Synopsis

Autumn 1705. George wakes from the fever dreams of his vampire conversion. Soula has nursed him, provided her blood to keep him alive. She has lost her family years before. She looks 26, is about 70

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10 days after Fever Dreams

“I don’t want to have a baby!” Helena’s voice was loud. George was surprised to find he was awake with the sun a little higher in the unseen sky above the cave.

“I was a year older than you when I had my first.” Erianthe said.

“I was the same age as you when I found I was pregnant.” Melissa said.

“And what about Ariana and Chloe?” Soula asked. “They are about three months ahead of you.”

“But it will be a Turk! A constant reminder of what happened to me.”

“There’s probably one hundred women in this cavern and the village below.” Soula said. “I think at least sixty five were rescued from the Turks, and almost everyone was pregnant when they were rescued. They’ve all been there, they all gave birth, brought up their child. Some of the children lived in the village below, and got married, and their children and grand children are out in the surrounding villages. Some stayed here to become human servants. Look at Sylvia, Athena, Artemis and Phoebe. They were all born here, and chose to live here.”

“And you know we will bring up the child to be Greek, speaking Greek, knowing our history and culture.” Erianthe added.

“But what will papa say?” Helena wailed.

At this point Phoebe, the warm bundle snuggled against George, touched one finger to her lips. *Just pretend you are still asleep. Once they sort this out you can wake.*

*Someone started this conversation just as I was about to wake, didn’t they?*

*Of course! Erianthe and Soula planned this. You will come in when I prompt you, and say it is wonderful news.*

*I guess I will. A grandchild eh?*

“I think your father will be pleased.” Soula said. “Children are God’s gift.”

“I know there are herbs that can get rid of it. I’ve read papa’s notes. I even know what it looks like.”

“If you read your father’s notes, you will know they are dangerous to the young mother.” Soula said. “We know of the herbs, but we will not use them. Would you spurn God’s gift like that?

George listened with growing concern to Helena’s complaints. *That’s Helena. Sometimes she can’t be told. I’m sure it goes in one ear and out the other.*

*I think this is your cue to wake up.*

“Helena, you’re pregnant? That’s wonderful news. I didn’t think I would ever have a grandchild. Congratulations.”

“But papa! It’ll be a Turk!”

“No, it will be a Greek. We will speak to him or her in Greek, you will take him or her to the local church for baptism, and everyone will help you teach your child Greek culture and what it means to be Greek.”

“But you don’t understand.” The girl wailed.

“No? Your belly will grow big, and then a little baby will pop out. You will love him or her more than anyone else.” George was smiling. “And all of us will help you bring him or her up.”

“Don’t try to cheer me up. This is the worst! And I don’t like being here. It’s always dark.”

“Well, it’s better than where you were. You’ll get used to it. And once your powers start to develop you’ll be able to see better.” Erianthe said.

“And you’re not my mama.”

“No, but I’m old enough to be your grand mother. Don’t do anything rash, and you will get used to the situation in a few weeks.”

*Just let her be.* George sent to everyone. *She is just letting off steam. She will be fine with it in a few days.* Aloud he added “Well, I am looking forward to our grandchild. We’ve lost enough, you and I. We don’t need any more heartbreak.”

Helena sighed, a mournful sound. “I guess you’re right. I don’t feel as bad today as I did last week. Are you really happy about me being pregnant? Honest?”

“Honest. You are the only child I have left. I’d like a grandchild, if that’s all right by you. I can’t have any more children. None of the men here can. Ask any of the women.” He suddenly beamed. “A grandchild. That is wonderful.”

“I still don’t like it. But Melissa has Andromeda, and Ariana and Chloe will have babies in a few more months. But they aren’t your grandchildren.” Helena sighed again. “A baby. I wanted to be married first. But if they can, I can. I’m doing it for you, papa. You’re all I’ve got, I’m all you’ve got. But I can give you a grandchild, and then we’ll both have the baby. It will be yours and mine.” She shrugged. Then she brightened. “You’re going to feed soon, aren’t you? It’s Phoebe’s turn. Don’t you have to go and wash or something?”

George had just finished feeding. The sun had set not long before. Erianthe was making coffee, helped by Melissa. Helena was complaining to Ariana and Chloe. Her voice rose. “It’s still not fair.”

George and his human servants heard footsteps outside, and their heads turned to the doorway. “Life isn’t fair, young Helena. There are all manner of people out there who will kill you, enslave you, rape you or beat you simply because they want something you have. Life is what you make of it. God gives you opportunities. You can chose to take them, or ignore them, but it is your choice. Other people may take their choices, and opportunities, and that results in your harm. What you do at that point is your choice, but if someone has harmed you, or threatens to harm you, then you are entitled to use every means you can to stop them. Sorry to disturb all of you unannounced, but something has come up that I need everyone to respond to as soon as possible. George, Phoebe, you might as well get dressed.”

“That’s not fair.” George mimicked Helena. “Coffee is being made. Join us and we’ll talk. Phoebe, let’s get dressed.”

“Who are you two?” Helena asked.

“This is Elektra, my number one human servant. I am Philippos, the boss of our village.”

“So you’re the one who turned my daddy into a monster. I should kill you for that.”

Philippos laughed. “Refreshingly candid. You would be within your rights, but consider this. If I hadn’t turned you father, you would still be amusing a legion of Turkish soldiers. No one would know to rescue you, no one would know how to find you. However, your mother’s spirit visited George, and told him you were alive, and where to find you. Because George was turned, he could see your mother’s spirit, and talk with her. Every choice has outcomes that are good for some, and bad for others. Which would you choose? To be here as things are, or for your father to still be human, and you to be lost as a comfort woman to scruffy Turks? And when your looks faded, and you’d birthed ten or fifteen children for your Turkish overlords, you’d become a drudge, cleaning toilets and other distasteful jobs in the hope of being fed, and not beaten. Which do you choose?”

Helena stared at him for a minute. “I choose here. Sorry papa, I choose to be here, with you as a monster, than to be a mattress for Turks until they discard me because I’m too old and ugly.”

“That’s good, I also choose what we have over you being with the Turks.”

“Does this mean you won’t kill me?” Philippos asked.

“Well, not for turning papa into a monster.”

“Good. As the boss of the village, I often have to make choices that affect many people. George, Phoebe, coffee is ready. If you would like to sit down, I have other people to see very soon.”

“There has been a couple if attacks during the night on the surrounding villages, they look like vrykolakas attacks. Tonight I want every man and half the women on guard duty in each of the villages. If attackers turn up, summon Petros and me for reinforcements. Do not attack them yourselves.”

“What happened?” George asked.

“Isn’t that what happens when you make monsters?” Helena asked sarcastically. “The monsters attack people?”

“My men are tame, they have human servants to feed them every day, see they have sex every day ...”

“Except today.” George needled gently.

“Well, you’ll just have to wake up earlier. I can see where your daughter gets it from. Helena, human servants look after us monsters and we in turn look after them. We also keep the surrounding villages under our protection. Elektra and Lydia investigated; Elektra, would you please give George the details.”

“Do you know the Woodcutter village?”

“Yes, it’s west of here near the forest. We pass through it when we collect wood.”

“An elderly couple were found dead in bed this morning. They were bloodless, though there was little blood on the sheets. There were three bites on the man and three on the woman. Unhealed, they had bled a little after their hearts stopped. The bites were different sizes, there were at least four, possibly six, attackers. We spoke with the dead spirits, but they had no memory of what happened, other than each recalled a dream of having sex with several people. And in Three Pines village, that’s north west, two young boys were bitten but not drained. The wounds were healed, so it was someone experienced. Likely two people. The boys were also sexually assaulted - they’d both been sodomised. They both complained of pain there. All they remember is dreams with a sexual content. We performed a healing, they should be fine in a day or so.”

Helena’s mouth had dropped open when Elektra had mentioned the boys’ injuries, but she said nothing. Soula was more forthcoming. “Did you set Yannis or Constantine free? That sounds like their work.”

“A mistake of leniency that will not be repeated. We don’t expect the same villages to be targeted tonight. But there are caves near Woodcutter village, down hill from here, where the assailants may hide out during daylight. George, since you know Woodcutter village I will send you there, along with Stephanos. The other men will be spread out amongst the other villages. I will search the caves, Petros will be looking for Yannis and Constantine. He trained them, they will be difficult to find. George, can you and Soula, along with two other women, go down to Woodcutter. Stephanos will be along when he has fed. I still have a few people to organise. I want the attackers caught tonight, before they kill again.”

He drank his coffee and stood. Elektra finished her coffee and stood. They left swiftly.

“Well, let’s get ready.” George announced. “Soula, who do you want?“

“Sylvia, Artemis and Athena. It may be a long night.”

“Can I come?” Helena asked.

“No, you’re not a trained human servant. A rogue vrykolakas would take over your mind, and you would do whatever he wanted. Sorry.” Soula replied.

“Don’t worry, I’ll live.” Soula raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

The four women dressed in dark coloured men’s clothing. “What are you doing? And why?”

“This looks like men’s clothing, but we’ve tailored it to our measurements. You can’t run about or fight in a dress, and we certainly wouldn’t want to be flying in a skirt. And dark colours to make us hard to see.”

“I understood everything except flying.”

“We’ll show you if you want to follow us to the entrance.”

“I’ll go with you.” Melissa said. “I’ve filled a lantern.”

“Bring it, but cover it before you go outside.” Soula admonished. “There’s a bright moon, and a lantern outdoors when when we know there are night raiders about is not a good idea.”

“Oh, I’ll leave it behind then.”

“I will hold onto you.” Helena announced. “I don’t see well in the dark.”

Melissa and Helena followed the others to the entrance. She surprised George by giving him a hug, and then hugged Soula. “You’re my father and my foster mother. I should behave correctly towards both of you.”

“What’s brought this on?” George asked.

“Philippos asked me which I would choose, remember? Two possible futures, I choose this one. Because the one I dreamed about died. I can never go back to it. But I can still have most of the things I dreamed about.”

“And maybe more things you didn’t know about, but would have dreamed about.” Soula said with a smile.

“Hey, do we get hugs?” Artemis asked.

“Of course! But you’re more like my big sisters. Or lovers? Is that the right word?” Helena hugged Artemis.

“Lovers is a good word for us, because we love you.” Artemis replied.

“And do you love me?” Athena asked. “Despite my brown skin?”

“I don’t even notice it. Of course I love you. I just spend less time with you because you are busy with Ariana and Chloe.”

“You know what I think?” Sylvia asked. “I think the three of us should all spend more time with all our foster daughters. The six of us could be like a big happy family.”

“Maybe we could add Phoebe and me?” Melissa asked.

“Of course. Now we are all part of George’s extended family, it makes good sense.” Artemis replied.

Helena hugged the other three. “Come home soon, all of you.”

“We could be out most of the night.” Soula said. “Now, flying is something both of you will learn when you come into your powers. Watch us fly.”

The five of them rose straight into the air, and flew away west under the bright moon. Helena’s jaw dropped. Then she turned to Melissa. “Your turn for hugs. I want you and I to love each other too.”

The two girls hugged, then Melissa put a protective arm about Helena and guided her home. “I would like that too.”

*It’s very bright. Like daylight.* George broadcast as they flew.

*Not quite that bright for us.* Soula sent back. *But everything is clear. I’d say more like a rainy day. The attackers are vrykolakes, they will see us as easily as we spot them. We don’t know what their skills are, but we should assume they are like us.*

*Except they kill their victims. They are wild? Rogue?*

*They have not been trained by us, they are the monsters you would be without us. Philippos will probably offer them sanctuary in return for loyalty. I suppose wild ones are to be pitied.*

*Offering sanctuary could be dangerous. They might be bandits who want to kill the rest of us.*

*They would not know about our power. Experienced human servants would control them. The village is coming up. There are a few tall trees we could hide in.*

*If anyone looks up we’ll be as obvious as dog’s balls.*

Soula sent a laugh. *Luckily most humans don’t look into the treetops.*

*Bandits might.*

*Good point. Everyone - treetops, but assume the raiders will look up. If you see anything suspicious let me know. I’ll tell Petros.*

They came in very high, selected their tree, and dropped silently. The village seemed still, but a few houses had flickering light behind curtains, candles or oil lamps.

*George, Rebeka just told me that Stephanos can’t fly well, and has trouble talking mind to mind. I told her to take him to that tall tree near the goat pens and stay with him. If he is needed I will tell her.*

*This could be a long night, especially if no one shows up.*

*Yes. Now a vrykolakas is a hunter. Think of the stillness of a hunter waiting for his prey before he pounces.*

George found himself slipping into stillness. He was surprised to find his breathing stopped and his heart slowed. Soula was on the other side of his tree, close enough that he could smell her, an inviting smell. But only when I breathe. He could hear her heartbeat, soft and slow, and her breathing, nearly silent, slow. Any such sounds would be lost in the night noises. They waited.

*I am the shadow, silent, unseen, unheard. I am not here.* That thought kept repeating itself, and it took George a few moments to realise it was outside himself.

