closing it entirely.

Adnan points to the food.

ADNAN

Please, help yourself.

Bashkim appears eager to get on with business, but he tries some of the food to be polite and takes a cup of coffee which Adnan offers him.

BASHKIM

You have two daughters as I do.

ADNAN

They are respectful daughters, but I'm most unfortunate not to have any sons.

BASHKIM

Like myself.

(beat)

Without a son, a family's future is not assured.

Adnan has already resigned himself to the fact that he has no sons.

ADNAN

Sometimes we must accept the fate that god has handed us...

BASHKIM

While a man has vigor and health and ambition, he can make his own fate.

ADNAN

You have done well for yourself. There is much for you to be thankful for.

(beat)

Yesterday, you mentioned a proposal. I would be greatly interested to hear what you have to say. I have a number of ideas to expand my olive groves. Perhaps we can discuss a partnership which will benefit the both of us...

BASHKIM

Hmm.

ADNAN

Your business depends on the produce we can provide to you. While we give you very good product, we can do better. You'll be able to demand a higher price for the produce at the wholesale market. What we lack is a good water source in our fields. I know of a way we can --

BASHKIM

We can discuss these matters later. I want to present to you my proposal first.

Adnan is instantly attentive.

ADNAN

Please.

BASHKIM

Adnan, I lost my dear wife to an unfortunate accident over a year ago...

Adnan nods wordlessly. He knows the entire story.

BASHKIM (CONT.)

As you know, I'm a man of means. I can provide generously.

(beat)

Your elder daughter. Is she spoken for?

Adnan is taken by surprise. He takes a moment to reply.

ADNAN

No.

Bashkim's pleased. He sets his coffee down.

BASHKIM

I would like to ask for your her hand in marriage. I'll offer a very generous bride-price.

(beat)

Later, I will consider your business proposals quite seriously.

Adnan pours himself a glass of *raki* and swallows it in one gulp. This was not the "proposal" he had expected. He had expected a business proposal - not a marriage proposal. He hesitates to answer.

Bashkim looks impatient. He's a man used to getting his way. Quickly.

BASHKIM

Will you give me you daughter's
hand?

Adnan finds his voice. He's careful to not offend his guest.

ADNAN

I'm most honored by your
request. Please give me a few days
to consider. I will provide you an
answer soon.

Bashkim would rather have had the answer now; but he too must respect his host and potential father-in-law.

He takes a glass of *raki* and lifts it for a toast, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

BASHKIM

I look forward to your
approval. Inshallah.

INT. ADNAN'S BEDROOM - LATER

Mirjeta immediately confronts her husband after Bashkim has left.

MIRJETA

Why didn't you accept his proposal
right away? We're lucky that he
wants Marta. You could have
insulted him!

Adnan still appears dazed by the proposal.

ADNAN

I thought he was here to make a
business proposal.

MIRJETA

Why would he come to do business
with you? We can't offer him
anything but our daughter.

ADNAN

Did you know about this before?

MIRJETA

There was talk among the woman. He's a widow. We were all guessing which woman he would want to marry next. We're lucky his eyes turned to Marta. He's the wealthiest man in the village.

ADNAN

And also the greediest.

MIRJETA

He comes from a noble family. The Dukagjini's. He promised a large bride-price. This marriage will finally change our family's fortunes.

ADNAN

And I have not provided you enough?

Mirjeta remains silent. It's a sore point between them.

ADNAN (CONT.)

You know he has two dead wives already. What will be the fate of the third?

MIRJETA

His first wife died during childbirth. That's not his fault.

ADNAN

And the last one? What about her?

MIRJETA

It was an accident.

ADNAN

You know that's not true. He beat her to death when she couldn't provide him a son.

MIRJETA

She insulted her husband in public. She was too opinionated.

ADNAN

Like you are?

That shuts Mirjeta up, if only more a moment.

She appears more concerned about improving the family's prospects than her daughter's happiness.

MIRJETA

I heard him. He'll help your business if this marriage happens.

ADNAN

I don't want to sacrifice Marta's happiness.

MIRJETA

Children are there to sacrifice for their family. I -- I've made sacrifices. Sacrifice is our way.

Mirjeta grabs her husband's hands and pleads to him.

MIRJETA (CONT.)

Adnan, this is a great proposal. It won't come again. Bashkim's a powerful man. We can't insult him. There have been blood feuds for much less.

ADNAN

I'm not afraid of him. Bashkim may have money, but he's arrogant. He takes advantage of his suppliers. He cheats us!

MIRJETA

But not such a great cheat so you wouldn't do business with him!

The barb stings. Adnan raises his hand to strike his wife. She doesn't shy away and stands firm, challenging him to strike. He lowers his hands.

Adnan's voice is tinged with steel. Despite his wife's strong personality, he was still head of the household and therefore held sway in all matters.

ADNAN

Woman, your tongue will get you into trouble one of these days. You should have been born a woman.

Mirjeta sighs and continues in a softer tone.

MIRJETA

You have already decided then? You
will refuse his proposal?

Adnan shakes his head.

ADNAN

No... I haven't decided yet. I
want to talk to Marta first.

INT. MARTA'S BEDROOM - LATER

Mirjeta follows her husband into Marta's room, which she
shares with Mira. But Adnan wants to speak to his daughter
alone. He points to the door.

ADNAN

I want to speak to Marta alone.

Mira wordlessly leaves, but Mirjeta stays put.

ADNAN

Mirjeta, go!

Adnan's tone will brook no arguments. Mirjeta gives Marta a
stern glance and leaves the room, pulling the door behind
her, but also leaving a gap to eavesdrop from.

Adnan is wise to his wife's ways and closes the door firmly
and turns to face his daughter.

ADNAN

Marta, do you know why Bashkim came
to visit today?

MARTA

Wasn't it for business?

There are two small beds in the small, sparse bedroom shared
by the sisters. Adnan sits on the edge of one and pats a
spot next to him.

Marta wordlessly sits down next to her father, somewhat
anxious.

ADNAN

Marta, many women your age have
already married and started a
family.

Marta stiffens.

ADNAN

Your mother and I think it's time for us to consider proposals for your hand in marriage.

MARTA

Is that why he came? He wants to marry me?

ADNAN

Yes.

MARTA

Oh, my god. He's so old!

ADNAN

This won't matter later, you'll see. I'm ten years older than your mother.

MARTA

That man's old enough to be my father! I don't like him. He's arrogant!

ADNAN

We can't dismiss his proposal so hastily. He's an important man with an established business. He'll be able to provide a great deal as a husband.

MARTA

I don't care. I can't! I won't!

ADNAN

Listen to me. He's a powerful man. This proposal can't be so easily dismissed --

MARTA

Father, do you know Omar?

ADNAN

Tahiri's son.

Marta's reluctant to tell him about Omar, but she realizes that she must.

MARTA

He wants to marry me.

(beat)

I -- I want to marry him too.

Adnan stiffens. He's taken completely by surprise.

INT. OUTSIDE OF MARTA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mirjeta is eavesdropping with her ear pressed to the door. She stiffens and grabs the doorknob, prepared to barge in --

-- then with the greatest self-control, she stops herself.

She's livid with anger, but presses her ear back to the door.

INT. MARTA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Adnan takes a moment to cope with his surprise, but he does not appear to be angry.

ADNAN

If Omar wishes to marry you, why hasn't his father made a formal proposal to me yet?

MARTA

Omar is saving for my bride-price. He hopes to have it by next year.

ADNAN

Hope? Even if half our hopes came true, we'd all be rich. I know for a fact that Tahiri has mortgaged half his land. He's an honest man, but he's also a fool and a gambler. What prospects can his son have? It'll take them years to get together a god bride-price for you. Can you wait years, Marta?

MARTA

Yes! Omar's ambitious and smart. He's not like his father. He's a hard worker. He has ideas to increase the yields of their crops. He'll succeed.

ADNAN

Ideas! Hopes! A man can't feed a wife on these alone. Marta, Bashkim will be able to provide you a life without hardships.

MARTA

Omar and I love each other.

ADNAN

In our society, love and marriage don't have anything to do with each other. We consider a man who falls in love with a woman a vain fool. A man has to be a good provider first.

MARTA

Is money the only thing that matters? We've never had much, but you've given us a good life.

Marta gets down on her knees and clutches her father's feet.

MARTA (CONT.)

Don't give me to
Bashkim! Please! I'll never be
happy with anyone other than Omar!

Adnan makes his daughter sit back on the bed and grasps hers hands.

ADNAN

I'll carefully consider what you have told me. But remember, in the end, a daughter must obey her father.

Adnan gets up and leaves the room.

INT. OUTSIDE OF MARTA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mirjeta scrambles away from the door, pretending not have been eavesdropping.

Adnan is not fooled. He's displeased with her behavior, but has come to accept Mirjeta's bad habits.

He gives his wife a stern look.

ADNAN

Don't torture her.

Adnan walks away, brows knit in deep thought.

Mirjeta rushes into Marta's room...

INT. MARTA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mirjeta barges in and, without a second thought, slaps her daughter harshly across the cheek.

MIRJETA

How dare you! Did he touch you?

Marta cries out in pain and falls off the bed. She raises her hand above her, prepared to block the next blow.

Mirjeta grabs her daughter by the wrist and lifts her up, not letting her go.

MIRJETA

Are you chaste?

(raises her hand to strike
again)

I'll kill you if you bring any
shame upon us!

MARTA

We didn't do anything!

MIRJETA

Swear to me!

MARTA

I swear!

Mirjeta lets her daughter go. Marta steps back and begins to massage her wrist. Tears glisten on her inflamed cheek.

Mirjeta is a portly woman. The excitement has strained her. She's breathing heavily.

MARTA

Your father has always spoiled both
of you. How does he even consider
what you want? Did I ever have a
choice? No! I obeyed!

(beat)

For your sake, you better hope that
your father accepts Bashkim's
proposal. You'll never marry that
peasant!

INT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

Bashkim is conversing with his foreman Stefan, inspecting a batch of fruit.

ADNAN (O.S.)

Bashkim.

Adnan approaches. Bashkim smiles when he sees Adnan.

BASHKIM

Welcome, Adnan.

ADNAN

I would like to discuss that private matter, if we may.

Bashkim puts an arm around Adnan's shoulder in feigned warmth and leads him away from everybody else. They walk to the open entrance of the warehouse.

BASHKIM

Well?

ADNAN

I've carefully considered your proposal. We were greatly honored.
(beat)

But I have decided that my daughter will wait a little longer before she marries.

Bashkim is astonished.

BASHKIM

You reject me?

ADNAN

There are many father's who will be eager to give you their daughters
--

BASHKIM

But not you? You find fault with me? Is that it?

In this volatile land where even slight offense could lead to a blood feud, Adnan tries to appease him.

ADNAN

Certainly not. I find fault with my daughter. She's young and immature. I'm certain you will

(MORE)

ADNAN (cont'd)
 find a mature woman who will be
 able to adequately take care of
 your household and, *inshallah*, give
 you many sons.

BASHKIM
 If she doesn't marry me, she should
 never marry at all!

ADNAN
 I will decide when and whom my
 daughter will marry.

BASHKIM
 Do you know who I am?

Adnan remains mute.

BASHKIM (CONT.)
 I could buy this entire worthless
 village and the peasants who
 provide me worthless produce!

ADNAN
 Without our goods, you would not
 have a business.

BASHKIM
 What do you know about
 business? You barley eke out a
 living on that worthless patch of
 land. I could have changed your
 family's fortunes!

A vein throbs in Adnan's forehead; but he keeps his voice
 level and his anger in check.

ADNAN
 I'm content with what god has given
 me. You're a busy man. I'll leave
 you to your work.

Adnan turns and leaves before the argument escalates into a
 physical confrontation.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - DAY

Marta and Mirjeta are waiting for Adnan when he steps into
 his home. They're both anxious to hear what he has to say.

Adnan's face is still flush with anger. He approaches his
 daughter and places a gentle hand on her head.

ADNAN

You will not marry him.

Marta cries out in relief, hugging her father in gratitude.

Adnan detaches himself and steps out of the room, leaving the two women alone.

Mirjeta turns on her daughter, livid with rage.

MIRJETA

You've damned us all!

EXT. VILLAGE STREET - DAY

Marta and Ariana walk together along the dirt road that snakes through the village. Their gait is a little hurried, with nervous glances behind them.

ARIANA

I could be in a lot of trouble for this. You don't know how good a friend you have!

MARTA

I know. I'll never forget.

ARIANA

Ask him if he has a cousin. Every other man in the village is so ugly!

The girls share a laugh.

They come upon a single-story stone house similar to Marta's and stop. This is Ariana's house.

Marta stands outside while Ariana disappears into the house and returns a few moments later.

ARIANA

They're not here.

Marta is visibly nervous.

MARTA

Are you sure they'll stay away long enough?

ARIANA

Mother and the girls take hours at the market. My brothers and father

(MORE)

ARIANA (cont'd)
 won't be back from the fields until
 dark. Grandma's in bed. I hope
 she's not dead.
 (winks at Marta and grabs her
 hand)
 Come on.

