Synopsis

1886 - the black prince visits with George in France. Invites him to England.

Set in the luxurious home of wealthy baron who is a vampire, head of French vampires.

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“I’ve been told you’re the Greek Physician.”

George was sitting a little apart from the crowd of humans, sipping sherry, and observing. He didn’t really want to be at this soiree, but his mentor had insisted it would make his career. He had spotted several people like himself, but they were all engrossed in conversations with humans. He looked up at the speaker.

Middle aged, with dark hair, the figure was tall, perhaps 180 cm, but gaunt as if he were unwell. He was dressed in current fashion, dove grey and dark grey. His face bore scars from cuts, perhaps swords, George surmised. His moustache was fashionably large, waxed to keep it neat. His beard was unfashionably short, and streaked with grey. He’d led a hard life.

He was someone like George, but old, with an aura of power he had felt only from a couple of individuals. This one was a master of masters. He spoke fluent French, but with an odd accent.

“You are well informed, sir. I am doctor Podalirios. I have studies under some of the best teachers in Saxony and La Sorbonne. And you are?”

“I judge you to be from the late 1600s or early 1700s. Dr Podalirios? I have read that somewhere. Ahah! The Trojan war. He was one of the sons of Asclepios. Reputed to be a great physician. I like it sir. But you are too young to be he. But then we have many names over the years.” He sat down beside George, holding a glass of red wine, from which he sipped. “Humans know me as Lord Alfred of Heathfield. The estate exists, though the original holder’s lineage is extinct. I have a friend, well placed, who arranges these estates for us. I am English, or rather, Norman French. I was once Edward of Woodstock, the Prince of Wales, also known as the Black Prince. You may have heard of me.”

George had heard of him as England’s master of masters. Norman French put him sometime in the middle ages, possibly 1300s. Prince of Wales made him the crown prince.

“It was 1705, sir. Your death and burial would have been quite public. How did you manage to hide your erm resurrection?” His tone was deferential, as it should be towards any master. “My real name is Georgios, George, son of Costa, of Thesaloniki. Though actually I was born in a village a few kilometers from Thesaloniki.” None of that was true, but George had told the tale often enough even he believed it.

“I have heard of Thesaloniki. Northern Greece, I believe. How do any of us survive our resurrection? Because whoever makes us, takes the time to see we survive. If my family had even an inkling of what I had become, they would have burned me alive. But I was sick for several years, growing weaker; my death was expected. Some disease from Spain, we thought. It was only after my resurrection that I realised what my wasting disease was.” He paused.

George finished his thought. “You had been bitten by one of our kind, infected, but not turned. You would waste away slowly until you died. Someone would have to watch you every day to be with you when you died.”

“Just so. Someone who called himself the Man In Black came to visit. He threw out the leeches and the physicians, saying ‘you are killing him with your blood letting.’ He told me I must die to be reborn, which sounded very Christian to me then. He even called for a priest to give me the last rites. Later he sat with me while my family farewelled me. I passed into a dream, and returned three days later, like our lord. I woke in a castle, feeling healed, alive. It was then the Man In Black explained to me what had happened to me.”

“How did you take his explanations, sir?”

“Not well, as I am sure you understand. Brought up a good Christian, you fear demons and damnation. Then you are told you have joined the living dead, utterly damned.” The Prince’s voice was soft, though George heard him clearly. “The castle belonged to the Master of England.”

“Did he jump or was he pushed?” George joked.

“Neither. I believe I can trust you George. The Man in Black speaks highly of you. The families all believe I killed him in a duel, and it suits me to have them think so. One day the Man in Black came to visit with the Master of England. At the end of their stay, the Master handed me the keys to his castle, and told me he was going on a journey. The Master left with the Man in Black.”

“Just like that? Did he say anything about where he was going?” The Man in Black had obviously told the prince to talk with George, and the prince had ensured their host had invited him.

“No, but there were hints that the journey might take them out of this world. Don’t ask me more, I do not know any more. I would like instead to hear how you came to be resurrected. If you don’t mind.”

“I’ve told it a few times now. I lived in a village near Thesaloniki in Northern Greece. The Turks occupied most of Greece then, still do.”

“They’ve occupied a good portion of Eastern Europe since the 1500s. Please go on.”

“I was with a party of men and boys collecting wood for the winter. I had my twelve year old son with me. We returned to the village in the evening to find the Turks had paid a visit. The entire village was on fire, and they’d looted, raped and murdered. I found my wife and younger daughter dead and mutilated, there was no sign of the older girl. I think they took her with them.” He paused, making sure his face was still, composed.

“They forged an empire, but they are savages at heart.” The prince contributed. “I was among those fighting them in eastern Europe. They would do unspeakable things to those they captured. I spent some time with Vladimir the Impaler, as he was known. The Count of Dragon Castle, or Dracula in his language. He lost his wife to the Turks, and took a vow to live until he had wiped them from the face of the Earth. Sorry, I’m interrupting again.”

“It stops me from dwelling on the horrors of that day. Vladimir is one of us, is he not?”

“Yes, though I think there are more Turks now than in his day. You had a horrific experience. What happened then?”

“Most of us went back to the forest to spend the night. The next morning we did what we could for the dead, and collected what we could of our belongings. There were no survivers, though many young girls and boys were missing. Some of the villagers went to surrounding villages where they had relatives, though god know what they would find. A few of us went back to the forest. I don’t think we were thinking straight.