Guardedly he thought to Soula *Soula do you hear a thought about a silent shadow?*

*Yes, I am checking with the others. Do not move.* There was silence for a minute, except for the refrain, then she returned. *There are three raiders going past the goat pens. They look like Turkish soldiers, but they move and smell like vrykolakes. Rebeka has told Petros. He will be here with reinforcements within fifteen minutes. We stay put unless they enter a house. If they do, we have to stop them.*

*We don’t have any weapons do we? I have a knife, nothing else.*

*Knives may not be useful. Stephanos has brought his smaller axe, the broad bladed one for cutting planks. I have a small blessed cross in a pouch, as do Sylvia, Athena. and Artemis. You might want to keep your distance from us.*

The raiders seemed to know where they were going. They stopped at the second house in from the goat pens. Soula thought to their small group *They are entering the house. George and his women will go after them. Rebeka, your group should stay back, keep watch. There may be others on their way in, or these may make a run for it. Be silent as you leave the trees.*

George moved to the open area between the branches, already flying. When Soula sent *Now* he left the tree and glided across the intervening space and through the window. Soula was next, followed by Sylvia, armed with a heavy iron fry pan, Athena and then Artemis.

As he entered, George seemed to know where everyone was. This room was a bedroom, with two adult humans under a spell, and two vrykolakes approaching them. There was a second room with two children and the third vrykolakas on his way into that room. Sylvia and Artemis went straight for number three. George hurled himself through the air at the one on the far side of the bed, Soula moved towards the closest.

*Sleep* Her power went out, and all the humans fell deeply asleep. The nearest one growled and struck out at George as he flew past. George kicked where his head should have been, and then caromed into the second attacker.

In the children’s bedroom, Sylvia whacked the third attacker in the head with the pan. Her own superior strength, a match for the attacker’s, meant she smashed much of his skull, knocking him to the ground. He staggered to his feet and ran into the exterior wall, smashing a hole and staggering outside. There he met with Rebeka and Stephanos as they landed. He swung a long bladed knife at Rebeka, who danced back, then swung at Stephanos, who parried with his short hafted axe. The blade took the hand off somewhere near the wrist. Blood spurted. Stephanos swung the axe the other way, and severed the attacker’s head. Blood spurted, then turned to flames, then dust. The body crumbled away, and it seemed a dark wind blew the ash away. The empty clothes collapsed on the ground.

Both Rebeka and Stephanos looked stunned for a moment, then recovered.

Meanwhile, George was wrestling with his attacker. George was trying holds and locks to subdue the man, but he was able to break George’s holds. Soula slugged her attacker with her fist and then grasped his head, gouging his eyes badly. Blood spurted from the sockets, while Soula unwrapped her blessed cross and smacked her attacker in the face with it. He screamed, flames springing up around where the cross was touching, and made a run for it. Soula grabbed his neck and managed to drop the cross inside his clothing. The vrykolakas rushed screaming through the wall of the house and began rolling mindlessly on the ground as he burst into flames. Rebeka and Stephanos were there, but there was little they could do.

Sylvia, Soula and Artemis helped George subdue the third vrykolakas, and led him outside. *We have to leave. The village is waking.*

At this point Petros landed with three other vrykolakes and five women. *We will take him away. Soula, you and Sylvia and Artemis, stay here, keep your crosses in sight, and tell the villagers their attackers burned. Everyone else, leave now. Make sure you do not leave anything behind.*

By the time people began emerging from their homes, Soula was shouting “We got them! We got them!”

A crowd gathered to look at the two piles of partly burned clothing and ash, the damaged home with it’s now awake, if shocked, occupants. Sylvia fished through the second pile of ash to retrieve the cross Soula had dropped inside his clothing.

Philippos and Elektra arrived, walking through the trees as if they had walked down the hill. Philippos promised someone would be down tomorrow with money to pay for the repairs to the house, and a gift to the survivors of the dead couple. They talked for a few minutes, then Philippos gathered Soula, Sylvia and Artemis, and the five of them walked back into the trees. The group of villagers stayed where they were, talking and inspecting. Once Philippos was out of site in the trees, he took to the air.

Petros’ group flew towards home. Four women carried the terrified Turkish vrykolakas, with Lydia behind threatening to use her blessed cross on him. “This will burn you alive if I touch you. If you move or even blink without my permission you will burn. Understand?” She spoke Turkish to the soldier.

Petros said “I am sure there are more of them. I’ll question him when we land and can chain him. I’m leaving the watchers in the nearby villages. Stephanos, I saw what you did to that Turk. I’m impressed. Where did you learn to do that? And especially with a short handled axe.”

“Hah! This is my special axe for crafting planks and beams from tree trunks. You must cut with precision in a dead straight line.” He demonstrated precise cuts. “A longer handle would get in the way. I was the village wrestling champion; I taught young Georgios here to wrestle. I’ve often fantasised about doing that to a Turkish soldier. I’m just glad it worked.”

They landed at the small village where they kept their horses. “We’re home.” Petros said, forestalling questions. “I’ll fetch Maria.”

“Who is Maria?” George asked.

*She is the oldest among us.* Lydia replied. *I do not want the Turk to have any knowledge of us. Maria was wife of the bandit chief before he became a vrykolakas. She stood by him, became his human servant. His only human servant. She was powerful enough to survive his death. She was a witch when she was human, so she told me. This village was where I started with Petros, about one hundred and sixty years ago. She was at least eighty then. Philippos is afraid of her. When Philippos decided to move us into the cavern, Maria declared she would stay in the sunlight, and made Philippos promise that anyone who wanted to leave the cavern could. Most who leave come here.*

Petros returned with a woman who looked classical Greek - blond hair in two long braids, blue eyes, skin that was milk pale except for her tanned face arms and legs. She wore a white linen wrap belted with a red belt of woven cords, leather sandals, and one bright red feather attached to a red leather thong about her neck. She appeared to be in her mid thirties. She walked directly to George and looked him up and down.

“Sophocles Georgios Zaloumis. Welcome to our village. Stephanos Loukas Palomedes. Welcome to our village. I am Maria. I am the village elder of both Katolofos - Underhill village, and Bandit’s Refuge, or simply Home.”

Her voice was soft, but power seemed to wash from her like heat from a fire. “Release the Turk. He cannot run.” She stepped close to the Turk, staring fixedly. He stood trembling, transfixed like a deer caught by headlights. “Ahmet Ergin, you are a thief, a rapist and a murderer. You are a monster. And all this before you were turned into an ubir. Tell me why I should let you live.”

George reflected that he heard her speaking Turkish, but in his mind he heard Greek. Ubir had to be Turkish for vrykolakas. Neat.

The Turk stammered out something that George did not understand. Maria grabbed him by his throat. “The darkness that follows is a poor excuse. You can defy it if you choose. Make a choice. Defy the following darkness and choose life, or let the following darkness into you, and choose death. Choose now.”

At this point Philippos landed hastily, followed by the rest of the women. Soula put her arm about George, Sylvia flanked his other side.

“Maria, I want him alive. I want to question him.” Philippos blurted out.

“I already did that. There are three at Tall Pine village, Petros has that under control. They likely ran when they felt their friends die. The other two went south towards the town. Catch them all when they sleep. The cave is lower down, well hidden. You know where it is.” A picture of the entrance popped into George’s mind, along with direction and rough distance from where they stood. George thought he could probably recognise the entrance when he reached it.

“Ah, yes, I recognise it. Lydia, could you organise capture some hours after sunrise? Bring them to the cave.”

“I don’t think bringing them to our cave is a good idea.” She countered.

“Bring them here. We have cellars enough.” Maria ordered.

Philippos sighed. “As you wish, Maria. What do you intend doing with them? They’re Turks, I don’t trust them, even if they are vrykolakes like us. Many of the women would riot if they saw them.”

“I am well aware of that. I can’t imagine Greek women who have been raped by Turks consenting to become their human servants. That means we have a problem. I want to examine each one of them. Perhaps they have Turkish comfort women as well. They could become their human servants.” She turned and spat. “That means allowing Turks to stay here after they have invaded us and raped us. I think not, unless we can set them on Turkish soldiers. Go home all of you. Elektra, Lydia, Soula, please visit me two hours after sunrise. Bring four or five others, we will see if we can catch some monsters.”

The raiding party took to the air, leaving Maria alone with Ahmet. “Follow me. I will feed you.” She turned and began walking back to her house. Ahmet followed. “Do not think to flee, I own you, you are my bond servant. You need my blood, you want my blood. You will sell what little is left of your soul to be mine, and you will sell everything you know and everything you own for my blood. I bind you to me. I bind you to me. I bind you to me.” A shiver passed through Ahmet, though his step never faltered.

Maria led him into her house. “Here is the washing area. Undress and wash yourself thoroughly. I will get you a wash cloth and a towel.”

Ahmet was obediently standing naked when Maria returned. She watched him while he washed, ensuring he was clean. When she was satisfied, she disrobed to stand naked before him.

“This is your prize. Come to the bedroom where I will feed you. You will share the rapture with me. Then I will teach you how to pleasure me. If you learn fast, I will spare your life. If you fail, I will try one of your companions once we capture them.”

“Did anyone locate Yannis or Constantine?” Soula asked once they entered the cave.

“No.” Petros replied. “They were trained by me, they will stay well away for days, perhaps weeks. They struck north, I am guessing they will strike south next.”

“Philippos, what were you thinking?” Lydia asked. “You felt sorry for them, and you let them go? Did you even put them in coffins? And they killed George’s son! I suppose you feel sorry for the Turks as well? You will let them into our village, just like that? They won’t last their first day. You realise that?”

“Nobody asks to become a vrykolakas. I feel sorry for every one of us. I don’t know what to do with them. Do we kill them? They should have been allowed to bleed out by whoever fed on them. Whoever they are, they should never have turned a Turk!” Philippos sounded angry. “I want to know who created them, and I want to know where their lairs are. All of them. Once we know that, we can toss all of them naked into the sunlight. Or at least you women can. And do the same with Yannis and Constantine if you can find them.” He stalked off, muttering “I try to help people, and they take it and throw it back in my face.” He turned. “If it wasn’t for me, all you men would be like them. If they can’t be tamed, they must die.”

Lydia looked at Soula and Elektra, who nodded their agreement. Elektra then followed Philippos. “He’s an idealist; he gets upset when others don’t conform to his ideals.”

“All right, you ladies will have to deal with finding their lairs tomorrow.” Petros said. “You should probably sleep. Stephanos and George, good work tonight. I will keep you on standby in case more of them are spotted. I think they’ve fled, they would have felt their compatriots deaths. I will call you if I need you. Lydia?”

“Five minutes.” She replied. Petros nodded and walked off.

“I felt their deaths.” George said to Soula. Lydia’s look said much. “What? I’m a physician. I heal people, not kill them. Except by accident.”

“George, I felt their deaths too. That means whoever made you made them. Stephanos, did you feel anything when they died?” Soula replied.

“Only joy that a Turkish invader was dead.”

“Lydia, do you know who turned George, or Stephanos?”

“Usually Philippos or Petros does that. I suspect George was turned by either Yannis or Constantine. He would have had his son with him.”

“Maybe you should let Helena know?” George suggested. “Then she can drop her grudge against Philippos. That also means I could die when Yannis and Constantine die?”

“Perhaps.” Lydia replied. “But you have powerful human servants who will keep you alive. We make you much harder to kill.”

“Surprisingly, that’s a relief. I have decided I don’t want to die any time soon.”

“That’s encouraging. I have to see to Petros, we’ll talk later.” Lydia walked off in the direction Petros had taken.

“And I should see to you, George, along with any of your women who are still awake.”

“You don’t think Petros will ask us to go out again?”

“No, he has others who are more experienced. We probably have the house to ourselves.” They walked off arm in arm.

Sylvia, Artemis and Athena were sitting around the table. “We made coffee. It’s still warm, and there’s enough for both of you.” Athena said.

“Everyone else is asleep.” Sylvia added. “We thought we might all sleep here tonight. Melissa and Helena are sleeping in our bed, Phoebe and Erianthe are sleeping in Athena’s bed, and Andromeda is asleep in Athena’s room as well.”

“And we thought George might need sex tonight.” Artemis added.

“Hey, we hoped he’s feeling like pleasuring all of us.” Athena added. “It isn’t all about George. He has to do his duty by his women.”

“Yes, that too.” Artemis continued. “I didn’t want you to think it was all about me.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you all.” George replied. “I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations.”

Later, the four women went to sleep, Soula and Athena in one bed, Sylvia and Artemis in the other. It was three hours till dawn. George decided to go for a walk, and see who was interested in chatting.

The cavern had a deserted feel to it, and George realised that most of the men and nearly half the women were out looking for Yannis, Constantine and the Turkish vrykolakes, and almost all the rest of the women would be asleep. That left Stephanos, Petros and Philippos, and he wasn’t in the mood for talking to any of them.

This was the first time he had been on his own for an extended period of time since his arrival. Back home, when his family was alive, there was always a myriad things to do about the house or the farm. Here, the women seemed to take care of everything, even repairs. He decided he needed to find things to do, and that reminded him of herbs. He should scout the environment to see what herbs grew here.

Having walked once around the cavern, he left and walked to the nearby village that Maria had called Bandits’ Refuge. There were no lights on there. George wondered which was Maria’s house, but decided that knocking on her door was not a god idea. All the houses were build in the old style from rough stone, with slate tiled roofs and small windows with heavy wooden shutters. They were probably all sun proof, especially if a thick, dark blanket was hung across them. George filed that away as a useful fact if he ever needed to sleep away from the cave.

Eventually he walked back the the cavern and sat near the entrance to watch the sunrise, or rather, watch the sky lighten and go through its colours, but not where he could see the actual sun climb above the horizon.