Ariana leads Marta to the backyard and points to an apple tree at the edge of the property line. Behind that is a copse of thick pines.

ARIANA
 He should be waiting over
 there. Hurry.

Marta takes another nervous look around and darts past the apple tree into...

EXT. WOODS - CONTINUOUS

It's dark in the trees; but there is enough daylight to see a few paces ahead. Shafts of sunlight pierce the canopy above.

MARTA
 (whisper)
 Omar.
 (beat)
 Omar, are you there?

A SHADOW steps out from behind a tree and steps into the sunlight. It's Omar. He comes instantly to Marta.

MARTA
 I wasn't sure you got my message.

OMAR
 What has your father decided about
 the marriage to Bashkim?

Marta plays coy.

MARTA
 What would you do if I were given
 to another man?

OMAR
 I would kill him! You're mine.

Marta is happy with the response.

MARTA

You won't have to kill anyone. My father rejected his proposal.

OMAR

Praise be to god!

Omar brings Marta into an embrace. She likes being close to him, but cautiously detaches herself from him after a moment.

MARTA

I told my father about your interest. He didn't reject it outright. But if you don't get my bride-price soon, he and my mother won't let me remain unmarried for long. Till then, we have to stay apart. People will start to talk.

OMAR

I'll get your bride-price within a year or die trying!

MARTA

Live, Omar. Just get it soon and become my husband.

OMAR

Inshallah.

EXT. VILLAGE STREET - EVENING

A doleful wail precedes the man as he approaches the house along the dirt road. It's Selman. He's leading a mule. Slung over its back is a BODY.

Dogs start barking around the village in response to his wails.

Selman stops before Marta's house and bangs on the door.

SELMAN

He's gone! He's gone!

Selman's wailing continues. After a moment, Mirjeta cautiously opens the door. Marta is behind her.

SELMAN

He's gone! He's gone!

Mother and daughter recognize Selman and rush outside.

Selman points to the body slung over the mule.

Mirjeta and Marta rush over to see who it is. The mule is startled, bucks and dumps the body unceremoniously onto the ground. It falls on its back.

Mirjeta and Marta scream in unison when they see who it is.

MIRJETA AND MARTA

No!

It's Adnan. His eyes stare vacantly into space. His face is drenched in blood. There is a bullet hole between his eyes.

Mother and daughter fall to the ground next to the body. Mirjeta collapses onto her husband's chest, sobbing uncontrollably.

When her daughter tries to touch her father. Mirjeta violently throws her hand off, giving her a venomous and accusing stare.

EXT. MOSQUE - MORNING

ADNAN'S BODY lies wrapped in a white shroud on a wooden bier placed in the center of the public square in front of the only mosque. According to custom, the deceased will be buried within twenty four hours of death.

Man VILLAGERS have gathered for the funeral and, according to custom, many have worn their clothes inside out. Among the mourners are Marta, Mirjeta, Mira and Magda, as well as Selman, Omar, Ariana and a host of VILLAGE ELDERS. Bashkim is conspicuously absent. The men and women are segregated into two separate groups.

The village IMAM (prayer leader) stands in front of the deceased, facing away from the villagers. Following the imam's lead, everybody whispers final prayers underneath their breaths.

When the prayers are finished, a group of POLL BEARERS lift up Adnan's body onto their shoulders, and start to carry it to the graveyard just outside the village. The village men follow, but the woman must remain behind.

While the men remain silent, heavy wailing starts among the women. Loudest among them is Mirjeta. She starts to tear out her hair and scratches her face and beats her chest. She is inconsolable.

Marta watches her father's body being taken away and falls to the ground weeping.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - DAY

Mirjeta, Magda and ZOGU (60), a village elder with a long, handle-bar mustache, are gathered around Marta, who sits with her head downcast.

ZOGU

The forty day period of mourning has passed since your father's death. Your mother has asked me to speak to you about a very important matter.

(beat)

As you know, according to our customs and the *kanun* -- the laws that we must all abide by -- when the family patriarch dies, the eldest son inherits the property, goes to war, defends the family and also avenges insults.

MIRJETA

We are on the verge of losing everything because of you!

Mirjeta is still angry at Marta over her husband's death and blames her for it.

Zogu raises a hand to silence her.

ZOGU

Your father left no sons. There is no male to run his business or to feed his family. Everything he owned will eventually be claimed by his brother.

MIRJETA

I'll never allow it!

ZOGU

But also according to the *kanun*, there is a way for you to save your family's fortunes.

(beat)

You must become a sworn virgin.

Marta lifts her head for the first time, not sure if she had heard him correctly.

ZOGU

By taking the oath, you will take on the role of a man and become head of the family. You will be able to own property, move freely and carry a weapon. You will dress like a man and can never marry.

MARTA

No!

The gravity of the choice finally hits Marta like a physical blow. She collapses in tears. While her mother remains unmoved, her grandmother picks her up and strokes her hair in sympathy.

MAGDA

It'll be all right, child. You must obey. The *kanun* says, a woman is a sack made to endure. You must endure.

ZOGU

It is a difficult choice, I know. But you will be adulated. Look at the respect Elvira has achieved. By becoming a sworn virgin, you will prevent the house, the hearth and the candle from being extinguished.

MARTA

No! I can't do this! Don't ask me to do this! Please!

Marta turns to her mother for help. But there is no sympathy from her.

Mirjeta points to a BLOODSTAINED SHIRT that hangs on the wall, next to a picture of her dead father.

MIRJETA

I want you to look at that always and never forget.

It's the shirt that Adnan was wearing when he was killed. It's being kept as a relic and a reminder of the vengeance that that needs to meted out to his murderer.

Mirjeta turns back to her daughter.

MIRJETA

If you don't take this vow, we'll lose all of our property. Everything your father worked for. Every sacrifice he has made for us will have been in vain. We'll be on the streets. Nobody will ever marry your sister. Taking the oath will be the only way to save your family.

(beat)

Your father gave you a choice -- but now you have none. You *will* take the vow.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Marta and Omar are back together again in the woods behind Ariana's house. They haven't seen each other during the required period of mourning after he father's death.

Omar see Marta's drawn face and how thin she has become. He touches her cheek in sympathy.

Marta turns away from him to hide her sudden tears.

OMAR

Are you all right, Marta?

MARTA

My father is dead. We have nothing. His murder remains unavenged.

OMAR

Did Bashkim do it? I will kill him!

Marta turns around and wipes her tears.

MARTA

He was supposedly out of town that day. There are men who will vouch for him.

OMAR

He is craftier than a fox. I wouldn't put anything past him.

MARTA

We have no proof.

(beat)

Selman was out in the groves when he heard the gunshot that killed him. When he rushed to see what happened, he saw two men fleeing on horseback. He believes it was bandits. They took father's horse.

Omar is anxious about the future. It's written plainly on his face.

OMAR

What will happen to you? What about us?

MARTA

To save my family, I --

Marta's voice breaks. She takes a moment to compose herself.

MARTA (CONT.)

I have to become a sworn virgin.

OMAR

What?

MARTA

I have to become a sworn virgin and take an oath to never marry.

Omar is thunderstruck. He understands the full import of what it means to become a sworn virgin.

OMAR

You can't do this! Was it your mother? Don't let --

MARTA

My father is dead. I have to do what is expected of me.

OMAR

No! You can't --

MARTA

I have no choice!

OMAR

Run away with me. We'll start a new life together somewhere else.

MARTA

There's no place we could go where
we wouldn't be found. I have to
make this sacrifice for my family.

Omar hangs his head and lets out a wail of agony.

Marta gets very close to him and looks directly into his
face... and then kisses him tenderly.

MARTA

Touch me, Omar.
(beat)
One last time.

Marta pulls Omar to herself. He doesn't have the will to
resist.

INT. MARTA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Marta sits on the edge of her bed, looking dazed. She's
already cried herself out and appears resigned to her fate.

Mirjeta is in the room with her. Magda and Mira stand in
the doorway, looking on with great sympathy. Mira is
weeping silently.

The men's clothing are laid out on the bed next to
Marta. There is a white undershirt and white shirt and
skull cap, dark brown vest and jacket, pressed brown slacks
and a black belt. A pair of worn, leather boots and Adnan's
rifle.

Mirjeta is solemn. There is no visible anger towards her
daughter.

MIRJETA

Marta, you must wear these. I will
help you.

Marta glances at the men's clothing. She appears visibly
repulsed by the attire, but quickly suppresses it.

Before she undresses, she goes over to her dresser and takes
a handful of jewelry that she'll no longer need and presses
them into her sister's hand.

Mira cries out in anguish and hugs her sister fiercely, then
abruptly flees from the room. She can't witness this.

Marta wipes a tear away and wordlessly undresses herself,
stripping down to her bra and panties. She shivers, but
doesn't appear embarrassed by her near-nakedness.

Mirjeta spots Omar's locket dangling from the necklace around her daughter's neck.

MIRJETA

Where did you get that? Here, give it to me. You shouldn't wear any jewelery anymore.

Marta grabs the locket tightly in her hand and shakes her head vigorously.

Mirjeta sees the defiant expression on her daughter's face. She realizes that she will not win this battle. Wordlessly, she hands Marta the pants, which she wears, at first with a little difficulty. They are a little loose around the waist but the belt holds it up.

Marta's breasts are large and would stick out against her shirt. Her mother takes a piece of white, cotton cloth and wraps her breasts, pressing them flat against her body.

Marta feels discomfort but doesn't cry out. She puts the undershirt and shirt on, tucking them into the pants. Then she wears the vest, jacket and boots.

Mirjeta procures a towel and a pair of scissors. She approaches her daughter, almost like an executioner.

Marta holds up her hand. Her mother seems to understand and gives her daughter the moment that she needs.

Marta goes over to a mirror that hangs on the wall. She looks at her face and her long, black silky locks. She caresses her hair longingly for moment and then abruptly turns away and sits down in a chair. There are tears in her eyes.

Mirjeta softens up to her daughter for a moment.

MIRJETA

You will adjust to your new role. Some day you will be content. You honor your family by this sacrifice.

Mirjeta grabs a lock of her daughter's hair and cuts it off.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - DAY

The VILLAGE ELDERS are seated before a long, wooden table like members of a cabal. As many of the TOWN RESIDENTS who could fit into the hall have squeezed inside to witness the ceremony. They are pressed against the walls, leaving an open space in the middle of the room in front of the table.

Bashkim sits among the elders. He almost appears to be gloating. Elvira, the other sworn virgin, also sits among the elders. She looks upon Marta with kindness and gives her a reassuring smile.

Selman is there. His face is lined with acute sadness.

Omar is conspicuously missing from the gathering.

Mirjeta, Magda, Mira and Ariana stand to the side with the villagers.

Marta stands quietly in the center of the room, eyes downcast, the focus of all attention.

The villagers are fascinated by Marta's new appearance and many gawk at her openly.

Marta looks ill at ease in her new guise; her appearance is still feminine despite the short hair beneath her skull cap and men's attire.

Zogu stands up to silence the crowd by raising his hand. They quiet down immediately. He starts to speak in a loud, commanding voice.

ZOGU

Adnan Bajrami has passed away leaving no sons. According to the *kanun*, only a son may inherit his property and protect, defend and honor his family. Woe to a family without sons!

(beat)

But the *kanun* allows a daughter to become a son. A daughter to become a sworn virgin and rescue her family's fortunes.

(beat)

Marta Bajrami, daughter of Adnan, has agreed to take an oath to become a sworn virgin.

Zogu regards Marta.

ZOGU (CONT.)

Marta, do you appear willingly
before this council to take the
oath to become a sworn virgin?

Marta nods wordlessly.

ZOGU

Speak up, child.

Marta's response is not much louder than a whisper.

MARTA

Yes.

ZOGU

According to the *kanun*, you are
legally bound by this oath. The
punishment for one who has sworn
falsely is death and dishonor. Do
you understand?

MARTA

Yes.

ZOGU

By taking this oath, you vow to
remain a virgin. You vow to
forsake marriage, children and
sex. You can never go back on this
oath. It will shame your
family. The mark of dishonor will
remain for seven generations.

(beat)

When you take this oath, you will
become a man. You will dress like
one, act like one, work like one,
talk like one and your family and
community will treat you like a
man.

(beat)

Do you take this oath to become a
sworn virgin willingly?

Marta does not respond immediately. There is a quiet murmur
in the crowd. But finally she gives her assent.

MARTA

Yes.

ZOGU

Do you swear?

MARTA

Yes.

INT. ADNAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Marta stands uneasily in her trousers, shifting with discomfort. According to tradition, she must always dress like a man, even at home.

Her mother's things are being cleared out, along with her father's.

As head of the household, she's now inherited her parent's room and will sleep there alone.

Mira comes into the room to take more of her mother's belongings into her own room.

MIRA

Mother has so many things. I'll have no room at all! You're so lucky, Marta. This room is so much larger.

MARTA

Take the oath, and I'll gladly give it to you.

MIRA

No!