“We met with a party of bandits, who said they were happy for us to stay with them. They said the Turks had attacked several other villages. They were a dreadful, sickly looking lot, but they were fellow Greeks who were going to put the fear of God into the Turks. We all decided to stay that night with them, and see how things might develop.”

“In some ways a very sensible decision. If they were what they said.” The prince looked expectant.

“They were vampires,” George said flippantly, “and they had their way with us that very night. Some of us woke two or three days later, the rest died that night. My son was one of those who died.”

The prince studied him for a few moments. “I am sorry to hear that. But I sense you are almost happy.”

“Well, everything dies. Had he lived a normal life, he would be long dead now. Besides, they could not turn him; he died clean.”

“Many children do not survive the attempt to convert them. I like to think their innocence prevails. I am sure your family is in a better place. I like to think even we can be saved. A learned theologian assured me that even demons can be saved, if they turn from their evil ways.”

“I like to think that also. But we hunt humans, I doubt we can give up that.”

“We don’t have to kill them or turn them though. In my jurisdiction I have banned the turning of children. Their masters are essentially vile paedophiles. I have threatened them with death if they dare to convert a child.”

“That’s the only threat some vampires understand. Many of them are rogues and villains.”

“Bandits? Pirates?” the Prince smiled. “Give someone like that eternal life, and they will use it for evil. We can choose not to use our gifts for evil. I am trying to enforce that in my domain. You obviously did not stay with your band of bandits.”

“No, they were bandits.Sometimes they would turn a Turk into a vampire, often they preyed on Greek villages. I learned how to kill Turkish vampires, and taught the few from my village how to. When we realised that the bandits were preying on Greeks, we started killing them as well. We Greeks had enough trouble from the Turks, without or fellow Greeks compounding that.”

“How many of them did you kill?”

“It took us several months to be able to stand up to them. But they were weak, always bickering and fighting amongst themselves.We were five, they were twenty nine. They would kidnap Greek women, use them for months, and then kill them. We began finding them by themselves, and killing them. They suspected us, but a dead vampire leaves little trace; they could not prove anything.” George was talking to his empty glass, remembering.

The Prince signalled a waiter, who brought a tray. The prince took another glass of red, George asked about several before settling on a glass of Mosel. “I prefer my wines sweet.” He drank a glass, reached for a second.

“You can leave the tray.” the Prince instructed. To George he added “So doctor, what started you looking to leave? Discontent usually stays unacted upon, unless something pushes one past a certain point.”

“It started when Costa and I found two of them molesting a small boy. Raping him. We took their heads. Then we returned the boy to his village. That was the best we could do.

“I still prayed to God to help us. And I found that I would wake at dusk, and be awake until dawn. Most of the bandits would take at least ten or fifteen minutes before they would wake, and they would fall asleep ten of fifteen minutes before I would. Every few days I would take someone’s head. When they became fifteen, Costa and I killed the rest of them one dawn. It was a dangerous game, but we succeeded. Then the five of us freed the captives, and we set off for the Austro-Hungarian empire. Some of the freed captives came with us. We knew there were other vampire families around, we didn’t know them, we didn’t trust them.

“We went via the Balkans, and most of them stayed in the mountains. I continued all the way to Gratz. I’ve been gradually making my way westwards ever since. In Gratz I was fortunate enough to meet Baron Wolf von Augsburg, whom I am sure you know is one of us. He sponsored me to the guild of herbalists and apothecaries, and I set up there as an apothecary. That was around 1720.”

“I know of the baron, though I don’t believe we ever met. The guilds were supposed to ensure well trained people were registered, but these days they are mostly about protection of privilege; no one from out of town will be registered. May I ask why you chose herbalist apothecary?”

“I was the herbalist in our village. My father was a herbalist, my grandfather was, and back at least six generations. I could also set broken bones, and stitch up wounds.”

“You would have been useful in my campaigns when I was alive. That explains why you pursued physician later. I had wondered. I don’t believe we need physicians, but someone who can set bones is always useful. There is always a risk that broken bones will heal crookedly. It’s only the old ones who can shape shift. Tell me, have you reached that stage yet?”

“I don’t know. I.have never tried, and no one has ever offered to teach me.”

“Well, if you come to England I will teach you if you are ready. You must be at least one hundred and seventy, you should be able to fly and shape shift. Can you handle solid food?”

“Why thank you.” There was a lot involved in vampire politics, but this amounted to an offer of patronage. George had to be careful not to refuse outright, to negotiate good conditions for himself and his small family, and find a polite way to refuse such as not offending an existing patron if he wanted to say no. Of course, the prince probably already knew his situation. “Travelling to England is one of many things I’d like to do. There are a few things to finish up here.”

“Of course. There’s no hurry. Perhaps you can see your way clear to visiting some time in the next five years? We can discuss details later when you have a firmer time frame.”

“Yes, yes, I would love to come to England within the next five years. I might be able to come sooner. Thank you very much for your offer.”

The prince smiled. “How is your English?”

“Not good. I tend to learn the languages of countries I pass through, but I never stay longer than twenty years in any one place. I may be a village boy at heart, but it is easier to hide in big cities.”

“You will find London a very large city, but I also have country estates where my people can stay when they need. How do you handle collecting herbs? Don’t you have to pick them during the day?”

“Most are best picked by moonlight. Flowers have to be picked during the day, but that’s something human servants can do. They enjoy being in sunlit fields.”

Baron Wolf von Augsburg vampire living nea graz. sponsor to guild of herbalists

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