He walked back to Soula’s and his home, stripped, washed, and then slid into bed beside Soula. She woke and pulled him on top of her. Athena woke a few minutes later, and wanted George on top of her.

“He has about ten minutes before he sleeps.” Soula reminded Athena. “George, climb on top of Athena like a good husband, then in five minutes roll off so you can lie between us. That way we can both rest our heads on your chest as you fall asleep.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Soula and Athena were out of bed about half an hour after George fell asleep. That woke up Sylvia and Artemis, who joined them in the washing alcove. They were still towelling off when Melissa and Helena entered with a basket of fresh bread.

“Did you girls wash yourselves when you awoke?” Athena asked.

“Yes, but we haven’t eaten breakfast. We decided to get bread so we could all eat together.” Melissa replied.

“I’m hungry now.” Helena stated. “Which reminds me, whose turn is it to feed papa tonight?”

“Mine.” Melissa said, “And tomorrow is Soula’s turn.”

“When will it be my turn?”

“Not till you’re older.” Melissa said.

“Age is just a number.” Soula said. “You are a woman now, you are old enough. But not while you are pregnant or breast feeding. So between a year and eighteen months.”

“And not when you are menstruating.” Melissa added.

“Right.” Helena nodded. “I have to wait, I can wait. Hurry up and dress so we can eat.”

“Are the others joining us?” Sylvia asked.

“No, Erianthe said they are eating together, and we should.” Melissa replied. “There isn’t room for another five.”

“Well, why don’t you two start coffee for all of us.” Sylvia suggested. “One of you grind, and one of you set some water to boil.”

“Did you girls sleep well?” Soula asked.

“Yes, wonderfully.” Melissa started laughing. “Helena is like a kitten or a puppy, she wants to snuggle into the warmest spot she can find.”

“Really? Melissa wrapped her arms and legs about me, and I felt safe and loved. I dreamed my mama came to talk with me. She told me I should keep my baby, which I’m happy about. She also said all of you love me, and if I love all of you back I will be happy. How’s that?”

“That’s very sound advice.” Soula replied. “Your mama is a wise lady. Melissa, you’re tiring, let Helena do some grinding.”

“It’s harder than it looks. Helena, it has to be a fine powder.”

“I know.” The grinding device looked like a small wooden box with a brass funnel on top and a brass winding handle on the side. Helena pulled out the drawer at the base to check the quantity of ground coffee. “We need more beans. I often did this for mama.”

There were beans in the funnel, but Helena added another spoonful. Turning the handle caused the grinding mechanism to work, but since it was designed to produce powder the grindstones were pressed together, and the coffee beans tended to jam the mechanism.

“How old is this? The one we had worked better.”

“It’s at least thirty years old. You just need to use more strength.” Soula gave the handle a couple of turns.

“Yeah, but you’re stronger than Melissa and me. I think it needs to be looked at.”

“Maybe George can pull it apart later. Or perhaps Stephanos. Would you like me to finish grinding?”

“Yes, it keeps jamming for us.”

Breakfast consisted of fresh bread, goat cheese, olives, slices of mild capsicum drizzled with olive oil, grapes and figs. This wasn’t fashion food, but what the village grew or made from local produce. Coffee was a luxury they had to buy.

Soula selected Sylvia and Artemis to accompany her to visit Maria. Athena volunteered to come along. “Pheobe is happy minding my daughters.”

“Can we come along too?” Helena asked. “I haven’t seen much outside the cavern.”

“You can come for a walk. I am not sure whether Maria will be happy for you to go hunting Turkish vrykolakes, but we’ll let her decide.”

“Great.”

“You’re very chatty this morning, Helena.”

“She must have had a good night with Melissa.” Artemis joked.

“I did. She’s enthusiastic about trying different things. And she works hard at pleasuring me and makes me work hard at pleasuring her.”

“And I’ve worked out how to cause something like George’s wave.Only not quite as strong.”

“You’ve worked out how to do that? You have to teach us!” Artemis exclaimed.

“All of us.” Soula added. “You’re going to be very popular all of a sudden.”

“Only if you tell everybody. I think we need George, or a male human servant, for full power. But it worked with Helena. I kept pushing her through climax after climax, and I made her do the same to me. We got those pulsating vibrations, then they started running through both our bodies, and then they sort of blended together, and became a smaller version of the wave. After that we both fell asleep, and we shared dreams. I saw her mama as well. And then we went flying through fields of flowers. And I think we played with each other in our dream. We both woke up at the same time, and we both felt wonderful.”

“I am definitely booking a night with you.” Artemis said.

“Sure.”

“I think Helena has first claim,” Soula laughed, “so you’ll have to arrange for Helena to have a suitable substitute. Best left until Helena is sure she can make it happen.”

“How about waiting until after I next feed George? That will give us time to practice.”

“I’m in favour of that.” Helena replied. “No offence girls, but this week I want to wake up in Melissa's arms. Next week one of you can sleep with Melissa and I’ll sleep with both the others. We can swap around each week if you like.”

“Then I will put up my hand for time with both of you as well.” Soula said. “One at a time or both together, as you prefer.”

“Sure. We can try both together and one at a time. Helena, you and I are going to be very busy over the next few months. And very happy.”

“I never never considered I could be this happy with a girl. Or girls. Can you really love more than one person?”

“Of course.” Soula replied. “A mother loves all her children equally. George loves all his human servants equally. His human servants all love him without jealousy of each other. Human servants come to know and love their sister human servants. And a woman loves all her lovers equally. Take it from me. I have several lovers, and now we are all part of George’s household I am looking forward to adding the rest of you my list of lovers.”

“Even me?” Helena asked.

“Of course, you won’t be thirteen for much longer.”

The trees thinned, and they spied Lydia, Elektra, Loukia and Sofia ahead of them. They were still walking when Lydia’s party arrived at Maria’s house. Maria was sitting on the veranda at a table with several jugs. Lydia’s group sat and began pouring drinks. They spied Soula’s group approaching and waved.

Soula introduced Melissa and Helena to the group, adding “Melissa, I think you know most people. Melissa is Phoebe’s foster daughter. Helena is George’s real daughter, she is one of those we rescued nine days ago.”

Lydia introduced her group, adding “We were part of the rescue party, though you may not remember much. We put you to sleep to minimise your panic.”

“I was on the cart with Loukia and Sofia, and I’ve met both Lydia and Elektra.”

Maria finally spoke. “Melissa, Phoebe’s daughter. You gave birth to Andromeda. How old is she now?”

“Just past two. Phoebe’s minding her today.”

“And how old are you? Have you been apprenticed yet?”

“I’m nearly sixteen. I was apprenticed to George two weeks ago.”

“That’s good to hear. George is a good man. Helena, welcome to our community. You were rescued from the Turks, and you’re pregnant. How are you coping?”

“I was angry and I cried a lot. The Turks beat me every day, and at least a dozen raped me every day. Then I was rescued, I found my father, I talked with my mother’s spirit, and I met these four women. Their is still pain, but I am happy most of the time. I want to see what you so with the Turkish monsters.”

“How old are you?

“I’m thirteen and a half. I am going to keep my baby, and I want to be apprenticed to George, even though he’s my father.”

“Feisty. Brave words. I suggest you get to know all the other men before you decide to be apprenticed to your father. Get to know the competition for your hand. I have no objection to you being apprenticed to your father, if that is what you both want. He can't make you pregnant, so there will be no complications. But if you don’t know the other men, you can never be sure you have made the best bargain. Being a human servant is for life. You must be certain you have chosen the best one for you. Sorry, I am forgetting myself. Please sit. These jugs contain sweet red wine, these contain water. Please serve yourselves.”

“I wasn’t thinking of having sex with me father.”

“Well, all the more reason to be apprenticed to someone else.” Maria took a cloth off a platter to reveal Greek shortbreads. “Please take some.”

Everyone sat, and poured each other a mixture of wine and water, as was Greek custom.

Maria spoke. “Helena, let me give you one bit of advice about becoming a human servant. After about one year, you will find that you stop growing. Your hair stops growing, but it will return to where it was if you cut it or pluck it. So keep your hair styled as you like it. The same applies to your body hair. Cut it and pluck it to your liking once you are apprenticed, and keep it that way for when your body stops changing. For the same reason, you don’t want to be too young. Your body will continue to grow until about seventeen, but after you have been apprenticed for about a year, you will stop growing. You do not want to look like you are fourteen or fifteen for the rest of your life. Melissa is nearly sixteen, she will be nearly seventeen when she stops, and she will look like a young woman.”

“Thank you, Soula said I should wait at least a year to eighteen months because I am pregnant now, and will be breast feeding after. Oh, that was feeding father, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Soula said. “If you wait two years before you are apprenticed, you will be the same age as Melissa is now. And that leaves you plenty of time to decide to whom you wish to be apprenticed.”

“Sound advice” Maria commented. “Now that everyone is here, we can talk about finding our Turkish vrykolakes. And possibly Yannis and Constantine.”

“Did your captive prove talkative?” Lydia asked.

“No, but I can read his mind, and early this morning I invaded his dreams. He was turned by Yannis, as were most of the others. There appear to be five others. Three are hiding in the forest; two are under fallen trees, one is under a rock hidden by branches. I am not sure exactly sure where, though I believe I can find them. The other two were made by Constantine, and they are sleeping in a cave.”

“They are all Turkish soldiers?” Helena asked.

“Were. They are all vrykolakes now. The main question is, do we kill them outright, do we question them first, or do we take pity on them because they and now monsters and try to help them? If we help them, what so we do? Philippos was thinking of bringing them to our village; I told him they would all die the first time they slept.”

And Lydia said the same, Soula thought.

“Is he stupid!” Helena was suddenly angry. “I will kill them myself!”

“He is soft. He wants to help the monsters, since he is one himself.” Maria said mildly. “Hate the Turkish invaders, but judge each human by their deeds. And these Turks are no longer human, but monsters. Like our menfolk. If it weren’t for Philippos’ idea, and all our women, our menfolk would be killing Greek villagers. We know Helena’s thoughts, what are yours?”

“I can only think of the Turks who raped me, but that was two and a half years ago; nearly three.” Melissa said. “I haven’t forgotten nor forgiven, but I don’t think I want them killed in cold blood. I don’t know what should be done with them.”

“They raped me for months, but that was nearly sixty years ago.” Soula said. “I like to think I’ve moved on, that I could apply Christian charity to them, but could we trust them? I don’t want them living here, but if we don’t civilize them, they will be savage beasts hunting us. We will have to kill them.”

“I can kill them.” Lydia said. “Yes, I was raped by Turks, but I outlived them. They’re all dead now. I’ve seen too many women and girls raped by these savages. If you or Philippos tries to bring them into our village I will kill them myself. If you drive them away, they will be beasts of prey attacking Greeks whilst they sleep. We can’t civilize them, and we can’t let them live.”

“What if we bring them here? Never let them know about the Underhill village?”

“I doubt you can keep them from finding out. They may already know. If you can keep them here, and tame them, go ahead.”

“We have Turkish fathers.” Sylvia stated. “It might be possible to bring just a few here and civilize them. But not many.”

“We don’t know what to do.” Sophia said. “We don’t want them killed outright, but we can’t bring them here, it would upset too many people, and we can’t let them loose on our neighbours.”

“They are the invaders,” Loukia said, “they shouldn’t be here. And they’ve killed, why should they be allowed to live?”

“I’m inclined to agree that if they can’t be trusted they have to be killed.” Elektra said.

“I was just thinking,” Helena said, “the two in the cave were made by Constantine. Do you need one of them to question?”

Maria smiled. “Yes. Very astute of you. They have a connection to Constantine, and I can use that to find him. I will bring one back here in a wooden box covered with a heavy blanket. The other I don’t care about.”

“Do you have many women who will volunteer to feed your prisoners?” Lydia asked.

“There are a dozen women in this village, all of whom belonged to the original bandit gang. We don’t care for Turks, but a pet will do for a while. I’ve had several volunteer this morning to feed my pet tonight.” Maria smiled sweetly. “They probably all want to have sex with him to see if he’s better than a Greek bandit.” She laughed.

“So you are all human servants?” Helena asked.

“We served our husbands or lovers for many years, until one by one they died on raids.” Maria said, staring into her beaker of wine and water. “A few went back to their home villages, most of them stayed here. The ones who went home gradually lost their powers, grew old, and died. Those of us who stayed here retained or power, and remained young. We have a few young men visit for a time, we teach them the mysteries of sex, and when we tire of them we send them home to please their wives or girlfriends. And a few weeks later, more will come knocking on our doors. Otherwise, we maintain this village, we farm, and we help our your village, just as you all help us out.”

“We do? I didn’t realise.”

“Oh Helena, planting, weeding, pruning, harvesting, especially harvesting. Pickling, wine making, basket weaving, tending the animals, all the usual stuff you do on a farm. Harvest time you need a lot of hands. In two weeks we’ll pick all the grapes for wine making. You can’t grow anything underground.”

“So how do you keep your power if you aren’t bonded to anyone?”

“Maybe we just have lots of sex?” Maria laughed. “With each other, not just the local village boys. Seriously though, technically we are all bound to Petros and Philippos, though we never do anything with them. That seems to be enough to keep our powers going.”