Mira quickly scoots out of the room, passing her mother as she enters.

Mirjeta's not too pleased with losing her bedroom. She abruptly grabs a bunch of clothes and starts to leave, avoiding eye contact with her daughter.

MARTA

I'm sorry.

Mirjeta stalks out without responding.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - LATER

The evening meal is being served by the women. Marta starts to help, but her grandmother stops her.

MAGDA

No, you must let the women do it.

MARTA
Nana, I want to --

MAGDA
You must accept your role in all
ways -- as we must. You're now
head of this household.

Magda points to a spot near the hearth, where her father
traditionally sat for meals.

MAGDA
Sit where your father sat. We'll
serve you.

Marta glances at her mother, who doesn't look too pleased,
but Mirjeta voices no protest.

Marta sighs and reluctantly sits down for the meal, alone.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Magda gives Mira a bowl of soup to take back to Marta for
her meal. Mirjeta stalks in unhappily as her younger
daughter walks out.

MIRJETA
I can't do this! I can't treat her
as I did my own husband.

Magda gives her daughter a knowing looking.

MAGDA
I knew this would be difficult for
you. You have always been my most
stubborn child. God placed a man's
spirit in you.

MIRJETA
I should have been born a man!

MAGDA
You're the one who pressed her into
taking the oath. Now, you must
treat her as you did your
husband. By her sacrifice, she has
saved us. She deserves our respect
-- and obedience.

MIRJETA
I gave birth to her. She's my
daughter. I obeyed my husband, but
I won't obey her!

MAGDA

She's no longer your
daughter. She's head of this
family. You'll observe our
traditions, whether you like it or
not. You'll jeopardize our
fortunes if word gets out that you
don't. The *kanun* must be obeyed!

(beat)

Now, go take this to her.

Magda holds out a platter of vegetables.

Mirjeta takes the dish with the greatest reluctance and
storms out.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENTS LATER

Marta sits uncomfortably, barely touching her food as her
mother walks in and deposits the vegetable dish before her.

Marta tries to avoid looking at her mother but can't. Their
eyes meet, and she can see how difficult this is for her
mother.

Mirjeta starts to leave, leaving Marta alone to eat.

MARTA

I never chose this.

(beat)

Please, mother, I want us to eat
together.

Mirjeta stops, turns around slowly.

MIRJETA

Is that your command?

At that moment, Mira and Magda walk in with the last dishes.

Marta addresses them all.

MARTA

I command nothing of my mother. I
want to eat together with my family
-- who I love.

(beat)

All of you join me. Please.

Mirjeta appears pleased and nods. They all sit down to eat
together.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - MORNING

Marta sits on a horse, looking small on the large animal. But she's ridden before and holds the animal steady. She's dressed in men's attire, but in clothes that are suited for work in the olive groves.

Magda, Mirjeta and Mira are there to see her off. Mira hands her a sack of food, which she puts in a saddle bag. Mirjeta gives her Adnan's old rifle, which Marta slings over her shoulder. Marta is not proficient with the weapon, and appears intimidated by it.

She gives a smile to her family and urges the horse forward.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - DAY

Selman guides Marta around her father's olive groves, which now belong to her. Half a dozen FIELD HANDS are dispersed among the trees, pruning and picking fruit.

Selman had been a loyal servant of Adnan for years, and appears to be equally faithful to Marta. He's giving Marta lessons on growing olives. She listens attentively to him.

SELMAN

There are hundreds of varieties of olive trees. Some produce oil and others are only for pickling. We grow three different varieties of pickling olives.

MARTA

How many acres do we have?

SELMAN

You own three acres. Your father planted 150 trees per acre when you were this high. 450 trees in all. One variety per acre.

MARTA

How much fruit per acre do we bear?

Selman nods approvingly, pleased with the questions.

SELMAN

We get about two tons of fruit per acre. We could increase that to three or maybe four with the right conditions.

Selman reaches up and grabs a branch. He shows it to Marta.

SELMAN

The trees will require pruning as they mature. This will make the tree stronger and also bear more fruit. But pruning requires a delicate balance, so you don't cut too much off or too little. I'll teach you how to do it.

Selman lets the branch go and grabs a handful of soil from the base of the olive tree.

SELMAN (CONT.)

The trees don't like wet feet. The soil should be moist, but not too wet. This soil is almost as dry as a desert. That's why you only get two tons per acre!

Selman flings the soil away in disgust.

MARTA

What can we do to increase production?

SELMAN

Omar.

Marta is confused, but Selman smiles. Before Marta can say anything, Selman shouts.

SELMAN

Ho, Omar!

Omar is a speck in the distance. He's working his potato field, which lays directly across the road from Marta's olive grove.

SELMAN

Omar! Come over here!

Omar raises his head from his work and sees Selman beckoning to him. After a moment's hesitation, he sets his plow down and walks over.

This is the first time that Omar has seen Marta since her transformation into a man. He sees the short hair beneath her skull cap and the male clothing she now wears. It's obviously painful for him to look upon her like this.

Marta is clearly embarrassed; and would have run away if she could. She doesn't want Omar to see her like this.

Omar finally finds his voice and regards Selman, trying to avoid looking at Marta.

OMAR
How can I help you?

SELMAN
Help is exactly what we need. Do you remember your promise to help us dig that irrigation canal?

Omar nods.

OMAR
You should put in a drip irrigation system.

SELMAN
Exactly. You will still help?

OMAR
I'm a man of my word.

Selman turns to Marta and explains.

SELMAN
This olive grove doesn't get enough water. It's parched. That's why our yield is so low. I talked to Omar before your father... before he passed away about the irrigation system. With a drip irrigation system, you'll get water directly to the root zone of the plant. There will be less water lost to evaporation.

MARTA
Why hasn't this been done before?

SELMAN
Your father wanted to do it, but the labor cost would have been too expensive for him.
(claps Omar on the back)
He volunteered to help us!

OMAR
All our fields lack water. We need to dig many irrigation canals so we can divert more of the glacial melt water towards our fields. *Inshallah*, with more
(MORE)

OMAR (cont'd)
 water, your olives should
 flourish. I'll do what I can for
 you.

MARTA
 Thank you.

Selman seems to be aware of Marta's and Omar's past relationship. He can see the pained glances the two exchange with each other and is sympathetic to their plight.

He gives Omar's shoulder a warm squeeze.

SELMAN
 You're good man. I have a lot of
 work to do.

Selman walks away, leaving Omar and Marta alone.

There is a long awkward silence after he leaves. Marta finally breaks it.

MARTA
 I haven't seen you for many days...

OMAR
 To see you as you are now... is
 painful.

Marta touches her short hair, self conscious.

MARTA
 I look like a man.

OMAR
 I fell in love with the woman
 inside that body!

Marta almost reaches out to touch Omar, but then stops herself, conscious of the field hands nearby.

MARTA
 I had no choice. I never wanted to
 give you pain. I had to take the
 oath.

OMAR
 But pain has come to me.

Marta holds back tears.

MARTA

My heart aches too. But I have to
accept my fate. I'm so sorry,
Omar.

Omar chokes back a sob and replies solemnly.

OMAR

I will do everything I can do to
help you.

Omar walks away before his emotions overwhelm him.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - DAY

The village councils are held on a regular basis and
attended by the elders of the village. There are a dozen
people gathered at a long table. Among them is Zogu,
Bashkim, Elvira and Marta.

Zogu leads the council and sits at the head of the table.

ZOGU

(to Marta)

Because your father sat on this
council, you have inherited the
right to attend and to cast a
vote. We hope that you will honor
him by being a productive member of
this body.

Bashkim leers at Marta. She's clearly intimidated, but does
not look at him.

MARTA

I hope to do my father honor.

Zogu nods.

ZOGU

Let's begin, we have much to
discuss...

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - LATER

The meeting is close to wrapping up. Zogu turns to Marta.

ZOGU

We have all spoken today. You've
listened quietly. Before we
adjourn, you have the right to be

(MORE)

ZOGU (cont'd)
 heard. Is there anything that you
 wish to discuss?

Marta has something she'd like to bring up, but she looks
 unsure of herself.

Elvira notices.

ELVIRA
 There's nothing to be afraid
 of. Speak your mind, and we'll
 listen to you.

Marta collects her thoughts and answers after a moment.

MARTA
 Most of us subsist off the
 land. Our fortunes rise and fall
 with our harvest. Our harvest
 depend on water. If we had a
 reliable water supply, we could all
 increase our yields. The demand
 for our produce would
 grow. Business would --

Bashkim has been waiting for the moment to pounce on Marta,
 and he has found his opening.

BASHKIM
 You propose to teach us already
 about business? What does she know
 about business? Only a few weeks
 ago, she spent her days in a
 kitchen. She's only a girl!

ELVIRA
 She's a not a girl! She took an
 oath in this very chamber and
 became a sworn virgin. The *kanun*
 grants her the rights and
 privileges of a man. I've taken
 this oath and have sat at this
 council for thirty years. Do you
 question my right to be heard?

Despite being a sworn virgin, Elvira has earned respect and
 voice equal to a man's.

BASHKIM
 You have exceeded many men with
 your opinions, Elvira.

ELVIRA

And we have already heard too many complaints and no solutions from you today, Bashkim. It would be a great joy to hear some fresh ideas from a new voice.

Zogu raises his hand to silence them.

ZOGU

Enough!

(to Marta)

You have the right to be heard. Continue.

Marta gives a grateful look at Elvira and then musters up the courage to speak again.

MARTA

We need a steady water supply for our crops and can't only depend on rain. There's an available supply from the glacial melt waters and from nearby streams. If we could dig a system of irrigation canals, so every field is adequately supplied with water --

LUCCA, who is any ally of Bashkim's, cuts her off.

LUCCA

Yes, yes, there's been talk about this before. How do you propose to pay for this?

MARTA

Most of us work our fields six days a week right now. If we worked five and on the sixth, every able-bodied man worked together on the irrigation system for the benefit of all, it could be done.

Bashkim snorts.

BASHKIM

What benefit it would be for me?

Lucca follows his lead.

LUCCA

If I don't work my fields six days a week, my harvest will

(MORE)

LUCCA (cont'd)
 decrease. My profits will
 suffer. It would be easier to cut
 my knees off!

Marta presses on.

MARTA
 With water, our harvest will
 increase. If we sacrifice now, we
 will benefit in the long run!

BASHKIM
 Why are we wasting our time with
 this foolishness?

ELVIRA
 Her plan is a good one. Just
 because we didn't have the
 foresight to do it before, doesn't
 mean we shouldn't do it. We should
 take a vote.

Elvira turns to Zogu for a decision.

ZOGU
 We'll take a vote.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - MOMENTS LATER

After some more debate, the votes are being cast. They are
 going around the table. Elvira casts the first vote.

ELVIRA
 I say yes.

Marta is next.

MARTA
 Yes.

ZOGU
 Yes.

There is only one more "yes."

LUCCA
 No.

BASHKIM
 No.

Bashkim exchanges knowing smiles with the rest of the council members. He has some influence over them. All the rest vote "no."

ZOGU

Four votes for and eight against. This idea has been rejected.

Marta hangs her head in disappointment. Bashkim gloats in triumph.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - MOMENTS LATER

The council members are leaving. Bashkim lingers for a final word with Marta.

BASHKIM

You may have taken an oath to escape me -- but you'll see that this new path you have chosen will be a hard one. I'll make sure of it!

Bashkim snorts and shuffles out with Lucca, leaning on his good leg.

Marta tries to check her emotions. Elvira comes over and places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

ELVIRA

Come, walk home with me.

EXT. VILLAGE ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Elvira walks with a cane, slow as a turtle; but Marta patiently keeps pace with her.

ELVIRA

You did well today. The proposal was good. It's not your fault that the others have no mind of their own and flock behind Bashkim like sheep.

MARTA

He doesn't like me.

ELVIRA

He's a petty man. He's sore because he couldn't pluck a

(MORE)

ELVIRA (cont'd)
beautiful flower like you. Don't
let him upset you.

Elvira plucks a cigarette from behind her ear and offers it to Marta. Marta shakes her head "no".

Elvira lights the cigarette and takes a drag. Her voice is raspy, more like a man than a woman's.

ELVIRA
You may dress like a man, but
inside you are still a
woman. You'll adjust to your new
role in time.

MAGDA
I never chose this path.

ELVIRA
Ah, child, neither did I. We have
no choice. Our fates chose
us. It's about surviving in a
world where men rule. In our
society, a woman and an animal are
considered the same thing. Women
are property. A woman's life is
worth half that of a man. You
should be proud of your new social
status. You have rights as a man
now. Where, when you were a woman,
you had none.

MAGDA
I don't think I impressed anyone at
that meeting today.

ELVIRA
Zogu supported your idea. His is a
good endorsement to have.

MAGDA
Everyone respects you so much.

ELVIRA
I had to gain the respect of men.
It took time. Now people respect
me, and shake my hand, as they
would with a man. I can carry a
rifle! You have a good
head. Persevere and you'll do just
fine.

They come upon the well where Marta used to draw water and wash her clothes. Many of her old friends are there, including Ariana.