About ten minutes later a young woman walked from an adjacent house to join them. Her brown hair was plaited into a long braid that hung down her back to her waist, and she walked with a free and easy gait. She wore a pale yellow dress that came to her knees, brown boots that had seen a lot of use. Her breasts were unconstrained under the dress, and jiggled as she walked. She put her hand on Maria’s shoulder; the woman covered it with her own.

“Hi Zoe, are you joining our expedition?” Lydia greeted her. Most of the others also greeted her by name, and Zoe greeted them.

“Maria asked me along. Why not? I don’t know you two, I’m Zoe.”

“I’m Helena, George’s daughter.”

“And I’m Melissa. I’m George’s new apprentice.”

“Good to meet you. Melissa, you were with Phoebe? Helena? You one of those rescued about two weeks ago?”

“The night before new moon.” Maria supplied.

“You seem well adjusted for someone who’s been raped by Turkish soldiers for weeks. Most of the others are still getting through the hysterical crying stage. Will you keep the baby?”

“I think most of the girls are past that stage.” Soula remarked. “We did perform healings for all of them. But our Helena is very resilient.”

“I was angry and cried a lot until I was rescued. My father is alive, and after that it didn’t seem necessary to cry. All his women have been very friendly and loving; I feel I have a family again. And yes, I will keep the baby. It might be ages before I have another.” Melissa patted Helena’s hand while she spoke.

“My mother is dead, but I spoke with her spirit.” Helena continued. “Everybody dies, it’s just a question of when and how. And Melissa has a wonderful two year old. Ariana and Chloe will give birth in a few months. My child will have lots of siblings to play with.”

“You seem much older than thirteen.” Maria said.

“I wanted to be a physician like my father, but that may not happen now.”

“Your father is supposed to be training his women in his skills.” Lydia noted. “I am sure he will teach you as well.”

“We used to go out picking herbs together. He can’t do that now.”

“We can.” Melissa said. “And we could take our children when they’re old enough.”

Zoe fetched a chair from inside Maria’s house, sat and poured wine with a little water.

Maria said “We were discussing whether to tame the Turks or kill them. Everyone has a different opinion.”

“So now you want mine.” Zoe laughed. “If they were simply Turkish soldiers you could put the fear of God into them and wipe their memories and let them go. But they are vrykolakes, monsters, you either tame them or kill them. And I think many would not take kindly to Turks in our midst, even if they are tame vrykolakes. Killing them may be your best option.”

An hour later the entire group set out. Maria and Zoe had loaded two wooden boxes that could be coffins into a cart, along with two heavy blankets, and hitched up the horse. Maria drove, Zoe sat beside her. Everyone else walked beside the cart.

An hour walking along goat tracks brought them to a few boulders projecting from the ground, one tall plane tree to one side, scrubby bushes around the base. Maria pulled aside some of the scrub to reveal a narrow crack between two boulders.

“Is that a cave?” Soula asked. “I always assumed it was space between two rocks, nothing more.”

“It goes down and back, then branches into three.” Maria said. “Maybe fifty meters at most. But shelter for the day. Helena, fetch the lantern, you will need it.”

Maria turned to pat the horse, already eying a patch of grass. “Now you my girl, may eat the grass, but do not stray from here. Be good.”

Helena returned with the lantern. “I can’t find a flint. There’s nothing to light the lamp.”

“Ah, let me show you how it’s done.” Maria opened the lantern, checked the wick and the oil. “It’s all good.” She pointed her index finger at the wick. “Let us have light.” The wick burst into flame. Maria closed the lantern and handed it to Helena. “When you’ve been a human servant as long as I have, that’s how you light a fire or a lamp.”

Soula thought, *I know what she did. I will try that later.*

Maria organised for Soula to take one of the boxes and Lydia to take the other. Soula levitated the box and for Maria’s benefit said “Box, follow me.” Lydia laughed and did the same. Sylvia and Loukia did the same with the blankets.

“Smart.” Maria commented. “You will want your hands free. Helena, anyone would think you’d never seen a human servant floating heavy loads. The boxes are awkward to manoeuvre in confined spaces.”

“I haven’t seen that before. Well, perhaps when you were loading the carts the day I was rescued, but it looked like people were using their hands.”

“If we are going to bring these monsters out alive, the boxes have to be underground, and with enough room to put someone in them.” Soula remarked. “Maria, you go first, you know where they are. Melissa and Helena should follow with the lantern, then the rest of you. I will go last, Lydia, you should be second last.”

“Ah, so if my box becomes stuck, you can help me free it.”

“Yes, that too. I was thinking if your box becomes stuck, I can go backwards and wait for someone to bring out a body.”

“Which they won’t be able to do if my box is stuck. You can move yours backwards and then help me do the same with mine.”

The down passage was raw rock for about ten meters, then it turned and went into the hill. At this point it showed signs of being widened with tools. another twenty meters and they came to the junction of three smaller tunnels. Soula and Lydia set the boxes down, Sylvia and Loukia placed the blankets on top.

“We should have left blankets near the entrance.” Loukia said.

“That would mean being sensible.” Sylvia said brightly.

Maria led them into the left passage. They were deep enough now that the lantern was needed. “Mind your head if you’re taller than me.”

This cave had been smoothed and partly shaped by some intelligence. The ceiling was low, but there weren’t the protrusions to bump your head like a natural cave.

“I can smell them.” Lydia announced.

“We can’t.” Helena and Melissa countered.

“As your sense of smell grows stronger, you will be able to smell them. It’s a sort of sweet wine and old leather smell.” Soula commented.

“Helena, bring the lamp.” Maria ordered. She was around a bend in the passage, and the cave widened somewhat. There were cushions, bedrolls and blankets spread about, and two dark haired, swarthy young males lying on them. Their clothing had once been soldiers uniforms, but now were shabby and torn. They appeared still.

“Touch one.” Maria ordered Helena.

“Ugh! He’s cold. Is he dead?”

“No, but that’s what happens to a vrykolakas when he sleeps. His heart slows till it’s almost undetectable, and so does his breathing. Now Helena, study them both carefully. You must decide which you will kill when we get above ground.”

“How do you kill something that is already dead?”

“Very easily, if you know how. You expose him to direct sunlight, and his body will burn to ash. Quick, clean, and likely painless. Study them, this one will go into Soula’s box, and the other into Lydia’s box. They are both Constantine’s creatures, we only need one of them.”

Helena held up the lamp and looked at the two still forms. She took her time, face serious. “They are young, I think. Under twenty. Do you know if they asked to be like this?”

“I doubt they asked for this. Constantine fed on each, then as they bled out, gave them some of his blood. They would be unconscious, unable to refuse.”

“And they did that to my father.” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement seeking confirmation.

“Yes, your father would have been dying, and Yannis gave him his own blood.”

Helena nodded, looking unhappy, worried possibly. *She’s not used to this.* Soula thought. *She hasn’t seen her father like this. We keep her shielded. But she needs to know.*

Maria picked up the one she had designated for Soula’s box, and Zoe helped wrap a blanket about him. “Grab the cushions and put them in Soula’s box.” She followed them back to Soula’s box.

Once the cushions were arranged to her satisfaction, Maria gently laid the still form on them, and closed the lid, latching it shut. Then she did the same with the other one.

As they approached the cave mouth, Maria draped both boxes in the thick blankets, then the boxes floated out and settled on the grass, in a patch of shade.

“Helena, you can douse the lantern. Now, decide. Soula’s is the left, Lydia’s the right. Which one do you choose to expose to the sun?”

Helena looked stricken. *Ah, this is what Maria is doing. Just like Philippos.* Soula thought.

Helena shook her head slowly. “I can’t. I can’t kill one of them. I don’t hate them. I pity them. Sorry. I let you down. Someone else will have to do it.”

“No Helena, no one else will kill them. You made the Christian choice, the compassionate choice. I expected you would choose that, that’s why there are two boxes. If I intended for one to die, I would have brought only one box.”

“Then why ask me?”

“Hah! You said to kill them, and you said that passionately. You had to work through your passion, and come to compassion. Now you understand, we will take both back to Bandits Refuge.”

Lunch was goat’s cheese from milk from the village goats, olives and red capsicum, fresh bread baked by Daphne, another of the women living above ground, and honey puffs that Zoe had made. They washed it down with wine from local vineyards and water from a deep well near Maria’s house.

Daphne had long light brown hair caught in a knot on the tip of her head, and falling from the knot past her shoulder blades. She had hazel eyes, and wore a green skirt that fell to her knees, a scarlet bodice with embroidered flowers in pink and green, and brown boots that came to her calves. She looked in her early twenties.

When Helena politely asked how old she was, she said laughingly “I could be your grandmother six or seven times over. I am nine years younger than Maria, twenty three years older than Lydia. Now eat up, you’re eating for two.”

“Are you going to look after one of the Turks? That’s very brave of you.”

“Not as brave as you think. My husband would have had all if them quaking in their boots. I had him wrapped around my little finger. These boys will do exactly what we tell them to. I will take one, Zoe the other. Between us we will find the rest of them.”

“What about Yannis and Constantine?” Soula asked.

“They should die if the raid our local villages. Elektra told me what they did to George’s son. If they were human I would cut their fingers off. Not much use when they grow back, but before we kill them we must find out who they turned. We don’t want them dying as well.”

“We’re sure one of them turned George. The other likely tried his son.”

“Yannis. George should be safe with all his women to help.”

“You had better keep my father safe. Don’t do anything to endanger him!”

“We have to catch them first.” Maria stated. “Once caught, we will sever their ties of blood. That means finding each person they turned, and helping that person cut the blood tie. Once all those blood ties are severed, we can kill them. Only then.”

“What makes you believe you can control them?” Lydia asked. “After all, they are nearly as old as I am.”

Maria laughed. “My husband made them both, and Philippos and Petros. They barely survived his death. They are still loosely bound to me by ties of blood, because I was my husband’s only human servant.” Her expression became serious. “I do not like them molesting children. I do not approve of them turning any victims into vrykolakes. They have lost the protection of the Underhill village. Their human servants kept them semi tame, but not tame enough, because they could not prevent their bad behaviour. Now they are outcasts, if they attack local villages, then they should be punished. Taming them no longer applies, because they were tame, and they have gone rogue. Punishment for a monster that goes rogue is death. We decided that when Philippos and Petros first set up the arrangement of human servants, long before the rest of you moved into the caves. That was before your time, Lydia.”

Lydia had a soft, fond look on her face. “Mama Maria, you fostered me, you helped me through those terrible days of being a young, pregnant rape victim.”

“I still remember those days. You were feisty, like Helena is. You had your baby, you grew up.”

“And you apprenticed me to Petros. All those years ago.”

“I never thought multiple human servants would work, I thought there would be jealousy and fights between women sharing the same man. But you made it work.”

“We made it work because we had a common purpose. We made it work because we weren’t ashamed to promote Sapphic love between us. It’s hard to be jealous of someone you love.”

“And you taught Zoe, Daphne and I that we could learn to love each other.”

“And none of us have regretted that.” Zoe said. “It makes us into a family, not just a village. We’re all wives and lovers, not unrelated people living in a village.”

“Helena, you see what you have to look forward to living here.” Daphne remarked. “You work at keeping your monster tame, you work at loving your sister human servants, and you are part of big, happy, loving family.”

“It’s a bit of a revelation for me. Quite different from my village. But everyone seems happy with the arrangement, so it has to be a good thing. I already feel part of a loving family.”

$$ - 10 days later. George wakes with Phoebe

- Helena discovers she is pregnant.

- Village raid by Turkish vampires

- George’s walk

- Soula and group visit Maria

- Catching Ubir

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George awoke, the dark cloud dropping away. He recalled riding in a carriage, a really long carriage with at least ten rows of seats, drawn by horses that trod upon clouds. He was the only passenger, and the coachman unseen. Weird. Melissa was beside him, pretending to be asleep. Her breathing, though shallow, gave away the fact that she was awake. ”Good morning Melissa.” Melissa couldn’t yet manage mind speech.

“Good evening George. Are you hungry?”

“Not yet. The sun is still above the horizon. How did Soula and the others go with catching the Turkish vrykolakes?”

Melissa told him in some detail, including Helena having to choose life or death for them.

“That’s a weighty choice. I am glad she chose life. She’s done a lot of growing up in the past few weeks.”

“I was angry like she was when I first came here. Gradually you learn that nothing is forever, but you can choose to be happy. And you learn that you have to respect living things, especially humans and vrykolakes.”

“Come on lazy bones, time to rise.” Artemis called. “Time to wash, feed, and pleasure all of us.”

“So the tame monster does tricks for his keepers?” George waited while Melissa untangled herself and rolled off him. Then they both jumped naked from the bed.

“Of course. But not tricks, pleasuring us is how you repay us for our loving care.” Artemis and Sylvia were sitting at the table. “Now you’re up, we’ll call the others.”

Later, George was talking with Soula, Sylvia, Artemis and Helena. “Yannis and Constantine have obviously left the area. But, are there others like us out there? Someone turned the bandits, where might they have gone in the one hundred and sixty years since then?”

“Closer to two hundred years, Maria says.” Soula commented. “We always assumed they were a very small group. But if they made groups like ours and moved on every few years, there could be families of vrykolakes all over Greece. Between twenty and forty families.”

“And ours likely wasn’t the first family. So give them four or even five hundred years, that doubles the number.”

“What if they moved into Greece from somewhere like Asia Minor, and moved on into Europe?” Helena asked. “Or the other way around?”

“Either way, there could be quite a number of family groups of vrykolakes out there.” George summarised. “The question is, are they civilized like us, or are they rogues?”

“And if they are civilized, are they friendly?” Soula added.

“So Yannis and Constantine could have joined any of those groups.” Sylvia speculated. “They could have gone anywhere.”

“Well, as long as they are away from the areas we control, they’re out of our hair.” Artemis said.

“They know our strengths and weaknesses.” Soula commented. “They could lead an attack on us. Remember there is no rule of law here. The Turks raid us, bandits raid us. The Turks care only for the large cities, and their own people.”

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Four weeks passed. The grapes were harvested, and set to fermenting. Olives were harvested, and set pickling. The figs they’d harvested earlier and set out to dry were collected and stored in baskets. There had been no further sign of Yannis or Constantine, or the three Turkish vrykolakes.

Another two weeks passed; the trees adopted their autumnal colours. Everyone was stockpiling for winter, and the expected snows.

Three horsemen rode into Bandits Refuge village late one day. They were Greeks, dressed like gentlemen from a city. “Kalispera, kalispera!” They cried, attracting attention.

“What is your business here?” Maria asked when she and Zoe came out.

“We seek an audience with the Master of Underhill. We are envoys from the Master of Athens. Is this the right place? Do you ladies even know of whom we speak?”

Maria looked the speaker directly in the eye. “Clearly your master did not choose you for your intelligence.”

“And not for his looks either.” Zoe added. “Perhaps he’s good in bed?” Both women sniggered.

“And perhaps not.” Maria finished. “I have informed the master of your presence; he will be here after sunset. He bids us prepare lodgings for you, and food. I am afraid our food may be somewhat rustic compared to what you are used to in Athens.”

By now there were a dozen women surrounding the horsemen. “We have stables for your horses. Please dismount and follow me.” Daphne said.

Another woman indicated a nearby house. “We will lodge you all here. We must prepare it first.” Several women entered the house, talking amongst themselves.

The three horsemen dismounted, unloaded their packs onto the veranda of the house, and led their horses after Daphne. Another woman, Zenobia, followed. The men introduced themselves as Leonidas, the one who spoke with Maria, Nicholas and Pallas. The three were of similar appearance, brown hair, hazel eyes, a slight yellowish tint to their skin. They might have been brothers. Daphne assessed them as three human servants, likely all in their fifties, though they looked in their mid twenties.

“We’ve met your master.” Daphne said. “Several times in fact. I don’t remember you three though. How long have you been human servants?”

“Twenty eight years.” Nicholas said.

“Twenty six.” From Pallas.

“Twenty four.” From Leonidas.

“No wonder. It must be nearly forty years since we went to Athens. But your master still writes to us several times a year.”

“We don’t get out as much with all the Turks about.” Zenobia added. “Is Hector still there? Palomedes’ half Turkish servant?”

“Oh yes, he’s like the master’s number one servant.” Leonidas replied.

“Any of you married?” Daphne asked. “No? I think all three of you prefer the company of men. And that’s how Palomedes likes it.”

“You are observant.”

“Naturally. A human servant is her master’s eyes and ears.”

They finished with the horses, and Daphne and Zenobia led the men back to their lodgings.

“The midden is over there.” Daphne pointed. “It’s often too far to walk if you’re in a hurry, but there are chamber pots in your lodgings. There’s a well near Maria’s house, it’s deep, but the water is sweet. We’ve swept your house and made up three beds. There will be a couple of buckets of water, as well as soap, wash cloths and towels. They’ve lit a fire; there’s a lamp if you need. Dinner will be in that building there, it seats many people. Dinner will be in about an hour, but we’ll call you when it’s ready. Leave your swords in your lodgings, you won’t need them here.”

The three looked at each other, obviously communicating mind to mind. They all nodded.

Zenobia smiled sweetly. “Why do you bring swords? Surely you can control humans with you minds?”

“Correct.” Leonidas answered. “But an unarmed traveller attracts unwanted attention.”

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George awoke suddenly, a roiling black cloud falling away. It seemed to be held at bay by seven bright points of light swirling about him. Erianthe was a warm presence against his side and chest.

“You’re awake at last. You need to get up and feed, Philippos wants you with him. There are visitors at Bandits Refuge, envoys from the Master of Athens. Soula and I will go with you. They’ve requested an audience with the Master of Underhill, that’s Philippos; he’ll take several of the men with him, and the men will bring two servants each.”

“All right, I’ll get up. Had you heard of the Master of Athens? That means there’s another group of vrykolakes based in Athens.”

“No, I hadn’t heard of the Master of Athens until they arrived this afternoon.”

Everyone came in for the feeding and the coffee afterwards. Helena wanted to come with them, but Soula and Erianthe both said ‘No’. “This is by invitation only. We’ll tell you about it when we return.”

Helena pouted, but Sylvia pointed out “None of us are invited either. We’ll just have to find something to occupy ourselves.”

“I can think of something,” Artemis said, “it involves all of us. Helena, you can go first if you like.”

George, Soula and Erianthe walked over to Philippos’ home. Philippos walked out, accompanied by Electra and Melantha, a slim woman with raven tresses descending half way down her back, milk pale skin and green eyes. Petros was on his way, accompanied by Lydia and a brown haired woman George knew vaguely as Sophia.

“How long have you known about the Athens group?” Soula asked Philippos. “Maria says you’ve been in contact before. You didn’t tell me.”

“That’s how the Master of Athens wanted it. I knew, along with Maria, Zoe and Daphne. I suspect they were in contact even before I became a vrykolakas. We exchange letters once or twice a year. He’s been trying to form some sort of alliance between the various groups. Trying to set standards of behaviour so humans do not suspect we live among them. George, you may be wondering why you, as a fairly recent member of the band, are here. You are one of two educated people in our clan, you can read and write Latin.”

“Thank you. I’m flattened. Who is the other person?”

“Me. Once I was destined to be a lawyer in Athens. Sadly that did not eventuate. However, you all might as well know that Palomedes, the Master of Athens, is a distant cousin of mine.”

“Maria says he’s a lot older than you.” Soula commented.

“Yes, perhaps one hundred and forty years, more or less. He remembers the original Ottoman invasion. Anyway, we won’t say too much in front of the envoys. They can deliver their message, we will discuss it amongst ourselves, and then we’ll let them have our response.”

Petros arrived, and Aristoteles could be seen walking towards them, accompanied by Loukia and a dark haired woman George knew as Ana. Like Aristoteles and Loukia, her father was a Turk.

When Aristoteles arrived, Philippos launched into his explanation about the Master of Athens again. Then he added “I would like all of us to fly there, but circle around to come in from the west. I am reluctant to let anyone know where we live.”

“I think the Master of Athens might guess we live underground.” George said. “That assumes all the women can fly.”

“Of course we can all fly.” Lydia replied. “We’ve been servants since before we moved into the cave.”

“It’s only the newer ones who need to learn,” Melantha said. “The ones who live in the cave don’t have much need for flying. I have started levitating six or eight buckets of water, and flying to and from the spring.”

The sky was still light as they left the cave. “Don’t fly too high, boys, or you’ll find yourselves in sunshine.” Philippos cautioned.

*I can feel the sun down behind the hills, and every night I feel it moving west to east beneath me feet.* George thought. *The ancients claimed Earth was a ball, and even calculated its circumference at roughly twenty five thousand kilometers. They said the sun goes around Earth, and I can feel it moving.*

“There isn’t much danger of that.” Petros countered. “The sun is far enough down that we’d be up with the clouds. I don’t think any of us are that reckless.”

“No, remember Icarus and Daedalus?” Aristoteles said. “Icarus flew too high, and the sun melted the wax in his wings.”

“Erm, right.” Philippos said. “We’ll land in the village square.”

The dining hall was still in use, though most of the meal had been cleared away. Maria smiled, kissed Philippos and Petros, and invited everyone in. “We’re making coffee, there’s herb bread, olive bread, short bread and honey puffs, and there’s jugs of wine and jugs of water if anyone is thirsty. These are the three envoys from Palomedes - Leonidas, Nicholas and Pallas. This is the Master of Underhill, Philippos, and his second in charge Petros.” She then ran through the names of all the newcomers.

Leonidas had a letter for Philippos, and demurred when Maria went to take it. “I was ordered to place it directly in your hands.”

“Well you’re in my court now, and I am ordering you to give it to Maria. Unless of course this is poisoned.”

The surprise on the faces of the envoys said they were not aware of any poison.

Philippos laughed. “I didn’t think so. Give it to Maria.” There was steel in his voice, that of a master, and Leonidas handed the letter over without further ado.

“Now, is there any message from Palomedes, or just the letter? We will read it later and write a reply for you to take back.”

“None of us are aware of the contents of the letter.” Leonidas said. “Our master told us you would say that. We are to offer you his wishes for health and prosperity and long and happy life to you and your family.”

“Tell him thanks, and give him similar wishes in return. How is he? What is the gossip in Athens?”

“There is one thing.” Nicholas started, then looked at his two companions. “It’s supposed to be for your ears only but I think you might want it said publicly?”

“How can I judge that until I know what it is? These people here are my trusted counsellors, whatever it is, you can say it in front of them.”

“In your last letter you included a paragraph about Yannis and Constantine, and how they had fled your jurisdiction. They arrived not an hour before we left; there wasn’t time to add anything to the letter. I am to ask if you want my Master to kill them, punish them according to your will, or returned to you. They are being held, but I have no knowledge of their conditions.”

“Palomedes is a fair man. I told him they had disobeyed me and fled, and asked if he had any knowledge of them. They will be held, but treated humanely. I think we should be the ones to punish them, but we will discuss this later, and give you answer in due course. That should be a paragraph in my reply. Now, you have ridden far. Tonight should be happy. Regale us with news of Athens. I am sure the women would like to know of the latest fashions.”

Later, Philippos held council back in the cave, in a separate room that had been set up for a number of people to have a meeting. Maria and her friends brought some of the breads they had baked, Philippos supplied wine.

“George, I should fill you in on some background about the Master of Athens. He is older than Maria, possibly two hundred and fifty years old. That means he was born in the mid fourteen hundreds, when knights word plate armour into battle astride heavy horses. He has a number of concerns, apart from the Ottoman occupation. I think his principal concern is much the same as mine, how can we live peacefully among humans. He has adopted my suggestion of each vrykolakas having a number of human servants, though he still has an older practice of keeping human prisoners when he has the chance. He currently has a number of Turkish soldiers held captive, they are donating their blood to a good cause. I think that is dangerous, because there is always the possibility of someone escaping.

“He wants to prevent any Turks becoming vrykolakes, and he knows that all it takes is one rogue to circumvent that. He would also like to have some sort of governing council, with himself at the head, that would make laws for our obedience. It’s a grand idea, but just look at Europe, with its wars, and empires and invasions and occupations. Every single master must agree, or there will be war between the houses. If you know your Greek history, you will know that once Athens went to war with Sparta, and every single city was like a separate nation.”

“What about Europe?” George asked. “Are there other families of vrykolakes out there? Are they trying to form some sort of governing council?”

“Good question. I don’t know the answer, but I believe they are likely similar to here in Greece. Small families banding together into bigger communities, and striving for law and order that their country provides humans, and doing their best to live undetected amongst humans. Palomedes may know more on this.”

“What does his letter say?” Soula asked.

“First page is greetings to most of us here. He wishes all of us well. Then he acknowledges the receipt of my letter, and says he will keep watch for Yannis and Constantine, or any Turkish vrykolakes. I didn’t write that, so one of you must have communicated mind to mind with someone there?”

“I occasionally have a conversation with Hector.” Zoe said. “You know he and I can speak mind to mind, that is why you keep turning down his requests for you to send an ambassador to his court.”

“So I do. Where was I? Ah, there are many families of vrykolakes around Greece, perhaps thirty in all. Most of them are little better than wild animals, they prey on Greeks and kill them. He agrees with me that these families we try to tame, and if that fails, we kill them. The Turkish ones he is not sure whether we should try to tame them, or kill them out of hand.”

“We’ve already said that the humane act is to try to tame them.” Maria stated. “If that fails, then we kill them. And I know there are many people here who hate the Turks with a passion. I don’t trust them enough to allow them to form their own family, and I don’t know if we have enough Greeks who are willing to foster a Turkish vrykolakas. Our little refuge can only handle two or three, and that is what we have.”

“What, you have Turkish vrykolakes in the village?” George exclaimed.

“We do. There’s the one you and Soula captured, and the two that we captured. We are trying to tame them. They won’t go underground unless everyone is happy. And with seventeen recent additions to our group, the Turkish ones won’t be welcome for quite a while. If we find any more, we may have to kill them out of hand. We’ll deal with them when it happens.”

“Can I continue?” Philippos asked. “There are ‘houses’ as he puts it in the Austro Hungarian empire that consist of Vrykolakes, human servant, and ordinary humans. He has been writing to them about setting up a council across Europe. So far they have agreed to work towards that within the Austro Hungarian empire, and they will help Palomedes. He doesn’t say how, but he writes about forming a basic legal framework with each of the houses agreeing to conform to that framework. Of course he sees himself as another house. Hmm, that’s a couple of pages.

“The Hungarian is Count Grygory Thurzo, that’s how he writes it, I’m not sure of the correct pronunciation, but the Count has fought against the Turks for over one hundred years. He had an unfortunate incident with his relative Elizabeth, and had to stage her death in 1615 because her bloodthirsty appetite was noticed by the church and other nobles.