Marta waves to them. Surprisingly, the girls only nod in acknowledgment, including Ariana, but they do not wave back or come and talk to her.

ELVIRA

You're no longer their friend. You are man and they'll treat you as one.

Marta glumly follows Elvira. She's hurt by Ariana's standoffish behavior.

MARTA

Elvira, why did you become a sworn virgin?

Elvira's quiet for a time.

ELVIRA

I took the oath to avoid a marriage.

Marta knows that is one reason a woman can take the oath, but she's surprised nonetheless.

MARTA

What happened?

There's a wistful look on the old woman's face.

ELVIRA

There was a marriage proposal from another village. I was in love with this boy. I couldn't stand the thought of marrying another man. In rejecting that proposal, I had no choice but to take the oath. Otherwise, there would have been a blood feud with my family.

MARTA

What happened to the boy you loved?

ELVIRA

He married someone else. When my father passed, I became head of the household.

Elvira tosses her cigarette and takes Marta's hands into her own.

ELVIRA (CONT.)

You follow a path that I have already walked. Believe me, I know how your heart aches, but you will come to terms with it. I now have the soul of a man. Someday you will too.

They have reached Elvira's home. Elvira gives Marta's hand a final squeeze and goes inside.

Marta continues on her way, comforted little and very dejected.

INT. MARTA'S HOME - LATER

Marta walks in and encounters her mom. She tries to hide her emotions, bypassing Mirjeta and walking quickly out of the room.

Mirjeta notices that her daughter is upset about something. She doesn't follow, but her face softens with some sympathy.

INT. MARTA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Marta rushes inside and closes the door behind her. She flings the white skull cap off her head and falls onto her bed crying.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - DAY

Marta is on a ladder, pruning branches off an olive tree under Selman's guidance.

SELMAN

Not too much. Yes, that's it. Good. Cut that one.

MARTA

The tree is starting to look naked!

SELMAN

You have to control the growth in order to bear healthy fruit. You're a fast learner. Your father would have been proud of you.

Marta comes down from the ladder to take a break.

MARTA

Selman, where were you the night my father was shot? What about the other field hands, did they see anything?

A cloud passes over the old man's craggy face. He appears troubled.

SELMAN

Your father and I had stayed late to finish up some work. The other hands had already left for the day. I was in the back of the grove when I heard the gunshots.

MARTA

You said you saw two bandits fleeing?

SELMAN

(nods)

It was dark, but I saw men fleeing with your father's horse. They had to be bandits.

MARTA

The horse was found shot dead later. Why would bandits steal a horse and shoot it?

Selman appears uncomfortable with this line of questioning.

SELMAN

I wish I knew, Marta.

Before Marta can ask him more questions, Selman walks off.

Marta notices how reluctant he appeared to discuss this subject. She shrugs and goes back to pruning.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - LATER

Marta walks over to the back of the grove, where the olive trees have thinned out and are bordered by a vast skirt of pines around a tall mountain.

She finds Omar digging a long canal leading into the woods, with six of her field hands and a plow pulled by an ox. Omar is shirtless, and the muscles on his back ripple with his movements.

Omar notices Marta. He takes a break and comes over to her.

Marta offers Omar a jug of water. He takes a long swig and passes it the other hands.

OMAR

Thank you.

Marta tries not to stare at Omar's bare, well-toned chest, which glistens with sweat.

MARTA

I'm sorry I can't help you with the digging. I may dress like a man, but I lack the strength of one.

OMAR

Ha! I heard you showed some verve at the village meeting the other day.

MARTA

They turned down my proposal for a irrigation system for all of our fields.

OMAR

They're a short-sighted bunch of fools. They'll see how wrong they were when they see your grove flourishing.

MARTA

I think Bashkim will try to drown out my voice every time I come up with a proposal. At least I have Elvira in my corner.

OMAR

Learn how to bite back like her and then neuter Bashkim like the dog he is!

Marta laughs out loud.

One of the field hands who has been toiling nearby notices and glances towards them.

Marta notices the scrutiny. Even now, she feels self conscious speaking to Omar out in the open.

MARTA

Shout to me when you need more water. Don't work too hard, Omar. Pace yourself.

Marta turns around and starts to walk back.

Behind her, Omar declares.

OMAR

For you, Marta, I would move heaven
and earth.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

Stefan, Bashkim's foreman, is outside when Marta and Selman pull up to the gates. They are sitting in front of cart full of olives, drawn by two mules.

Stefan ignores Marta and turns to Selman.

STEFAN

Good, you have the courage to come
back to us.

SELMAN

Where else would we go?

Stefan twirls his greasy mustache with a finger.

STEFAN

Indeed. We all need each other,
eh, Selman? You have been
discreet, I trust?

BASHKIM (O.S.)

Be quiet!

Bashkim shuffles out of the warehouse and shuts Stefan down with a stern glance.

BASHKIM

I'll handle this. You have other
things to do.

Stefan meekly departs into the warehouse.

Bashkim puts his hands on his hips and looks at Marta and Selman with a smirk on his lips.

Selman avoids looking at Bashkim directly. There is some underlying tension between them. Selman appears intimidated by him for some reason.

But Marta is not afraid of Bashkim, fueled by her distaste for the man. She gets off her mule and regards him squarely.

MARTA
I've come to sell my
olives. There's two tons for this
month.

Bashkim plucks an olive from the cart and inspects it and
then tosses it back.

BASHKIM
They're small.

MARTA
They would be larger if there was a
steady water supply to our fields.

Bashkim ignores her jibe.

BASHKIM
2000 leks.

Marta is taken aback by the offer. She turns to Selman.

MARTA
What did he pay for two tons last
time?

SELMAN
4000 leks.

MARTA
Now you offer us only 2000 for the
same amount?

BASHKIM
Prices have fallen.

MARTA
Fifty percent in two months? Give
me 3000 leks.

BASHKIM
No.

MARTA
2500.

BASHKIM
2000. Take it or leave it.

Marta's angry. She knows she's being cheated.

MARTA

Let's go!

Marta gets back on her mule and rides away, drawing the olive cart with her.

Selman glances back helplessly at a stunned Bashkim.

BASHKIM

Your olives will rot unless you
sell them to me!

Marta ignores him and keeps going.

EXT. ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

As the warehouse disappears behind them, Selman turns to Marta who is driving the mules to go faster. She seems hell bent on getting away from Bashkim's warehouse as fast as possible.

SELMAN

Don't kill the mules on account of
him. You've already lost your
father's horse.

Marta slows the cart down, easing back on the reins.

SELMAN (CONT.)

If you don't sell your olives to
him, you'll go broke. You won't be
able to pay your workers or feed
your family.

Marta is still fuming.

MARTA

I won't let him cheat me! He
cheats everybody in this
village. He's done it for
years. I heard my father
complaining about it many times.

SELMAN

We have no choice. He has a
monopoly.

MARTA

Somebody has to stand up to hm.

(beat)

Selman, what did Stefan mean when
he asked you about being discreet?

A shadow flutters across Selman's face, but he quickly masks his distress by a forced laugh.

SELMAN

Who knows? Stefan's an addled fool. He talks too much, and half the things that come out of his mouth are senseless. The thing we need to worry about is what you are going to do with these olives. Maybe it's not too late. We can go back --

MARTA

I won't sell them to Bashkim!

SELMAN

Then what are you going to do?

MARTA

I'll think of something.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - DAY

Marta and Selman are alone behind the olive groves. They both carry rifles. Marta holds her gun awkwardly.

Selman aims at a target that has been painted on one of the trees at the edge of the forest and shoots.

He strikes the mark dead on.

MARTA

Do you expect me to be able to shoot that far?

SELMAN

If you mean to go through with this plan of yours, you need to learn how to shoot. There are bandits on the roads. First, you need to learn how to hold a gun.

Selman proceeds to show Marta how.

EXT. ROAD - MORNING

The covered cart is loaded with olives and drawn by two mules. Selman holds the reins, with Marta sitting next to him. A set of rifles lie on the seat between them. They make their way along a rutted, dirt road that carves the picturesque landscape like a scar.

MARTA

How long will it take us to get to Tirana?

SELMAN

At least four or five hours.

MARTA

I wonder how it's going to be like? I've never been out of our village.

SELMAN

I've been there twice -- and that's twice more than nearly everyone in the village. It's a big place, Marta. You can get lost. Stay close to me.

MARTA

I hope my plan works.

SELMAN

For your sake and mine, let's hope so.

EXT. ROAD - LATER

The sun is higher in the sky. Marta has dozed off. Selman appears tired as well and pulls the mules to a halt. He gets down to stretch his legs and then reaches into a compartment behind the wooden seat and retrieves a jug of water.

Selman takes a long swig and suddenly pauses. He shades his eyes with one hand from the sun and peers into the distance, at the road behind him.

He spots a dust cloud and, as it gets closer, it's possible to make out a RIDER on a horse. It's coming towards the mule cart fast.

Selman puts the jug away and jumps back onto the cart. He grabs the reins and slaps the rumps of the mules with a stick to urge them forward.

Marta is jerked backwards and wakes with a start.

MARTA

Selman --

SELMAN

Quick! Grab this and hold it steady!

Selman offers Marta the reins.

MARTA

What's wrong?

SELMAN

Bandit! Take these!

A rush of adrenaline and fear clears Marta's head instantly. She takes the reins and spares a quick glance backwards --

-- the rider is getting closer, coming along at a furious pace.

Selman grabs a rifle, which is already loaded. He turns around in his seat and steadies himself. He takes aim and fires --

-- the gunshot echoes like a thunderclap and misses the rider. He starts to weave his horse, but doesn't give up the pursuit.

Selman prepares to fire another shot, when the cart suddenly goes over a pothole, jerking it violently. Selman nearly tumbles off --

-- but Marta manages to grab a piece of shirt, while still holding onto the reins with her other hand.

She pulls Selman back. He steadies himself and fires again --

-- the shot whizzes by very close the horse, startling the animal. The rider is nearly thrown off --

-- but he manages to hang on, gets the animal under control and keeps coming.

Selman loads his rifle for a third shot, is about to shoot, but then pauses --

-- the rider is closer now. He's waving his hand frantically.

Selman lowers his weapon and turns to Marta.

SELMAN
Stop the cart.

EXT. ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Marta wipes the perspiration off her brow. She's still flush with excitement and fear. She stares at the approaching rider nervously --

-- and her eyes widen in surprise.

The pursuing rider reins his horse to an abrupt halt in front of them and jumps off.

MARTA
Omar!

OMAR
Why did you shoot? You nearly killed me!

SELMAN
I thought you were a bandit!

MARTA
You scared me half to death! Why are you following us?

OMAR
Why didn't you tell me you were going to Tirana?
(smiles sheepishly)
The least you could have done was ask me if I wanted to come along?

EXT. TIRANA - DAY

Omar, riding on his horse, follows the mule cart through narrow alleys filled with PEDESTRIANS, VENDORS, BEGGARS, STRAY DOGS and piles of debris.

A *muezzin* from a nearby mosque calls *azan*. The congestion decreases a bit as the faithful rush to the nearest mosque to intone their afternoon prayers.

Omar and Marta stare at everything wide-eyed, fascinated by their first visit to the capital city.

Selman guides the mules into a street where men carry crates of vegetable and fruits on their shoulders or pull carts filled with produce.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

The produce warehouse is much larger than Bashkim's. There are half a dozen along the street. There is a hive of activity. Fruits and vegetables are being loaded and unloaded at a frenetic pace, carted off to a nearby produce bazaar or to other parts of the city and beyond.

With Omar's help, Selman lifts off the tarp, to reveal the olives from Marta's groves to the PRODUCE PURCHASER, a grizzled man of sixty.

SELMAN

They will be to your liking. I promise you!

The purchaser inspects the olives with a practiced eye. He hefts one in his hand, testing the weight and then takes a bite of one, before spitting it out.

SELMAN

They meet with your approval?

The man gives an honest opinion.

PRODUCE PURCHASER

They're not bad.

SELMAN

We hope that you offer us a fair price --

PRODUCE PURCHASER

I never said I would buy your olives. I don't know you. Where do you hail from?

SELMAN

Our village is a day's ride to the south, past the mountains of Krrabë and Sauk. I'm sure you've never heard of it.

PRODUCE PURCHASER

I have a supplier from those parts already. Do you know a Bashkim?

Selman exchanges a fleeting glance with Marta and Omar. His lie is smooth.

SELMAN

I know a Bashkim in our village who is a blacksmith. I doubt he's your Bashkim. We've sold our olives to further south before. Our quality is second to none. They're highly sought after. You'll sell this batch easily and at a great profit.

The purchaser takes a long drag of his cigarette, carefully considering what to do.

PRODUCE PURCHASER

I don't know... I already have enough suppliers.

Marta, who has been observing silently, steps in.

MARTA

You buy these olives at a fair price --

(points to Omar)

-- and you'll get his potatoes too. Sell them and make a tidy profit and we'll get you a steady supply of produce from our village. Apricots, apples, peaches. We grow everything.

PRODUCE PURCHASER

I already have everything I need. Why should I buy potatoes, when I haven't agreed to buy your olives?

MARTA

Because our prices will beat your other suppliers. Today, offer me half of what you would offer your regular supplier of olives. My product is good. You'll sell them quickly, and next month you'll offer me a little more. I'll get our village to offer you their bounty at a price that will beat all your other suppliers. You'll be eager to buy from us.

The purchaser stubs out his cigarette and takes a moment to consider Marta's proposal quietly. He studies her with a critical eye and appears to come to a realization.

PRODUCE PURCHASER
Are you a sworn virgin?

Marta is suddenly self-conscious about her appearance.

MARTA
Yes.

The purchaser's face softens up a bit.

PRODUCE PURCHASER
If you have the courage to take the
oath and abide by it, you'll know
the importance of honor. All right,
I'll take your olives.

EXT. STREET - LATER

The cart is empty. Marta, Selman and Omar are ecstatic.

OMAR
You did it, Marta!

Marta is holding a wad of bills in her hands.

MARTA
Even if he gave me half what he
normally pays others, he offered me
nearly a third more than what
Bashkim offered me!

OMAR
And you already promised him my
potatoes!

MARTA
He won't cheat you like Bashkim.

OMAR
You promised him the produce from
our entire village. That was a
bold move! How will you make that
happen?

MARTA
I'll cross that bridge when I come
to it.

SELMAN
Your father would have been proud
of you, Marta. You have a knack
for business.

Marta feels a sense of pride and is quite happy. She squeezes Selman's hand affectionately.

MARTA

As long as I have you to guide me.
(to Omar)
And your help.

Both men flush.

OMAR

We should celebrate. I heard they have the best Turkish coffee here.

Selman grabs the reins to Omar's horse.

SELMAN

You two go. Meet me back here in an hour. I'll go feed the animals, so we can set off soon. We should get back to our village before night falls.

MARTA

No, Selman, you must come with us.

SELMAN

Go, Marta. Bring me back a bottle of *raki* and I'll be grateful.

Marta hesitates. Here, in the busy streets of Tirana, nobody spares them a second glance. In her small village, she's always had to be circumspect and would have never dared to be out in public with Omar, let alone share coffee with him alone.

Omar seems to understand.

OMAR

We're not back at the village. We only have an hour, Marta.

Marta looks at Selman for guidance. He gives her a small nod of approval.

That is enough for Marta. She follows Omar, grateful for the opportunity to go off alone with him.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - LATER

The place is packed, every customer a male. Marta garners a few glances but no outright stares or questions. It appears that sworn virgins were a known entity in the capital.

Marta and Omar sip their coffees, savoring the taste and each other's company.

OMAR

I'll bring my potatoes after I harvest them next month. You must come with me to negotiate, of course. Otherwise, I'll have no chance.

MARTA

I'll do everything I can for you, you know that. But you're giving me too much credit.

OMAR

Ah, but it's the best excuse I have to have you with me! I try to find every excuse that I have to be near you.

MARTA

So, that's the reason you volunteered to dig my irrigation canals!

OMAR

Of course. And after they're done, I'll volunteer to make your bed, so I can be even closer to you!

MARTA

But then my mother would shoot you!

They share a genuine heartfelt laugh. They appear happy and at ease, the recent heartaches forgotten for the moment.

OMAR

It's ironic that I've been able to spend more time with you freely since you became a sworn virgin.

MARTA

I guess it's one of the positive aspects of being treated like a man.

OMAR

Really? I had hoped to spend my life with you as my wife. It's hard to console with this alternative.

MARTA

It's not the future I had hope for either.

Omar sets his coffee down. His voice becomes a whisper. His eyes a window to his soul.

OMAR

I still haven't come to terms with it, Marta. It's difficult for me.

Marta see Omar's pain and shares it. She reaches out and squeeze his hand.

MARTA

Be grateful that we can be near each other at least. For the moment, that has to be enough.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - DAY

As Marta emerges from a back of her olive groves, she is startled to see Bashkim. He's berating Selman heatedly.

Stefan is also there, sleeves rolled up, poised to give a beating.

Selman looks frightened and cowed.

BASHKIM

-- you allow this to happen? Where did she get such ideas? Answer me!

Marta rushes to Selman's side.

MARTA

He owes you no answers! He works for me!

Bashkim transfers his wrath to Marta.

BASHKIM

How dare you try to undercut me and sell your produce in Tirana?

MARTA

If you offered us fair prices,
there would be no need to go all
the way over there.

BASHKIM

Us?

Bashkim takes a threatening step towards Marta.

BASHKIM (CONT.)

Do you think you'll get all the
other farmers to follow your lead?

MARTA

Some day everybody will wise up and
stop accepting the crumbs that you
offer them. Now, get off my
property!

Bashkim is livid and raises his arm to strike Marta.

OMAR (O.S.)

Stop!

Bashkim's hand stops in mid-swing.

Omar rushes to the scene. He's been digging ditches at the
back of grove. His naked torso glistens with sweat.

Omar moves himself between Bashkim and Marta.

OMAR (CONT.)

Lay a hand on her, and you'll come
to regret it.

BASHKIM

You dare to threaten me?

Stefan comes forward, ready to assault Omar, but Bashkim
stops him. He turns to Omar with a sneer.

BASHKIM

You spend more time here than your
own fields, potato farmer. You
can't stay away from her, can you?

(to Marta)

You rejected me because of
him. Even these clothes won't hide
what you really are. You're the
worst kind of slut!

Omar erupts. He swings wildly, catching Bashkim on the chin
and knocking him backwards.

Stefan immediately rushes Omar and catches his midsection with his head, knocking his breath out in a whoosh.

Omar falls backwards in pain, but manages to pull Stefan with him. They roll on the ground, exchanging punches; but Omar is heavily-muscled and stronger. He manages to flip Stefan over and holds him on the ground, gripping his hands behind his back and twisting it painfully.

BASHKIM

Enough!

Bashkim has recovered. He's already on his horse.

Omar lifts Stefan up forcibly and shoves him towards his master.

Stefan mounts his horse with a painful grunt.

Bashkim points an accusing finger at Marta and Omar.

BASHKIM

I will not forget this!

He spurns his horse and rides away. Stefan follows him.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - EVENING

Marta arrives on her horse. She looks worn out from a long day at the grove. She stables her horse behind the house and enters through the front door...

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Marta walks in to find Ariana, who is chatting animatedly with Mira and Magda.

Marta hasn't had much contact with Ariana lately. She's surprised to see her friend. But she smiles and Ariana does the same.

INT. MARTA'S ROOM - LATER

Marta and Ariana are seated on the bed together. There is an awkward silence between them. But Ariana makes the opening gesture. She touches Marta's shirt collar and the short hair beneath her skull cap.

ARIANA

It must be hard to dress this way.

MARTA

I'm getting used to it.

(beat)

I haven't seen you much these past few months.

ARIANA

You stay in your grove most of the day.

MARTA

I passed you at well few times. You never came over and said hello.

Ariana has kept her distance for the past few months. A rift has opened between these girlhood friends. Their friendly camaraderie is gone.

ARIANA

Your status... it's changed. People are starting to treat you like a man. I was confused. I didn't -- I don't know how to treat you!

MARTA

I'm still the friend you grew up with. I haven't changed inside.

ARIANA

I'm sorry if I've hurt you. I feel for you, Marta. I really do.

MARTA

(holding back tears)

Thank you.

They embrace and both wipe away tears.

Marta looks genuinely happy for the moment. She's missed the company of her best friend.

But Ariana's face becomes guarded.

ARIANA

I've heard a few things. There's talk that you still haven't let Omar go...

Marta's distress returns in an instant. She remains tight-lipped.

ARIANA (CONT.)

You took an oath. You can't go half way.

MARTA

(anguished)
It's so hard!

ARIANA

I know it must be. But you have to let him go. You have no choice.

EXT. POTATO FIELD - DUSK

Dusk is settling in, but Omar diligently continues to exert himself, digging into the soil and lifting up potatoes with a pitchfork. A HALF A DOZEN FIELD HANDS are scattered around his potato field doing the same.

Omar's father, TAHIRI, a squat, grizzled man of sixty glances towards the horizon. There is a red glow beyond the olive grove across from his fields. But it's not the sun, which is sinking fast on the western horizon.

Tahiri sniffs the air and suddenly shouts to his son.

TAHIRI

Omar!

Omar turns.

TAHIRI (CONT.)

The grove's on fire!

Omar glances in the direction his father is pointing to. He sees orange flames licking the horizon and lighting up the night sky.

Marta's olive grove is on fire.

Without hesitation, Omar throws his pitchfork down and runs to his horse. He grabs a rifle from a pack and runs towards the fire.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - MOMENTS LATER

Omar is tearing through the olive grove, towards the rear that borders the forest. The fire has started there. Already around him, some of the trees have caught fire. Flames leaps towards him and crackle, but he presses on.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - MOMENTS LATER

Omar emerges from the rear of the grove. A good number of the trees are already engulfed in flames and more are being lit.

Omar spots the culprits.

While TWO MEN are dousing a flammable liquid onto the olive trees, TWO OTHERS are going around with torches and setting them on fire.

Omar shoots his gun into the air. Instantly, the interlopers scramble and try to flee into the woods bordering the grove. Omar chases after them, firing again.

He hits one man in the arm. The man stumbles, but is grabbed by another and they keep running. Another man returns fire at Omar, forcing him to scramble and duck.

Then all four men have disappeared into the woods. Omar is about to follow, then stops himself and runs back towards the grove.

He has to stop the fire somehow.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - LATER

Marta arrives out of breath, followed by a FIELD HAND who had been sent to fetch her.

She sees Omar leading a brigade of his field hands in trying to put out the fire to her grove. Fortunately there is water nearby from the irrigation canals Omar has completed digging. They are filling buckets and throwing the water on to the flames.

Marta rushes to help.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - LATER

Steam rises from doused flames. The fire has been put out. Half the grove is a charred ruins, but at least the other half has been saved.

Selman finally arrives on the scene to witness the destruction. He looks crestfallen and rushes to Omar and Marta, who are resting nearby.

SELMAN

Oh, god, how did this happen?

Omar is covered with soot and still out of breath.

OMAR

Sabotage. Four men. They ran into the woods.

MARTA

Where were you? I sent a man out for you!

An ashamed look crosses Selman's face.

SELMAN

It was our day of rest from here. I was away from home.
(gives Omar a questioning look)
But you are here.

OMAR

I've lost time working on your ditches. We needed to catch up on our harvest. That's why we were here today and working into the night. If the irrigation channels weren't in, there would have been no water. You would have lost the entire grove.

Marta glances at the devastation around her, holding back tears.

MARTA

What am I going to do now?

OMAR

You will survive.
(beat)
And make whoever is responsible for this pay.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - LATER

The grove is silent. The sound of crickets fill the night. Only Marta and Omar remain. The rest have gone home after an exhausting night.

Omar lifts his rifle to leave and winces. Marta instantly goes to him.

She notices the burns on his hands for the first time and gently inspects them.

MARTA

You're hurt. You need to wrap your hands in bandages.

Omar is not concerned with his injuries. He's got something else on his mind. Other pains.

OMAR

You know who was behind this. He's after you, Marta.

MARTA

I have you to look after me. You're my guardian angel.

OMAR

I don't want to be just your guardian. I can protect you better if you were my wife.

(pulls Marta into an embrace)

I want to be your husband.

MARTA

It's too late. You know it's not possible.

OMAR

Break the oath! I love you. I can't bear to be without you.

Omar kisses Marta passionately. She initially returns the ardor but then pulls her lips away. Omar tries to kiss her again.

MARTA

Omar, stop!

OMAR

I can't take the pain!

MARTA

Find someway to forget me.

OMAR

I can't!

Marta tears herself free and runs away from him, disappearing into the grove.

Omar collapses in misery.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - DAY

The council members including, Marta, Elvira, Zogu and Bashkim are present; but there is an audience for this council meeting as well. As many of the villagers who could possibly fit into the room have squeezed in, including Ariana and Omar. Word has gotten out that there is to be some momentous event today.

Zogu lifts a hand to quiet the room down. He is distressed and taps two pieces of paper on the table in front of him.

ZOGU

We have two matters to discuss today. Matters of great importance. We will hear from Marta, daughter of Adnan Bajrami first.

Marta regards the audience. Her voice is steady as she speaks, fueled by anger.

MARTA

As I am sure everybody knows, half of my olive groves were damaged in a fire recently. It was an act of deliberate arson. Men were spotted fleeing from the grove before they could be captured.

(regards Bashkim with
unconcealed distaste)

I have no doubts whatsoever who the perpetrator behind this crime is. He sits before us today.

(points an accusing finger)

I accuse you, Bashkim!

There is sudden uproar from the audience, but Bashkim sits with a sly smile on his lips. He doesn't look worried.

BASHKIM
Lies. All lies. You have no
proof!

MARTA
I have your threats to me as
proof! You're the liar!