“The Bohemian is Count Adolf von Seinsheim, who has fought against the Turks for one hundred and fifty years. He also has a relative who came to the attention of the church, and had a faked death.

“The third is from Wallachia - Count Vladimir Tepesh. He has cleared the Turk from Wallachia, and he was nicknamed the Impaler for his habit of impaling captured Turks alive.

“Palomedes is negotiating to send ambassadors to each house, and to receive them in return.”

“They all sound quite bloodthirsty,” George commented, “do we really want people like this making rules for the rest of us?”

“The problem is they are nobles, they think society’s rules do not apply to them.” Philippos said.

“Just like any bandit.” Maria laughed. “Be sure their ancestors were bandits; they gained their lands by taking them by force.”

“I guess we can’t ignore them.” George commented. “So we have to work with them, try to civilize them.”

“I think that may be why Palomedes wants to send ambassadors, who can set an example. In fact, that may be another reason for us to send a family to him.”

“I think I would like to go to Athens for a time.” Maria volunteered.

“I lived in Athens for two years. I could go back if you need, but I need to clear that with my women.”

“Thank you George, but I would prefer to send an older vrykolakas, with his entire family. Maria, we likely should bond you with whoever we decide to send.”

“Well, if I don’t like your choice, I’ll stay here. Some of your men are so dull.”

“You would have to approve whoever I send. You make a list, rank them, and we’ll work our way down.”

“Fine. Anything else in that letter?”

“We preempted the next bit. He begging us to visit. I don’t think I want to go, but we can tell him we are making arrangements for some of us to visit. If you are going, what will you do with your pet?”

“Take him with me. He’s housetrained. That means that Daphne, Zoe and Zenobia will be going with me. Unless they want to substitute someone else.”

“Details, we can settle later. That’s about it for the letter. There’s some gossip, one of the women is pregnant, I mean one of his female human servants, she’s not sure who the father is. Could be Hector. Palomedes seems happy about that. You can read the details later.”

“We want to have some input into the rules he’s trying to dream up.” Maria said. “Those nobles sound thoroughly obnoxious, but we may have to send a delegation to each. It may all fall apart, but if they do manage to make it work, we’ll have to live under whatever stupid rules they dream up. I want to be directing that. Men can be so stupid.”

Later the same night, Ahmet lay on his back, naked, looking at the four women around him. One had fed him, he wasn’t sure which, then they all stripped naked and forced him to pleasure all of them several times. He was surprised he had been able to manage that many women. Now he felt sated, content.

In halting Greek he said, “That was good. Enjoy much. What you want ... me?” He switched to Turkish. “What are you plans for me? You understand me?”

“We all understand you.” Zenobia said. “Most of our group speak Turkish. Do you know what you are?”

“I am ubir, a blood sucking monster, I think. One of you fed me, but you did not die. How?”

“I fed you.” Zenobia said. “You have a choice. If you want to leave, we won’t stop you. But you will be a monster, preying on humans like a wild animal. Eventually they’ll hunt you down, kill you.”

“You’re easy enough to kill.” Maria added. “Catch you while you’re sleeping, throw you out into the sunshine. You’ll burn to ash. If you start hunting the villages around here, we’ll hunt you down. We look after other ubir apart from you. We don’t want the villagers getting the idea to kill ours.” She looked at Zenobia.

“And that’s your other choice.” Zenobia added. “We feed you. We have sex with you. Every day. You become tame. You don’t hunt, and you do what we tell you. The choice is yours.”

“That’s easy. But why do you do this? What’s in it for you?”

“Let me tell you a story.” Maria said. “You didn’t ask to become a monster. Neither did our menfolk. We nursed them through their fever, we devised a way to tame them, to keep them safe. We did that because we loved them. Some of them never survived the fever, some died from sunlight, or many other dangers we were not aware of. Some died in skirmishes with Turkish soldiers. We kept finding more monsters over the years; sometimes we knew who made them, often we didn’t. Those men were strangers, mostly Greek, some Turkish invaders. Very few really, you three are the most we’ve found. We do it for our loved ones, we do it for our fellow Greeks, the ones you would prey on. We also do it out of pity for what you are. We saved our menfolk, we can save you. But you have a choice. One path will lead to your swift death, the other to your survival. But we cannot let you join the rest of the community yet. A lot of the women were raped by Turkish soldiers; not all will have our compassion. There are some who would wish you slow and painful deaths. If you would live, you must learn to be Greek. You are monsters, you can forget about being Turkish and learn about being Greek. Has that answered your questions? We will help you live, if you make that choice.”

He looked young, scared. “I want to live.”

“Then we shall do our best to help you. We shall be your golden chains.”

They were still talking when there came sounds of yelling screams, and banging. “Someone grab the crosses.” Maria ordered, darting for the door. She grabbed a loose robe and threw it about her naked body. “Ahmet, follow me”

There was thumping, banging and cursing in Turkish coming from one of the nearby cellars. Four women were standing on an upside down stone bench across a trapdoor using their combined weight to reinforce the trapdoor. Then the trapdoor was flung open, and an angry Turkish vrykolakas burst out, swinging a sword.

*That must belong to one of the male human servants.* Maria thought, checking where the other Turkish vrykolakas was. She spied him standing with four women. Ahmet was standing behind her. *Control it now.* She kept watch on both Turks while advancing swiftly on the sword swinging one.

“Enough!” The force of her will brought the man the man to a brief halt. “Put the sword down, and you will be safe.”

“Safe? With women in charge? Real men do not obey women!”

“Put the sword down now!”

For answer he leapt at her, swinging the sword. Maria danced back faster than him, and the sword struck something invisible in mid air, struck and stuck there as if buried in a tree trunk. He screamed curses, and then the stone bench swept him off his feet, breaking his legs. He fell, and the bench reversed to crash down on his face and upper chest, crushing them flat. That he was still writhing told of his unnatural vitality.

“The cross. Quickly!” Maria ordered. Daphne dropped one directly on the man’s exposed chest, where it blossomed into flame. The stone bench, dripping blood and brains, lifted itself, then dropped onto the cross, forcing it against the man’s body. Flames roared, then died away, leaving nothing but ash and lingering after images.

“Anybody hurt?” There was a crowd now, everyone in the small village.

“No, he assumed we were human.” One of the women said. “His attack didn’t go to plan. Did he steal that sword from our guests?”

“Looks like it. Whoever owns it, pick it up.“ Maria caught the two Turks by eye. “Ahmet, Sandor, both of you here. That is your third choice. That is what happens when you bite the hand that feeds you. Is that clear?”

They both nodded. Maria went through the other two choices again for the Sandor’s benefit. “Ahmet has made his choice. You must make yours. If you elect to stay, we expect loyalty. We will be your new family.”

“And if I decide to leave?”

“There is a path there that leads north. Follow it. See that star there?” She pointed into the night sky. “That’s the pole star. That direction is north. When you cross the mountains you’ll be in Bulgaria. Don’t kill too many people along the way, humans will hunt you down. You will have no friends, no companions. If you attack any village within thirty kilometers of here, we will hunt you down, You cannot hide from me, I can follow you anywhere. I am Nemesis. You will burn, and Satan will collect your soul. Now start walking.”

“I would prefer to stay. I don’t want to die.”

“Thought you might. We won’t stop you from leaving, but you know what to expect if you do. If you stay, you will be loyal to us, and you will obey our orders. You were a soldier, you know about obeying orders. You will have to earn our trust. After all, you were one of the invaders. Now, go and join your women.”

Sandor nodded, looking chastened, and walked away to rejoin his new family. Maria turned. “Ahmet, are you all right?”

“Yes, just a bit shaken. It was all very sudden. How did you kill him? How did the stone bench move?”

“We are witches, we have power, and God has given us power over monsters. Ender was stupid and arrogant. He tried to kill some of us, he paid the price. Besides, I wasn’t about to grasp his sword by the blade.”

“But the cross?”

“It was blessed, sanctified.” Maria used a stick to rake through the ash, hooked the gold chain and its gold cross. It appeared unsullied, shiny, untouched by the fire. “Do not touch it. Do you feel it?”

Ahmet shuddered. “I feel it, stronger than I feel the sun. Even with my eyes closed I can see it shining, beautiful and deadly.”

“God exists. Even you Turks prey to Him. Living among us is your one chance to save your soul. One of your first tasks it to become fluent in Greek.”

At this point Leonidas interrupted. “You don’t seriously believe you can save his soul? His Turkish soul?”

“Leonidas, you know that every vrykolakas is an abomination before God. They cannot enter sacred space, the touch of a holy object causes their flesh to burn. So does sunlight. But there are a few who have died and their spirit has returned to talk with us. We know those spirits have been saved from Hell. They all deserve their chance. Even Turks.” Maria’s eyes became watery and her voice started breaking. “My husband never returned after he died, but by God, none of you shall stop me saving whomsoever I can!”

There was silence. Leonidas said, “I am sure my master would like a chance to save his soul.”

“They all would. Someone else can clean up, I’m going home. Ahmet, please accompany me.”

Daphne, Zoe and Zenobia fell in with Maria and Ahmet. Nicholas followed. Maria commented to no one in particular “I loved him. I would have done anything to save him, but I couldn’t. He didn’t come back.”

Daphne patted Maria on the shoulder. “It was the same with my husband.”

“And mine.” Zoe added.

“All four of us.” Zenobia said. “We will save those we can.”

“All right girls, let’s hug.” Maria said. “I’m feeling better now.” They indulged in a four way hug, while Nicholas and Ahmet looked at each other and the women, not quite knowing what to do.

“Nicholas, what are you doing here?”

“Lady Maria, my master has tasked me with something I must tell you in private, or near enough to it.”

“Then you had better tell me now.”

“He has told me to offer myself to you as his gift, and to stay here with you. I am to act as a messenger between yourself and him.”

“Then tell your master I thank him, and we will keep you. Now, will you be able to pleasure me the way a man should?”

“Oh my lady, I am a human servant. I will pleasure you when ever and how ever you wish. Nothing held back. And if you should find it in your heart to pleasure me as well, I shall be extremely happy.”

“Then I thank you too, Nicholas. We will make good use of you. I think it would be fair if we shared you amongst the twelve of us. But there are four ladies who have been deprived of their man, and I think we should encourage you to spend more time with them in compensation. Would you mind? Tonight we four have to look after Ahmet, there are four who will look after Sandor, and now there are four who will see to your pleasure. Would you be so kind as to tell them what I told you? They are there for your pleasure, you are there for theirs.”

Nicholas grinned. “My lady, your wish is my command. I will do as you desire with great joy.”

Maria hugged him, kissed him. “Then go to them now.”

Meanwhile, George and Soula were talking. “Quite frankly George, I’m bored here, I’d love to go to Athens with you. I am not sure about our extended family though. Erianthe likes it here, but I think she will go if both Athena and Phoebe go. Phoebe will likely go because she loves Andromeda, Athena will stay because of her foster children and grandchildren. Helena will go anywhere with you, but I would not want her travelling when she’s pregnant. Sylvia and Artemis will go with you, Melissa will go because of Helena, otherwise she will stay with Phoebe.”

“I liked Athens, but when I was there I stayed with my uncle. We would need two houses, I think. But I agree with Philippos about someone older. And I think waiting until Helena gives birth and all the children are past the toddler stage is sound. I am thinking that those women who were born here and grew up here may have some issues adapting to a big city.”

“Oh, they all have spent time in the surrounding villages. I think they’ll adapt easily.”

“If we lose a couple of women now, it would be serious, yes? But in a few years time we might have more apprenticed. In six years Helena’s child will be old enough. Meanwhile I can train all of you in medicine.”

“I am looking forward to that. You will teach us to read and write Latin? I think that will be very useful too.”

“I would like to make a copy of the Latin text book in Greek, but that may take a while. Oh, did you feel that? Some sort of disturbance in what? Power?”

“Yes, similar to when we killed the two Turkish vrykolakes. Let’s go down to the village.” Soula was on her feet before she finished speaking. She developed a preoccupied look. “Uh, there’s been some trouble. They had to kill the Turkish vrykolakas named Ender. No one else was injured. There’s more news if we go down to the village.”

“Let’s go.”

Philippos and Petros also turned up, along with Elektra and Lydia. Maria had opened a flask of raki, and everyone was sipping from small coffee cups. She was sitting with Ahmet on her left, Daphne on her right, Zoe beside Daphne, Zenobia beside Ahmet. They were crowded around one side of Maria’s kitchen table, the other six were crowded around the other side. The chairs were mismatched, six were Maria’s, another six were Daphne’s.

“Leonidas and Pallas have gone back to bed.” Maria explained. “Nicholas is apparently a gift to me from Palomedes, so I told him to go and play with the women who were looking after Ender. That should keep him busy for several hours.”

“Is he up to pleasuring four women?” Petros sniggered.

“The girls will give me a report tomorrow.”

“What happened? How did Ender gain a sword?” Philippos asked.

“They were all told to stay in their cellars, and that someone would come to feed them towards midnight. Ahmet, what did you do?” Maria asked the last in Turkish. Soula translated for George, using mind speak.

Ahmet responded “I stayed in my cellar as you instructed. I pretended I was on guard duty, and sat watching and waiting. I heard someone moving around outside, but I did not go out to see who it was. You told me not to leave my post.”

“You see? He is telling the truth.” Maria said in Greek.

“Yes.” He switched to Turkish. “Ahmet, you really must learn Greek if you are to stay with us. Most of us do not speak Turkish.”

“I will learn, sir. Lady Maria and her friends have promised to teach me.”

“Good.” Philippos switched back to Greek. “We will ask Sandor, if he lies he will be punished. Ender apparently disobeyed. I take it you didn’t compel him?”

“No, but he was warned, and had promised to do as he was told. If we have to compel them, we might as well kill them. I told each of them when they awoke that they had two options, stay or leave. They all chose to stay. I went over that again after I killed Ender. Ahmet means what he says. He knows we are his best choice. Sandor I am not so sure about. He asked what would happen if he left, so I spelled it out for him.”

“Had Ender been fed before he attacked?”

“Yes. The girls were undressing for sex when he pulled the sword from under his bed. I think he meant to take someone captive, but they used their power to throw him against the wall and fled. Then they locked him in, and placed a stone bench over the trapdoor.”

“Those cellars are built to hold an angry vrykolakas. The trapdoor is axe proof, did it give at the edges?”

“I think the hinges gave. Check it yourself.”

“Since it opens outwards,” Petros remarked, “the fastenings would be a weak point. I know we discussed outwards or inwards, but I can’t remember why we chose outwards.”

“I think we decided that the cellars were the ultimate refuge,” Daphne said, “and it was harder for an attacker to batter in a door that opened outwards.”

Philippos snorted derisively. “And therefore easier to break out of should we need to. So it goes.”

“Are we just going to welcome these Turkish vrykolakes into our homes?”

“Not quite, George. We can only accept a few; most of our women won’t feed them, let alone have sex with them. And they have to try to fit in. We don’t want them upsetting any of the women that have been raped.”

“That’s most of us.” Soula countered. “I don’t think they should be allowed in the main part of the village.”

“They’re not. And there’s only two of them. We can easily accommodate them here. Besides, what would you have us do with Turkish vrykolakes? Kill them on sight? Even Helena could not do that.”

“She couldn’t?” George asked. “This is something I’ve not heard.”

Maria explained what had happened when they captured Ender and Sandor, and how she had made Helena choose which one should die. “I do not want to stoop to the level of our oppressors. If we are no better than they, then that excuses everything they do to us. We must show we are better than they are.”

Soula signed. “I had forgotten that. We must save who we can, but we have our limits.”

“George?” Maria asked. “What are your thoughts?”

“I’m a healer, not a killer. I don’t like them, but if you brought me an injured Turkish soldier, I would feel obliged to help them. As you said to Helena, they didn’t ask to be monsters, we should do what we can to help them. How many of you speak Turkish?”

“We learned over the years.” Maria replied. “Philippos, Petros, Lydia Elektra, Soula, Loukia, Sofia, and the twelve of us above ground. George, I don’t think you have met Zehra, she is one of the twelve of us who live above ground. She was among a group of comfort women we rescued. She was fifteen, Turkish, she’d been born to one of the comfort women, and at age fourteen, she was added to them. She spoke some Greek. We taught her Greek, she taught us Turkish. She is Loukia’s mother. And now she is one of those entertaining Nicholas. I am sure we can arrange for her to teach you Turkish if you wish.”

“Let me think about that. It might come in useful.”

“Philippos, I have decided to go to Athens with whoever you select as ambassador. Daphne, Zoe and Zenobia will come with me, and so will Ahmet.”

“That’s your prerogative. What if he sells you out to the Turks?”

“I wouldn’t do that.” Ahmet protested. George could see dimly that he was telling the truth.

“Then he’s dead. I will kill him myself. I am Nemesis.” There was an echo of power that made everyone shiver. *How did she do that?* George thought. *She must have sent something mind to mind to all of us.*

“Do you want to wait until both Ariana and Chloe have given birth?” Soula asked. “They’re both due this month.”

“Fine by me.” Maria looked at her lovers, all of whom nodded. “Mind you, it will be nearing winter, and we might even have snows. We did last winter.”

“It may take that long for whoever else is going to be ready.” Philippos said. “And any snow won’t be much until midwinter. It’s the rains that might be a problem. There’s little more to be said now. I’ll question Zehra and the others later tonight, and I’ll also have a talk with Sandor tonight. Well, good night everybody.” Philippos stood, Elektra, Petros and Lydia followed.

Soula pulled at George’s arm. “I think some people would like to sleep. Maria, we’ll say good night also.”

“It’s a new way of thinking for me.” George confessed as they walked back. “I mean, intellectually I know Turks are people like us. Different religion, but still like us. Actually befriending a Turkish soldier is several steps beyond where I was prepared to go. But if Helena can forgive them, then so can I. I am surprised they would have a Turkish woman as a sex slave, but that essentially means she’s in the same boat as the rest if the women and girls we rescue.”

“And Ahmet and Sandor are vrykolakes like you. That makes it a step or two less than you think.”

“But we are free, the girls are not unless we rescue them. Comfort Woman. Such an odd word.”

“George, you do know the difference between a comfort woman and a courtesan?”

“Of course. A comfort woman is a slave, she has to do what she’s told. A courtesan gets paid, and she can say no. I don’t really want to think of my little girl being a sex slave. It makes my blood boil, and I get the urge to go out hunting Turks.”

“Then it’s good that you are civilized. We do not need to go hunting. As you said, we save people, not kill them. We rescue them. That’s how you get back at bestial people.”

“I am beginning to feel I should contribute something to the community. Teach medicine and herbalism. Teach Latin, Learn Turkish. Perhaps set up a clinic to treat all the humans who need treatment. And that means creating remedies. I need some sort of work shop to make up my remedies, and you need pen, ink and paper to be able to write down each remedy, and how to make it.”

“I think we can manage all of that. Philippos said he didn’t want you going to Athens yet. Once you have taught people here, they can stay and run the clinic, make up the herbal remedies, collect the herbs. I think many of the women would love to work at that, collecting herbs, drying them, making then into medicines. And women have their own particular issues that men don’t understand. Training some of us to be healers will benefit all of the surrounding villages. George, how long did it take you to learn your profession?”

“Years. I’ve already started Helena, she collects herbs with me, or used to, and she knows how to make some remedies.” His eyes were shining. “I need to keep myself busy, and not with make work. It has to be work with a purpose.”

We all do George. I will ask around, and see who else is interested in learning. Then we can see about setting up a large workshop. I expect Maria will want a clinic in her village, easily accessible to the surrounding villages.”

“Mmm. I wish there were some way I could stay awake during the day.”

“There might be. I will talk with Maria and Lydia later.”

$$ - the master of Athens

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George woke a good twenty five minutes before sunset. Phoebe was a warm, cuddly bundle snuggled against him. *I don’t even have to open my eyes, I recognise you by your curves.*

*And do you like them?*

*I love them. A woman should have curves. I know the four of you look like teenage girls, but you are the only one with curves in all the right places.*

*Laughter. If I were an ordinary human I’d likely be as wide as I’m tall by now. I am nearly forty.*

*And you are shorter than the others. I guess that would add to the effect. But I love you just as you are.*

*Thank you George, you’re definitely a keeper.*

George washed, Phoebe fed him while the rest of his women shared the experience, then the non adults went next door while George had sex with all his women. Afterwards the girls came back in for a snack and a chat, though Andromeda sat on her mother’s lap making sleepy faces at everyone and sucking on a dried fig.

“You missed all the excitement today papa.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Ten of the girls you rescued are from two villages about three days journey from here. They’re all going home to visit their families.”

“Is anyone going with them?”

Helena looked uncertain. “Some of the women. I don’t know them though.”

“You probably don’t know them either George.” Erianthe said. “Philippos’ number nine, Elina, Petros’ number seven, Maria, and Timotheos’ number seven, Laura. They’ll stay with the girls, and bring some of them back in a week or two. Likely all of them within two months. Their families love them, but they have no idea what to do with a pregnant unmarried teenager. The girls are settling in here, like Helena is. They have seen enough to know they can be happy here.”

“Five are from your village, when we find their living relatives, we’ll take them to visit. Most likely in spring.” Soula added. “And surprise, the last one is half Turkish, but brought up to be Greek. She watched them rape and kill her mother. But unlike Helena, she is very bitter about life.”

“I imagine her mother was unmarried, and possibly disowned by her family. But she might have been loved and cherished, and the Turks killed them all. And then they wonder why we dislike them.”

“I know her. Sapphira, because she has blue eyes, she told me.” Helena said. “Her Turkish father had blue eyes, her mother told her. They lived with her grandparents, I think they all loved one another. But the Turks killed them, like they did in our village.”

“And sometime I wish I could find all the soldiers that do things like that, and tear their heads off.” George clenched his fists, then unclenched them. “Why kill people? Why rape and pillage? Sometimes I think this world is Hell. Ana told me she was better off in heaven.” *Well, the after life.*

“That’s right, you can see mama and talk with her. Have you seen her recently?”

“Not since we rescued you and brought you home. She knows you’re loved here. She also knows we survive death, so that’s one less thing for her to worry about.”

“I don’t think Sapphira knows that. That might be why she’s bitter.”

“Helena, since you know her, do you think we could help her?” Soula asked. “I am thinking of helping her feel better, perhaps finding her mother in the afterlife, and getting them to talk in dreams.”

“It has to be worth trying. Maybe she could even come and stay with me? Well, us really.”

“If we can help her, I can make a case for fostering her.”

“That would be good. Papa, what do you think?”

“Help her if we can. If you ladies think fostering her will help, then let’s organise it.”

“We need to be careful not to upset whoever is fostering her now.” Erianthe said. “Plus some may become jealous that you have three fosters and want four.”

“Four? Helena is not a foster, she’s my flesh and blood daughter.”

“What I mean is that some may be put out that you have so many children assigned. They may ask you to trade for Sapphira.”

“That I’ll not do. Is that how things work here? Ordinary people treated like chattels?”

“No, but it has happened in the past.”

“If she’s not good company,” Soula observed, “whoever has her now might consider letting her go.”

“That’s a point. Now, when are our classes starting?”

“Zehra said she is happy to start tonight, or whenever suits you. Melissa said she will learn during the day, Helena said she will learn with you.

“Your classes on medicine should wait, there might be as many as twenty people wanting to learn. We need to organise a room, perhaps another week?”

“All right. Helena, I didn’t realise you wanted to learn Turkish.”

“I don’t hate them. I realised that when we went to collect Sandor and Ender. I despise the ones who raped me or beat me. The others are mostly just stupid people who follow greedy pigs of rulers. They’ve been here for more than a hundred years and they still can’t speak Greek. I could despise them for that. Maria and some of the others thought they would benefit from learning Turkish. You’re going to learn Turkish, so we’ll learn together. You sleep during the day, we don’t spend enough time together. When you start your medical classes I’ll go along as well. I want you to be proud of me.”

“I am proud of you, Helena. I would like you to be proud of me one day.”

“I am, papa. They turned you into a monster, but you’ve fought it all the time. You haven’t given in. I won’t give in either. You made me realise that. I can look at what happened to me in either of two ways. Either God was punishing me for something, or the Devil is fighting to take my soul. Yours too. God allows Satan to test us, and he helps us fight the Devil. You are fighting evil, I can too, because the devil can’t touch my soul. But Satan wants me to curse God, he wants me to believe evil is God punishing us. We used to discuss that, and mama would get upset if she heard us. She thought I was too young. But I understood, you explained things simply so I could understand. Do you think we’ll ever go picking herbs again?”

“We’re working on that. Do you feel up to a class tonight? Soula, do you think Zehra would be happy to hold one tonight?”

Zehra was happy to conduct a class, and Sylvia and Artemis joined in.

$$ - return of girls to their village

\* \* \* \* \*

Eight days later, George awoke with Soula snuggled beside him. *If you listen carefully, you will hear a new voice.*

*Sapphira? There was talk of her coming to stay. So her foster mother relinquished her?*

*Yes. Two of the girls who returned to their village are on their way here. I can’t give you details, except they prefer it here. Sapphira’s foster mother has been promised both of them. I think they are sisters, and their current foster mothers do not want two. Nobody wants Sapphira, they say she’s a misery guts.*

*Sounds like there’s a little jealousy over fostering. ‘I don’t like the one I’ve been given, but you can’t have her unless I get a better one in return.’*

*Yes, there is a bit of that going on. Some women can be fickle.*

*So how is Sapphira? I haven’t seen her yet, though I know she has visited with the girls.*

*She cheers up somewhat when she talks with Helena, or Ariana and Chloe. Andromeda likes her, and Sapphira enjoys playing with her. I think just seeing three pregnant rape victims who do not look like they want to die or hide under a rock is making her re-evaluate how she feels. There’s a way to go, but she is less unhappy than she was.*

*That’s a start. Where is she sleeping?*

*Officially, she is sharing with Helena, but Sylvia and Artemis sleep there too. For that matter, so does Melissa on a regular basis. The dynamics have yet to be worked out, she is not ready for a lover. That may change soon, she will be here for your feeding. Sylvia and Artemis want her to share in the sex that happens after, but with them only. They want to include Helena as well. I’ve told them no, because it is dangerous.*

*Dangerous? I think they would have to include Ariana and Chloe as well.*

*I agree. The danger lies in turning them into human servants as pregnant thirteen year olds. They would always be pregnant, never able to give birth.*

*Yes. Something to be avoided. I suppose I should get up and wash?*

*An excellent idea. I’ll call the others in.*

Sapphira was a sad eyed young girl, slim, with long dark tresses, pale skin, and piercing blue eyes. When she was introduced to George before his feeding, she had averted her eyes, but thanked him for rescuing and healing her.