BASHKIM
Bah! I contend that you're false
and without honor.

Bashkim rises and belligerently points an accusing finger at
Marta.

BASHKIM (CONT.)
Marta Bajrami, I accuse you of
breaking your oath. You have
broken the vows that you have taken
and the laws of the *kanun*! You are
no longer a sworn virgin.
(beat)
I have proof.

There is an uproar from the crowd and then immediate silence
as Selman steps out from the crowd.

Marta goes pale. Omar looks worried.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - MOMENTS LATER

Zogu looks grave as he regards Bashkim.

ZOGU
These are very serious accusations
that you have made. Have you
considered the consequences before
you question her honor?

BASHKIM
She has insulted me today! She is
the one without honor. I will
prove it.
(points to Selman)
Let him speak.

Zogu nods and Selman steps forward into a space in front of
the council table. He looks small, intimidated and
reluctant.

ZOGU

Selman son of Sloman. Speak in support of Bashkim's accusations against Marta if you will. But first, you will answer whether you do so willingly and without any coercion.

Selman exchanges a quick glance with Bashkim.

SELMAN

I speak without any coercion.

ZOGU

Do you swear?

SELMAN

(beat)

I swear.

ZOGU

Speak then. Do you have proof that Marta Bajrami has broken her oath as a sworn virgin?

SELMAN

Yes.

Selman's eyes are downcast. He avoids looking at Marta.

SELMAN (CONT.)

I have witnessed Marta in the company of Omar, son of Tahiri. They are still lovers!

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - DAY

Marta's mother does not notice her when she enters the *oda*. Mirjeta is staring fixedly at the bloodied shirt her husband wore when he was shot, hanging on the wall.

When Mirjeta turns around, Marta notices the sheen of tears on her mother's face, which she quickly tries to hide.

Mirjeta's first reaction is anger --

-- but the anguished expression on Marta's face stills her temper.

MARTA

Mother, I am so sorry...

Mirjeta has heard about Bashkim's accusations in front of the council and about Selman's betrayal.

MIRJETA

Your father was generous with Selman for over twenty years. He's eaten my meals many times. We live among vipers!

(beat)

Were any of his accusations true?

Marta's silence confirms her mother's worst suspicions.

MIRJETA (CONT.)

What you have done will bring down your house. Do you know that breaking the oath is punishable by death? They will stone you.

Marta lets out a wail of anguish and starts to cry.

Mirjeta's maternal instincts overcome her anger. She goes to her daughter and takes her into her arms.

EXT. VILLAGE ROAD - DAY

As Marta walks down the road, she passes villagers and acquaintances. She raises her hand in greeting, but nobody acknowledges her.

The people of the village are shunning Marta.

EXT. SELMAN'S HOUSE - DAY

The one story house is of similar style and make to Marta's own and like all the other homes in the village. The shutters are closed. There's an empty feeling about the place.

Marta has come to face Selman. She has to know the reason behind his betrayal. She strides purposely to the front door and knocks.

There is no response.

Marta knocks several times, but there is no answer.

Lucca, one of the members on the village council, passes along the street at that moment and stops.

He calls out to Marta.

LUCCA
He's packed his family and
left. He no longer lives in our
village.

Lucca continues on his way. Marta pounds the door one more time in frustration and leaves.

EXT. VILLAGE STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Marta walks with a look of naked misery on her face. But then her frown eases when she spots Ariana coming towards her along the street.

Ariana's carrying a basket of laundry and doesn't notice Marta at first.

MARTA
Ariana.

Ariana sees Marta and frowns. She hesitates for a moment and suddenly speeds up and takes a side street.

Marta calls after her.

MARTA
Ariana!

Ariana picks up her pace and disappears down the side street. She's shunning Marta too.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - DAY

Marta answers the door. It's Elvira.

For a change, somebody greets her with a pleasant smile.

ELVIRA
Child, let us talk.

Marta lets her in.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENTS LATER

Marta and Elvira sit across from each other on the floor near the hearth. Mira places coffee and sweets on the low table and withdraws, giving her sister a smile of assurance.

Elvira doesn't touch the food and regards Marta gravely.

ELVIRA

Serious charges have been brought against you. Tell me, is any of it true?

MARTA

(beat)

Some.

ELVIRA

Even one shred is enough to condemn you. Your life is on the line, child.

MARTA

What can I do?

ELVIRA

You have painful choices to make. Will you heed my advice?

Marta nods.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - DAY

The council has gathered again. The place is packed. Marta's day of reckoning has come.

Bashkim gloats openly, poised on destroying Marta.

Zogu quiets the place down and regards Marta.

ZOGU

We have heard the testimony of the witness Selman and have given it careful consideration. The consequence of breaking the oath are dire and we will follow the tenants of the *kanun* in this matter. I am prepared to deliver judgment today.

Elvira speaks up.

ELVIRA

One man's testimony cannot condemn. The *kanun* also gives her the right of disavowal.

Elvira turns to Omar, who is also in the audience.

ELVIRA

He too also has the right.

Bashkim's instantly on guard.

BASHKIM

She's guilty. It has been proven!

ELVIRA

Nothing has been proven. Let them speak!

Before Bashkim can raise another protest, Zogu cuts in with finality.

ZOGU

The *kanun* gives them this right. Let them speak.

Marta stands up to address the audience. She looks pale and nervous, reluctant to utter what she must. But she musters up her resolve and proclaims loudly.

MARTA

I publicly disavow Omar son of Tahiri. There is nothing between us, nor will there ever be, so I swear on my life and on my honor.

Bashkim is livid with rage, but holds his tongue.

Omar steps forward.

OMAR

I publicly disavow Marta daughter of Adnan. There is nothing between us -- nor can there be.

(beat)

I am to be married soon, so I swear on my life and on my honor.

Marta is confused. But then as Ariana steps forward from the crowd and stands besides Omar, Marta's face blanches in pained surprise.

Omar cannot look at Marta, but Ariana does, and a small smile plays at the edges of her lips.

INT. MARTA'S ROOM - DAY

TITLE CARD: 20 YEARS LATER

Marta stares into the mirror and notices the gray in her short-cropped hair and frowns. She is twenty years older, and, although she doesn't look totally like a man, her face and body have taken on some male characteristics. Her once oval face is more square and weathered and she's gained a few pounds. Still, if she were to grow her hair long again and wear a dress, it would reveal the beauty she once possessed.

Marta sighs and puts on her skull cap and turns away from the mirror.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENTS LATER

Marta sits on the floor at the head of the table, which is being set for dinner. She is still master of the household; but her family has grown.

To her right sits EDON (Mira's husband) a square-jawed man of 35 with black hair. Mirjeta sits down with a grunt, her joints creaking with age. She now sports a full head of gray and has lost much of her bulk. The jut of her chin hints at her past austerity; but age has mellowed her features a bit.

Mira comes in carrying dishes with her two children, AGON, a boy of 12 and his sister, MINA, a girl of 10. Mira has grown into a beautiful woman, a copy of what Marta would have been had she not take the oath.

The children set the platters before Marta, who smiles at them warmly. She is clearly fond of them.

There is a picture of Magda (who has passed away) on the wall, next to Adan's bloodied shirt and picture, which still hang there.

In deference, everybody (including Mirjeta) waits for Marta to be served, before they all to start eat and talk. There is harmony in this family. Clearly, Marta has guided it well.

EXT. MARTA'S HOME - MORNING

Marta leaves the house with Agon and Mina, both of whom are dressed in school uniforms and carry satchel with books. The family has prospered under Marta. An extension to the house has been built. It has grown by half.

Edon comes around from the back on his horse, ready for work.

MARTA

I'll join you after I drop them
off.

Edon nods, waves to his children and sets off for the olive grove.

Marta takes Mina's hand; but Agon self-consciously leads the way to school.

As they walk, many people pass Marta and acknowledge her with a nod or a smile. At one time she had been shunned and vilified; but after twenty years, she's become a respected member of the village.

A single motor-car careens by dangerously close without honking and they scramble to the side of the street in order to avoid it. Technology has even reached this remote village.

The only motor car in the village belongs to Bashkim. Sitting behind the wheel, he hasn't aged well. He's totally bold now and he now has a huge handle bar mustache, much like Zogu had and heavy jowls.

Marta knows he came dangerously close on purpose and frowns in distaste as he passes. Their feud remains strong after all these years.

EXT. SCHOOL - LATER

CHILDREN mill outside of a small brick school house. Mina and Agon detach themselves from Marta to play with their friends before classes start.

A TEACHER sees Marta and approaches her with a smile.

TEACHER

As-Salamu Alaykum.

MARTA
Alaykum As-Salaam. How are things?

TEACHER
 Good.
 (beat)
 But we could do better...

MARTA
 How can I help you?

TEACHER
 The school is getting too small for the number of students we have now. Who could have foreseen the success we would have when you helped to establish us? Most of the villagers are sending their children here.

MARTA
 I'll take it up with the council.

TEACHER
 Thank you.

The teacher shakes Marta's hand in gratitude and returns to the kids.

A bell rings signaling the start of school. Student rush off to their separate class rooms, with boys and girls being segregated according to custom.

A PRETTY GIRL of 8 arrives late with her mother and rushes inside the school house. It's Ariana, 20 years older and a bit heavier; a dim version of a girl of nineteen.

Marta and she briefly make eye contact and both look away. Their broken friendship still has not mended after so many years.

They head off in separate directions without greeting each other.

EXT. OLIVE GROVE - DAY

Marta arrives on her horse and dismounts. Over two decades, her olive grove has overcome the fire and flourished with the irrigation system. She's extended her acreage by buying the property across the road. Omar's former potato field has now been replanted with several acres of a second variety of olives, which are pressed into oil.

It's harvest time and a TWO DOZEN FIELD HANDS are picking olives and bringing cartfuls into a wooden olive mill that has been built adjacent to the grove.

Marta ties her horse to a post and walks into...

INT. OLIVE MILL - CONTINUOUS

Marta has extended her business interests to pressing and bottling olive oil.

Edon is overseeing a hive of activity. Olives are being brought in by the cartful and then dumped into vats for washing and cleaning. A mechanical mill powered by water grinds the olives into a paste in order to extract the oil, which is then bottled.

Edon comes over to greet Marta, wiping the sweat from his brow. Mira's husband has been made foreman of Marta's operations. He and Marta share a mutual respect.

EDON

We have to bottle this batch before the heat sets in. It's going to be a hot day.

MARTA

How many gallons do you think we'll extract?

EDON

At least 150 gallons.

Marta's pleased.

MARTA

You've done a good job, Edon.

EDON

All under your guidance. You're the captain that sails this ship!

Edon exchanges a warm smile with Marta and gets back to work.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - DAY

With Zogu long dead, Bashkim now presides over the council. He and Marta are the only holdouts from twenty years ago. The rest have died, including Elvira.

Although Bashkim leads the council, Marta is a stalwart opponent against him. The meetings are a forum for their continued animosity towards each other.

MARTA

The school is too small. There are too many students and not enough room for all of them. For the sake of progress --

BASHKIM

Forbid the girls from attending, and you will solve the problem.

MARTA

You have three girls --

BASHKIM

Who I refuse to send to school. They don't need their heads filled with blasphemous garbage! Our society is being corrupted by this "progress" you advocate.

MART

You're not so against "progress" as to have a motor car, are you?

Bashkim ignores Marta's jibe.

BASHKIM

We won't spend any more of this town's funds on *that* school.

MARTA

You have no authority to decide by yourself. Put it to a vote.

INT. VILLAGE MEETING HALL - MOMENTS LATER

Votes are being cast around the table. One-by-one, those in favor acknowledge with "yes", including Marta. But less than half the council members have sided with Marta.

BASHKIM

The school will not be expanded with public funds, so says this council!

Bashkim slams his gavel down and gloats at Marta, who glares back at him. Their feud continues.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - TIRANA - DAY

Marta counts the money and smiles. She's made a good profit selling her olive oil to the wholesaler.

Edon is with her. They walk together through the city streets, which have grown busier over the years. Progress has crept into this repressive country, including indoor plumbing, electricity and motor cars and lorries, which they have to avoid on more than one occasion.

MARTA

Wen now make more profit from oil than just selling the olives. Thank you for all your hard work.

Marta hands a portion of the proceeds to Edon.

EDON

It was your idea to plant those olive trees in the first place. You're the visionary, Marta.

MARTA

You should flatter my sister, Edon. Not me. Even if custom allows you to take another wife, I won't be able to marry you.

Edon and Marta laugh. There's a friendly camaraderie between the two.

MARTA (CONT.)

Let's go have some coffee before we start back.

EDON

We should be able to afford raki too?

MARTA

Yes, *raki* too.

INT. CAFE - LATER

They've had a good meal. Marta sips coffee, while Edon polishes off a bottle of *raki*.

MARTA

If you drink any more, you'll fall off the horse on the way back.

EDON

This is damn good *raki*! I'm going to take a bottle back.

MARTA

And I'd be duty-bound to tell my sister if you don't behave yourself.

Edon has a retort on his lips but then spots somebody entering the cafe.

EDON

Omar!

Omar has entered the cafe with a tall, gangly youth. Omar glances at Edon and Marta in surprise. His gaze lingers on Marta a moment, and he hesitates on what to do, but then comes over when Edon beckons to him again.

EDON

Friends from the village. Come join us!

Omar appears nervous, but then a warm smile from Marta melts his reservations and he takes a seat; but his son remains standing.

Omar's twenty years older, but has kept himself fit. His only concession to age are streaks of gray in his thick hair. His son OSMAN (17) has inherited his father's good looks and Ariana's coloring.

Osman turns to his father.

OSMAN

Let me go get my things, while you have coffee.

OMAR

Osman, you'll get lost by yourself.

OSMAN

I can find my way.

OMAR

Just wait a few minutes --

Edon stands up and puts an arm around Osman.

EDON

I'll take him. Besides, I need to clear my head. Let's go, Osman.

Without waiting for Omar's approval, Edon leads Osman away. He glances back and gives Marta a wink before he leaves the cafe.

There's a long, awkward silence after they leave. Marta and Omar avoid looking at each other.

OMAR

Osman needs to buy a few clothes. That's why he came along with me. I'm also teaching him my business.

Marta nods and pours Omar a cup of coffee for Omar.

MARTA

Share some coffee with me.

OMAR

Thank you.

Omar looks at Marta over the brim of his cup as he sips it, as if he's anxious to look at her openly.

OMAR

How are your groves doing?

MARTA

Very good. I make more from selling olive oil now. I'm going to expand those fields. My crop yield has doubled over the years. I couldn't have done it without your irrigation system.

OMAR

Remember how everyone else in the village was against the idea? Now, all the other farmers follow your lead and Bashkim has to pay them a fair price. That alone was worth all the hard work!

MARTA

Absolutely. How's your business doing?

OMAR

It's growing. I am going to start to import generators and pumps soon. I'll introduce these into our village as soon as I can, but my shop here in Tirana takes up so much of my time.

MARTA

It keeps you away from our village.

OMAR

The money is good.

Marta is quiet for a moment.

MARTA

You sold the potato fields to me and chose another line of business, so you could avoid me. I never wanted to drive you away, Omar.

Omar doesn't deny her accusation.

MARTA (CONT.)

We can't always avoid each other. It's been a long time.

OMAR

Ariana doesn't like --

He cuts himself off. Marta can tell that their marriage is not a happy one and she feels great sympathy for this man she loved twenty years ago... and still does.

Marta's hand is on the table. Omar looks at it, as if he longs to reach out and touch her... but is afraid to.

He takes a long sip of coffee before he speaks again.

OMAR

Twenty years has not made me forget anything. I never told you why I married her.

(tries to make a joke)

Her father had no bride price.

Marta chuckles, but Omar can see she's still smarting from the decision.

OMAR (CONT.)

It must have come as a shock to you?

MARTA

It surprised me so much.

OMAR

I'm sorry about what happened. I had no choice. I -- I married her because it was the only way to really protect you.

MARTA

You didn't love her.

Omar dares to glance into Marta's eyes directly and then places his hand over hers.

OMAR

There is only one woman I've ever loved.

INT. SCHOOL HOUSE - DAY

Marta hands over an envelope to the teacher, who looks at the money inside and is very grateful.

MARTA

I hope that this down payment is enough to start building the extension to the school.

TEACHER

(surprised)

I thought the council voted against it?

MARTA

That's my personal donation. God has blessed my business. I will get you more.

The teacher gratefully embraces Marta.

TEACHER

We are blessed to have you.

MARTA

Just make sure they all get good educations -- especially the girls.

TEACHER
Inshallah.

EXT. SCHOOL HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

When Marta steps outside, Ariana is waiting for her. She approaches Marta, frowning deeply.

ARIANA
I want to talk to you.

MARTA
How are you, Ariana?

Ariana does not reply directly. There is no love lost between these former best friends.

ARIANA
You met Omar in Tirana.

MARTA
(beat)
We came across each other in a cafe. It was bound to happen. Both of our businesses take us to the city.

ARIANA
Is that how you two meet? You set up meetings in Tirana?

MARTA
No. It just happened by chance.

ARIANA
Liar!

Marta has no patience for her former friend and turns to leave.

Ariana grabs her shoulder and pulls her back. A silver chain slips out of Marta's shirt, revealing the locket that Omar had given to her long ago.

Ariana's eyes go wide in surprise. She's livid.

ARIANA
You still wear it!

Marta tucks the heart-shaped locket back into her shirt.

ARIANA
Give me the locket.

MARTA
Ariana, listen --

ARIANA
I'm his wife. He's no longer
anything to you. Why do you keep
his locket?

Marta doesn't answer.

ARIANA (CONT.)
You can't forget him can you? You
can't let him go. Give it to me!

Ariana lunges and tries to snatch the locket from
Marta. She misses and rakes Marta's neck with her nails.

Marta turns around, angry, ready to pounce on Ariana, but
manages to hold herself in check.

MARTA
You'll never get it from me!

Marta pivots and runs away.

Behind her Ariana screeches.

ARIANA
Let him go. He's my husband! Damn
you, he's mine!

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Mirjeta is tending to the scratches on Marta's neck which
have become inflamed.

MIRJETA
Why did you wait all day to treat
this?

MARTA
I had a lot of work at the grove to
do.

MIRJETA
Who scratched you?

Marta remains silent.

Mirjeta pulls out the chain and looks at the silver heart.

MIRJETA (CONT.)
 Don't you think the village is
 talking about this already?

MARTA
 She's lucky I didn't box her ears!

MIRJETA (CONT.)
 I thought it was settled twenty
 years ago?
 (sighs)
 Ah, Marta, you still can't forget
 him!

Marta doesn't reply. She grabs the chain from her mother's
 hand tucks it back inside her shirt.

MIRJETA (CONT.)
 Marta --

Suddenly Mirjeta starts to cough violently and spits up
 bloody sputum. Marta hurriedly gets her a glass of water
 and makes her sit down in a chair.

MARTA
 Are you all right?

MIRJETA
 My days are numbered, Marta.

Mirjeta's a old woman now and it's no secret that she's very
 sick.

Mirjeta places her hand over her daughter's chest. This
 once difficult and stalwart woman has become much more
 sympathetic towards her daughter in her old age.

MIRJETA
 You've become strong like your
 father, but your broken heart has
 never mended.

Marta remains quiet.

Mirjeta grabs her daughter by the arms and looks directly
 into her eyes.

MIRJETA (CONT.)
 I should have been a better mother
 to you. You've made so many
 sacrifices for this family. You've
 made me proud. With my dying
 breath, I'll wish that you will
 (MORE)

MIRJETA (CONT.) (cont'd)
 find the happiness that you're
 looking for. If you have it in
 your grasp. Take it. Don't
 sacrifice it for any reason!

INT. MARTA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Marta is writhing in bed with a NAKED MAN. He cups her breast and starts to knead it. She squirms in ecstasy.

A shaft of moonlight reveals the man's face.

It's Omar.

He grabs Marta's hips and enters her. Marta cries out --
 -- and wakes up.

It was only a dream.

Marta sits up in her bed, drenched in sweat. She grabs her face in misery and starts to weep.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Marta answers the door, rifle in hand. Somebody is pounding loudly on the door. There is a muffled voice beyond.

She opens the door carefully to discover Osman, Omar's son.

He's out of breath and looks frightened.

OSMAN
 Sanctuary, please. He's going to
 come after me!

He rushes inside without waiting.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENTS LATER

The family (Marta, Mirjeta, Edon and Mira) is gathered around Osman. Mina and Egon peer in from the doorway.

Osman has been given a glass of water and he's had time to catch his breath.

MARTA
 Osman, you'll be fine. Relax and
 tell me what's wrong.

OSMAN
Bashkim is going to kill me!

MARTA
Why?

Osman is reluctant answer. Edon seems to have an idea.

EDON
Is it his daughter?

Osman nods but doesn't say anything.

MIRJETA
What did you do, son?

OSMAN
I didn't do anything!

MARTA
What happened with his daughter?
Just tell us the truth. We haven't
accused you of anything.

Agon steps into the room.

AGON
He likes Dora. He's always
sneaking off with her!

MARTA
Is that true, Osman? Is that what
happened?

OSMAN
I love her, and I am going to marry
her!

EDON
(chuckles)
You must really love her if you'll
risk having a father-in-law like
Bashkim. Now, tell us what
happened.

The entire story comes out in a rush.

OSMAN
She met me a few times alone,
that's all. Last night we met each
other to talk and we lost track of
time. She returned home late and
her father was waiting for her. He
(MORE)

OSMAN (cont'd)
 beat her and she told him
 everything. Now, he wants to kill
 me. I swear I never touched
 her! You have to believe me!

Marta has a wistful look. She knows about secret interludes
 between lovers well. She's sympathetic.

MARTA
 I believe you. How do you know he
 will be after you?

OSMAN
 Dora slipped out a message to me
 through her little sister. Her
 father swore to kill me. That's
 why I slipped away and came
 here. I had nowhere else to go.

MARTA
 Where's your father?

OSMAN
 He's away on business. Please help
 me!

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - LATER

Osman has gone to bed with the children. Marta remains with
 her mother, Edon and Mira.

Mira looks visibly worried.

MIRA
 I have two children in the
 house. I'm worried.

EDON
 Three. Osman barely has hair on
 his chest.

MIRJETA
 Bashkim's had three wives and three
 daughters. He's surrounded by
 women. He should be glad to have a
 son-in-law.

MIRA
 Bashkim's dangerous. Look at what
 happened to father --

Mira cuts herself off. It's an unspoken suspicion in the family that Adnan had been killed by Bashkim, but there's never been any proof.

MIRA (CONT.)

I have sympathy for Osman, but I don't feel safe with him around here. Mother, what are we going to do?

MIRJETA

Marta will decide. She's the head of this family.

Marta has been quiet so far. They all turn to her for a decision.

MARTA

He'll stay with us.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - MORNING

Edon has been keeping guard on the porch all night, clutching a rifle. As Marta opens the door to relieve him, Bashkim arrives with Stefan, who is driving his car. They get out and approach the house.

Stefan still looks fit after twenty year and dangerous. They are both carrying rifles.

Bashkim is florid with anger.

BASHKIM

Get him out of there. I want him!

Marta steps outside and stands next to Edon, clutching her rifle tightly.

MARTA

He says he's done nothing wrong. He's only a boy.

BASHKIM

He dishonored my daughter. I will have my vengeance!

MARTA

Bring this matter to the council. Osman has sworn to me he hasn't dishonored your daughter. I believe he's telling the truth.

Bashkim limps forward in anger, cocking his gun.

BASHKIM

Of course, you'll believe that son of a bastard. Step aside or you'll regret being part of this feud!

MARTA

I already have a feud with you for twenty years!

Stefan lifts his gun. It looks like he's about to shoot --

-- Edon raises his gun, but Marta is quicker on the draw. She squeezes off one shot that strikes near Stefan's toes and in rapid succession another one at Bashkim's feet, startling him.

MARTA

Violate my property and I'll have the right to kill you. I've given him sanctuary -- now get off my property!

Marta and Edon both cock their rifles, fully prepared to shoot.

Bashkim's face is contorted with rage; but he takes Marta's threat seriously.

BASHKIM

Our reckoning will come soon!

He whirls in anger and rides off with Stefan.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - LATER

Edon peers through the door crack cautiously before opening it.

Ariana stands there. Her face is drawn with distress.

ARIANA

I want to see my son.

Edon steps aside and lets her in.

Ariana spots Osman through the open doorway into the *oda* and instantly rushes to embrace him. When they pull away, both have tears in their eyes. Osman looks slightly embarrassed.

Marta comes into the room, Ariana immediately turns to her.

ARIANA

I was sick with worry looking for him. You should have sent me a message!

MARTA

We were too busy protecting your son. Bashkim came to take him away this morning. We stopped him -- for now.

(beat)

Osman's in serious trouble. Bashkim's sworn to avenge the dishonor against his daughter.

Ariana looks about to collapse in distress. She fights back tears.

ARIANA

Why is this happening to me?

Marta's face softens in sympathy.

MARTA

When is Omar coming back?

ARIANA

Soon. Maybe a day or two. I don't know. What's going to happen, Marta? Shouldn't you try and get away from this house with my son?

MARTA

They probably are watching the house. If we try to leave, they might try to ambush us. Osman should stay here until Omar comes back. Then we can figure out what to do. Go back home and look after your daughter. I'll protect your son with my life.

Ariana can see that Marta is telling the truth. She grabs Marta's arm gently.

ARIANA

I'm sorry about everything that has happened between us. I -- I wished that we had always remained friends. Thank you.

She hugs her son fiercely once more and leaves the house.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

When there is a knock on the door moments later, Marta thinks it's Ariana.

It's not Ariana. A FRAIL OLD MAN stands there, leaning on a cane.

Marta does not appear to recognize him at first, but then her eyes narrow in anger.

MARTA

Selman?

Selman nods.

SELMAN

Please... I have to talk to you. I've come a long way.

Marta debates on whether to shut the door on his face --

SELMAN (CONT.)

Please!

-- but then reluctantly lets him inside.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENTS LATER

Selman sits uncomfortably on a chair. Marta and her family surround him like interrogators. Mirjeta looks especially angry and turns on Marta.

MIRJETA

You shouldn't have let him in. He's eaten my bread and betrayed us!

SELMAN

I am dying. Let me make my confession to you. I beg you!

Mirjeta is curious to hear what he has to say.

MARTA

What do you have to say, Selman?

Selman's hands shake from a palsy. He takes some tablets to calm himself. He looks like he's on death's doorsteps.

SELMAN

I have cancer. I'll be dead very soon. I had to clear my conscience

(MORE)

SELMAN (cont'd)
 and beg for your forgiveness before
 I breathed my last.
 (beat)
 I've committed great sins.
 (turns to Marta)
 I betrayed you to the council about
 Omar.
 (beat)
 And I lied about who killed your
 father.
 (beat)
 Your father wasn't killed by
 bandits. I was in the grove that
 night. Bashkim shot him. I saw it
 with my own eyes.

Mirjeta lets out a loud moan, but Marta remains silent as if she'd known all along.

SELMAN (CONT.)
 I tried to hide but Stefan saw
 me. Bashkim threatened my life if
 I didn't keep quiet. I knew he'd
 kill me I didn't obey him. I
 became his puppet... and spy. I
 was afraid for my life and did
 everything he wanted me to do.
 (beat)
 I couldn't take the shame of
 betraying you anymore, so I fled
 the village. I was a coward.

Selman collapses onto Marta's knees and starts to weep.

SELMAN
 I beg you to forgive me. Please!

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - DAY

Mira stands at the door with Agon and Mina, fighting back tears.

MIRA
 I don't want to leave you alone.

EDON
 I'll be fine. Go over to my
 father's house and stay
 there. Don't leave the house.

Mira turns to Mirjeta.

MIRA
Mother, come with us.

MIRJETA
I won't leave the house. I'll die
here if I have to.

Selman stands next to her with his gun.

SELMAN
I'll protect her with my life.

The old man has decided to stay and fight, trying to make amends for his past sins.

Osman exchanges a glance with Agon. They're friends. Osman looks worried. Agon gives him a comforting smile.

Mira glances at Marta, who stands resolutely with a rifle in her hand.

MARTA
Go before it gets dark. We'll be
fine.

Mira and the children hug Edon and leave the house.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - ODA - MOMENTS LATER

Marta is looking at the bloodied shirt her father was shot in and the photo next to it. The shirt still hangs on the wall, yellowed by the years, but still a stark reminder of a violent death.

MIRJETA (O.S.)
You must avenge his death.

Mirjeta comes to her daughter and regards her.

MIRJETA (CONT.)
Now we know who killed him. He has
to die. You are duty-bound to do
so.

Tribal traditions demanded revenge. Marta nods wordlessly, with a resolute expression on her face.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - NIGHT

There's no moon. It's a hard to make out the SHADOWS which creep out of the woods. There's at least TWO MEN. One of them has a bottle in his hands, which he lights. It's a firebomb. He reaches back to throw it --

-- there's a muzzle flash from one of the back widows and the loud clap of a gunshot.

The man falls to the ground, clutching his chest.

Another man instantly grabs the fallen firebomb and tosses it at the house. It strikes the stone wall and shatters, spilling kerosene, which ignites, but can't harm the stone.

A second shot rings out. It misses and the man escapes back into the woods.

A THIRD MAN comes out, firebomb in hand, aims and tosses.

It shatters a back window and falls into the house.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - FRONT - CONTINUOUS

Two horses are brought to a halt and TWO MEN quickly get off and seek shelter behind them. They have a bag of firebombs which they start to light and toss at the house in rapid succession.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Marta squeezes off rapid gunshots through the front window, trying to hold off the ATTACKERS.

A firebomb strikes a window, cracks it, but doesn't shatter it. Marta holds steady and fires off another shot. There's a scream outside. She's struck someone.

But then a fusillade of gunshots start to strike the house in all directions. Bullets shatter the windows, striking furniture and ricocheting off of the stone walls.

Marta ducks. So does Selman who's manning the other window nearby. They plaster themselves on the stone floor.

A firebomb makes it through one window, followed by another. They shatter, spill kerosene and ignite the room.

The door to the *oda* suddenly flies open. Osman rushes outside, panicked. A bullet nearly strikes him. He jumps onto the floor, hysterical.

Mirjeta rushes out of the room after him. The next bullet is true and strikes her. She cries out in pain and clutches her chest.

MARTA

Mother!

Marta loses sight of her mother as the room starts to fill up with smoke.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - LATER

Omar rides up on a horse and leaps off and rushes to Selman who is stooped over a body.

The house is a smoldering mess. The stone walls have held, but the roof has caved in.

Selman has managed to pull two bodies out of the house. Mirjeta lays dead on the ground, face up with a hole in her chest.

A bullet has grazed Edon's forehead. He's moaning on the ground as Selman tries to tie a bandage around his head.

Omar searches for the bodies of Marta and Osman.

Selman pauses to look up at him.

SELMAN

They were taken by Bashkim. Maybe
-- maybe the warehouse. Go help
them!

Omar leaps back onto his horse and starts off at a breakneck speed.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Bashkim's car is parked outside. The doors and windows are closed. Thin slivers of light spill out between cracks. Screams of pain can be heard from inside.

INT. WAREHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Stefan and a THREE HIRED THUGS watch the torture with grim satisfaction.

Marta and Osman dangle in mid air, hands tied with cords that are slung over the rafters. Their faces are covered with soot, the backs of their shirts are in tatters and dripping with blood.

Bashkim is breathing heavily from the exertion, favoring his good leg. His bald head glistens with perspiration. He wields a whip, and pulls back with all his might and strikes Osman's back --

-- the boy howls out in pain, bucks against his ropes and then hangs limp. Blood drools out of his mouth.

Bashkim, then whips Marta; but she resolutely doesn't cry out. When Bashkim goes around to face her, she spits bloody sputum at him.

Bashkim dodges the sputum and glares at Marta.

BASHKIM

This is your day of reckoning.

Marta glares back at him.

MARTA

You killed my father. I am going to kill you!

INT. OMAR'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ariana paces the room nervously as her daughter and mother watch. They all look deeply worried.

MOTHER

Sit down! You're making her nervous. Omar's back. It will be all right.

ARIANA

No... no... I know something's going to go wrong. Mother, watch her.

Without waiting for a response, Ariana rushes out of the house.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Omar dismounts from his horse, which he's driven to exhaustion. He ties the animal to a tree. Beyond, it's possible to spy the warehouse.

He takes out his rifle and slowly creeps towards the building...

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ariana's out of breath when she reaches the house. She sees the smoldering ruins and cries out in distress.

She spots Selman and Edon and rushes to them.

ARIANA

My son? Omar? Om my god. Did they --

SELMAN

They survived the fire. Bashkim took him. Omar went after them.

Edon is now back on his feet. The bandage around his head is streaked with red, but it has stopped the blood flow. He reaches down and picks up his rifle. He looks determined.

EDON

Let's go.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Omar has quietly crept up to the warehouse. There appears to be no sentries outside. He finds a crack in one of the wooden slats and looks inside --

INT. WAREHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Bashkim is done with his whipping. He's had a good workout and is perspiring heavily. One of his hired thugs hands him something to drink.

Bashkim motions for Selman to lower Marta and Osman, who hang limply in their bonds, clothes in tatters and covered in blood. It's not clear whether they're still alive.

Selman unties the knots to the ropes and both bodies fall to the ground with a thud. Osman groans but doesn't regain consciousness, but Marta's eyes flutter open.

Bashkim throws the rest of his drink into her face, waking her.

Marta tries to rise, collapses, then manages to gain her feet. She stands unsteadily but is determined to stay on her feet.

Bashkim sneers at her tenacity.

BASHKIM

Maybe it was good I didn't marry
you. You're more like a man than a
woman!

Bashkim steps up to Marta and grabs her crotch.

BASHKIM (CONT.)

Are you really a man?

Marta's hands are tied behind her back; but she reacts violently and knees Bashkim in the groin.

He howls in pain and steps back, massaging his groin. He's livid, a vein pulses at his temple. He motions to Stefan.

BASHKIM

Hold her!

Bashkim withdraws a long, wicked blade from his waist and advances on Marta...

EXT. WAREHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Omar is sitting in the driver's seat of Bashkim's car. The keys are still in the ignition. He appears familiar with the controls and starts the engine.

Omar quickly engages the car, drives forward and around and then guns the vehicle towards the warehouse doors --

INT. WAREHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

As the car slams through the doors, Bashkim and his cohorts are momentarily startled. Then they start to shoot --

-- Omar leaps from the car as a fusillade of gunshots strike the vehicle.

The car keeps going --

-- Bashkim and his thugs hastily leap out of the way. The vehicle crashes against a post, jarring the building but coming to a stop.

Bashkim's livid about the destruction of his precious vehicle.

BASHKIM
Kill him! Kill him!

Omar dives away from the gunfire. He rolls to his right and comes back up and squeezes off a shot --

-- one of the thugs takes a bullet in the gut and goes down.

Stefan, who still holds Marta, lets go of her and advances on Omar with the other two thugs. The three men go after Omar, guns blazing.

Omar tries to run for cover, manages to avoid the bullets --

-- but then a shot hits him in the right leg and he goes down.

INT. WAREHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Omar's on the ground bleeding from a wound to his right calf. His rifle lays several feet away. Stefan and the two remaining thugs surround him, guns pointed and cocked.

Bashkim's holding Marta with her hands tied behind her back and a knife to her neck.

Osman remains unconscious on the ground.

Marta struggles against Bashkim, but her strength is sapped. When Bashkim pricks her neck, drawing blood, she stops struggling.

Bashkim glances at Omar and grins.

BASHKIM
Shoot him.

Before they can fire, gunshots erupt from the warehouse doors --

-- as Selman and Edon rush inside, guns blazing.

Right behind them is Ariana.

One of the thugs goes down, but Stefan and the last thug are unhurt. They turn and start to shoot. Guns blaze on all sides.

Ariana sees her son on the ground and tries to rush to him--

-- she's caught in the crossfire and goes down when a bullet catches her in the chest.

Omar rushes to her side; but it's too late. She dies in his arms.

Edon's an excellent marksman. He squeezes off two rapid shots and takes down Stefan and the last thug.

Selman rushes Bashkim. He leaps onto him, allowing Marta to twist away. They go tumbling to the ground and start to struggle with each other. But Bashkim's larger and stronger. He manages to twist his blade around --

-- and sinks it deep into Selman's abdomen.

The old man glances at Marta, whispers something under his breath, before blood gushes out of his mouth and he dies.

Marta screams and rushes Bashkim, who's still on the ground and kicks the knife out of his hands. He scrambles to recover the knife, but then Edon shoots it away with his gun and then comes over and unties Marta's bonds.

Marta rubs her wrists and glances around her. The battle is over. Selman and the thugs lays dead. Omar is at Osman's side, trying to wake him. Then her eyes come to rest on Ariana, who lays dead in a pool of blood.

Marta looks visibly grieved. She checks her tears, grabs the rifle out of Edon's hand and approaches Bashkim.

Bashkim is cornered. He sees the burning hatred in Marta's eyes and looks frightened for the first time. He rushes to her feet and grovels for mercy.

Marta kicks him back viciously with a solid kick to his chest. Bashkim sprawls onto his back, and before he can rise --

-- Marta shoots him between the eyes.

EXT. MARTA'S HOUSE - DAY

TITLE CARD: 40 days later. The typical mourning period after a loved-one's death.

Omar arrives on his horse and dismounts. He's dressed in a clean outfit and clutches a bouquet of red roses.

The house has been rebuilt, with few traces of the fire evident. There's a new roof and the exterior stones have been white washed. A bed of flowers skirts the front. It looks quaint and inviting.

Omar strides up towards the front door with a purpose in his steps.

INT. MARTA'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Marta allows Omar to step inside and notices the roses. When he offers them to her, she hesitates to accept them.

OMAR

It's time for you to be a woman again.

MARTA

I've taken an oath to remain a sworn virgin.

Marta's response is tepid. There's no conviction behind it.

OMAR

Every single council member is gone. Nobody can stand in your way now.

The struggle is visible on Marta's face. She doesn't know what to do or what to say. She's worn the guise of a man for so long... that she's forgotten to be a woman... almost.

Omar takes a bold step forward and removes her skull cap, revealing her short hair. When he pulls her to himself and kisses Marta, she doesn't know how to react at first. But then the feelings come flooding back, and she responds in kind.

Marta's breathless when Omar pulls his lips back.

OMAR

Marry me, Marta.

Tears spring into Marta's eyes. This is what she's wanted all of her life. She nods "yes."

MARTA

I love you.

She kisses him again.

FADE OUT.