“The healing process is still happening, though you are physically healthy. Helena is a little further along than you are, but that’s because your foster mother had no idea how to treat you.”

Soula had commandeered a workshop where George could make his herbs and hold his medicine classes. Erianthe and Phoebe stayed to mind Andromeda, who was asleep, but everyone else, including the Helena and the other three girls, was there.

“We will work through my work book in order, because that’s the order I learned things. It’s a bit disordered; I did have index lists, but I lost them when our village was raided. You don’t have to make notes now, because you will work in pairs copying out my notes.”

“Erm, I can’t read.” Sapphira said hesitantly.

“We can fix that, starting tomorrow.” Soula said. “Everyone who lives here should be able to read and write.”

“I have to spend time writing my indexes again, you girls will do that in due course. The secret is to number each page.

“Now, let’s start. Herbs is a general term because they are mostly plant based. There are some minerals like salt, but some herbs you will recognise from cooking. For example, garlic is good for colds, Rosemary, sage, thyme is good for helping you get mucus out of your lungs.

“Preparation of herbs. Some herbs can be eaten raw, like garlic. Most benefit from heat to help extract the medicine. The most common way to prepare herbs is as a tea, chop the herbs up, pour boiling water on them, let them steep, strain off the liquid. The dose in this case would be one cup. You would normally prepare enough for one day.

“Fresh herbs are more potent, but I’m sure you all know herbs are seasonal. When they’re out of season, use dried. Some herbs need to be cooked like soup, again the dose will be one cup. Soups and teas won’t keep, you have to make them every day. If you want something that keeps, you make a tincture. This is concentrated, and normally you mix it with raki to preserve it. Different herbs have different needs when you make a tincture, I’ll cover this under individual herbs.

“Some herbs are poisonous, so you can’t eat them, but you can make a poultice or a rubbing oil. For example, Arnica is good for bruising and sore muscles, but it is poisonous. However, you can steep in it raki and then apply to the skin, or mix it in olive oil and massage with the oil.

“This was just an introduction, and everything I have mentioned will be covered in detail later. Tonight, we will look in detail at two herbs for pain relief. Poplar and willow. The medicinal parts of poplar are the young leaf buds when they are resinous, the bark of young branches. For willow, it is the bark of young branches. Now poplar buds, Helena knows this, are referred to in the bible as the Balm of Gilead. You may have heard of this. The young buds are best harvested in early spring, but if you can find new growth in summer, you can harvest that. The bark of poplar and willow must be harvested from young branches, new growth, but can be harvested if the sap is flowing. ...”

George continued talking for a time, talking about preparation, dosages for different ailments, and taking questions. He moved on to the poppy plant, saying “There is a more potent herb for pain relief, the poppy. Medicinal parts are the young seeds and the sap that flows from the seed pod. Unlike poplar, poppy seed or juice tends to put you to sleep.” Again he discussed collecting, preparation and medicinal doses.

Eventually, as he was winding down, Sapphira asked, “Are we supposed to remember everything you said?”

George smiled. “Eventually, you will be able to remember most of it. We can’t remember everything, and this is why we write things down. But before writing was invented, we would have to organise things so you could remember everything. You will find things easier when you learn to read and write. We’ll also get into practical work once we can find some viable herbs.”

“I know where there are some poplars growing.” Artemis said. ‘Perhaps we can collect some bark tomorrow?”

“Good idea. Take Helena with you, she knows what to look for.”

The others left, Helena hung back, Sapphira with her; Soula was helping George tidy up.

“Soula, are you George’s wife?” Sapphira asked.

“No, George’s wife was raped and murdered by the Turks when they kidnapped Helena. I saved George’s life when the devil tried to take him. I am his principal human servant.”

“I know about human servants, but I didn’t know you saved his life.”

Soula sat, indicating to the girls to sit. George pulled up a chair and sat on it reversed, his arms over the back.

“You know George is a vrykolakas, and must drink blood?”

“Yes, you explained that before, when you fed him this evening.”

“Mmm, did you foster mother explain about human servants and how we keep our monsters tame?”

“No. Well, she might have, I might not have been listening. She wasn’t very nice to me.”

“We know. That’s why we were able to take you away from her. Helena asked for you to be with her, but it took a while.”

“Helena was the only one who was friendly to me when I was captured. Everyone else was nasty because I was part Turkish. I hoped I could go with her, but they split us up. No one listened to me.”

“We listened to Helena. Then we had to convince others it was best for you. Besides, Sylvia, Athena, Artemis and Phoebe are half Greek, half Turkish. We brought them up to be Greek.

“Now, when the devil turns a man into a vrykolakas, they die; then on the third day about half rise again as a monster while the other half stay dead. Those ones have their souls, the ones that rise have to fight the devil for them. Without our help, the vrykolakas will be a ravenous beast, drinking the blood of every person it comes across, and killing them. I pulled George back from the brink, and we took his soul with us. That meant I became his principal human servant. But he needs more to anchor him, so I brought in Erianthe, Sylvia, Athena, Artemis and Phoebe. Melissa is now fifteen, and Phoebe’s foster daughter, her own daughter is now two, and weaned. She is old enough to be apprenticed as a human servant, and she chose to stay with George. Sapphira, you and Helena will also have a choice when you are fifteen. Most girls choose to become a human servant, but some choose to return home, like your mother. That was why you were born away from our community. We are hoping you will stay with us.”

“Me too, I like it here, I think; and Helena’s here. I’m not sure what you meant about anchoring George. You do that to a boat.” There was puzzlement on the girl’s face.

“Ah, sorry. I mean anchoring him to his humanity, so it follows him around. If George didn’t have his women, he would lose his humanity and become the monster. He would wake starving and every time he fed he would commit murder, a great evil. His women give him the gift of life, the gift of blood. We do it willingly, we do it with love, and no one dies. There is no sin when we feed George.” Sapphira nodded.

“Also, there is a dark cloud that swirls around him, seeking to possess him. We women are like bright lights that drive the darkness back. We are his shield, we are between him and the dark cloud. One is not enough, George has six of us, plus Melissa who is the apprentice. We will also ask Ariana and Chloe when they are fifteen if they wish to apprentice with us. Helena also, when she’s old enough. If you stay with us, then we will ask you as well.”

“I like it here, though I don’t know anyone well except for Helena. If she wants to apprentice, then I will too.”

“There will be plenty of time to get to know us, and to learn what is involved in being a human servant. How old are you now?”

“Fourteen and two months. Why?”

“Well, traditionally You’d be apprenticed after your fifteenth birthday, but if you’re pregnant you have to wait until you’ve weaned the baby.”

“I could be, I’m three weeks overdue.”

“Most girls we rescue are. Ariana and Chloe are nearly due, Helena is probably a week ahead of you. Andromeda will have four siblings.”

“Oh yes, the two year old.”

“It will be great to have some children running around.” George said. “Makes the place more like a home and family.”

“I don’t know if I want to have a baby right now.”

“I was like that when I found out.” Helena said. The two girls started talking to each other.

“I didn’t know you knew about the black cloud.” George said to Soula.

“Oh George, I pulled you out of that cloud during your fever dream. It followed us everywhere, waiting for me to tire. The first thing I did when you woke was bring in reinforcements in the form of Erianthe. And then each day I added another one. With six experienced human servants we have just enough. I would like more, and we will take on as many apprentices as we can. Within a few years they will be experienced.”

“What’s this black cloud you mentioned?” Helena asked.

“We’re not sure, but we know it wants George’s soul. That means it’s evil.”

“And enough human servants keeps it away? Then Sapphira, you have to become papa’s human servant, and so do I.”

“All in good time.” Soula replied. “George is safe for now, and we have plans to keep him safe.”

“But he will live a long time, won’t he?” Helena asked.

“Yes, but so will we. We don’t know how long George can live, but so far we can live as long as any vrykolakas we know of.”

“How long are we talking about?” Sapphira asked.

“Maria, whom you met at the above ground village, is over two hundred years old. She could be considerably older. Philippos said she was nearly two hundred when he was turned, according to her husband. That was, let’s see, Lydia’s one hundred and sixty, and Philippos is about ten years older. Wow, at least three hundred and seventy. No wonder she survived her husband.”

“I don’t understand.” Sapphira said.

“She was her husband’s only human servant. Normally when there’s one or two, they die when their vrykolakas dies. She survived. I make sure all our human servants are bonded to each other as well as George, so all of us should survive his death. But there are no guarantees. Maybe the die so they can save his soul from the black cloud.”

Helena and Sapphira seemed to be enthralled. Soula continued, “I came here almost seventy years ago, like you two, young and pregnant. My son Leon became a vrykolakas, he died twelve years ago. His soul was saved, he visited me to tell me he was free. He went on to the afterlife. I haven’t seen him for some time. One of his human servants died when he died, she was with him when he visited. I sometimes wonder how they are doing.”

“He’s never been back? Maybe he’s busy, like Ana. Maybe they set up home somewhere in the afterlife.” George suggested.

“That’s sweet.” Helena commented.

“Yes, they hinted at that. But I think they went exploring, that’s like Leon. But that gives me confidence that we can, and have, saved your soul George. We just need to keep it safe until then.”

“I wonder how you keep a soul safe? After all, you can’t just put it in a jewellery box.” Sapphira speculated aloud.

“Well, you encourage it to do good works.” Helena suggested.

“From my limited experience, when it is the soul of a vrykolakas, you tie it to several human servants, who pull it back from the abyss, and keep the dark cloud from seizing it. From the way Elena explained it, she died saving Leon’s soul, though she did not say that.”

“What did she say?” George asked.

“That she felt Leon die, they all did, and there was a persistent tugging on her. She knew Leon needed her, and she let the tugging take her. The next thing was like a dream. She was facing off against the black cloud, Leon was hugging her waist and sheltering behind her, and she could see several bright points of light that we think were her sister human servants.

“She fought against the cloud until it retreated, and then an old man in strange robes appeared. He told her it wasn’t safe where they were and he would lead her to the afterlife. They felt he was trustworthy, so she and Leon followed him. He took them to a village where her grandmother was, and several others whom she knew but were dead. They were going to set up house there, and look around.” Soula’s eyes were distant as she remembered. “Leon said there were many villages around a large town with a hospital and a school. I think he meant university. Yes, that’s about all they said, and they haven’t been back to visit since. I don’t even know anything about the villages.”

“I wonder who the old man was?” Sapphira asked.

“St. Peter. He lets people into heaven.” Helena said.

“That’s what the priests tell us.” Soula said. “But that doesn’t mean he has to be. The priests haven’t returned from the realm of the dead to tell us what it’s like. Leon did, so did Elena and Ana, George’s wife. Uh, your mama.”

Sapphira looked surprised, almost shocked. “Are you saying that priests lie to us?”

“Some do, but that’s a different issue.” George said.

“I’m not saying they lie, only that they tell us what they’ve been taught. They haven’t experienced it for themselves.” Soula said. “And when something is passed down from generation to generation without understanding it becomes changed, but no one realises.”

“I just didn’t picture heaven looking like here, with villages and towns.”

“That’s what the dead spirits tell us. I understand why Leon wanted to explore. Is this all there is to the afterlife? Or is there much more out there?”

“Well I think that the heaven the priests tell is about must be out there somewhere.” Helena stated. “Everyone who has told us what they saw only saw a small part of it.”

“Exactly. So the old man may not have been St. Peter, but someone else who takes people to one particular area of heaven.”

“Now you’ve explained that, it makes sense. But why are there different places?”

“We don’t know that. That’s a question for God.”

“Didn’t Jesus say ‘In my father’s house there are many mansions?’ Maybe the different places are what that sentence means.” George suggested. “Heaven is probably reserved for the saints. The rest of us have to make do with the villages and towns.”

In the end they agreed to leave it like that.

$$ - Sapphira moves in

Later: George, Soula and Helena talk

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A week went by, shading into a second. Autumn was fading into winter. George woke to find Artemis curled against him, head on his chest, watching his face. “Good evening George. I can tell when you are about to wake, the dark cloud surges forward, and we have to beat it back like a disobedient dog. Do you remember your dreams?”

“Good morning Artemis. I always feel privileged when I find you in my bed. And thank you for beating the dark cloud back.” He looked at her in amusement. “Seriously, I know it’s your duty, but I think deep down you like me.”

“Don’t assume too much.” She matched his grin. “You’re not a man, you’re a monster, I can love you, do love you. Yes, you are privileged, I wouldn’t do this for any man, wouldn’t do this for most monsters. Now seriously, do you remember your dreams?”

George hugged her gently. “You know I love you. I am trying to remember my dreams.”

“Don’t try, let it creep up on you. I know you love me, I can feel some of your feelings, you can’t lie to me. And I know you love your other women just as much, and your daughter. Men can’t do that, it takes a woman.” Her face was close enough to kiss. Artemis eased forwards and kissed his nose. “There, that’s because you’re special.”

“Thanks. I’ve just remembered what I dreamed. It was a gloomy hall, stone I think, lit by flickering flames. There were a number of people there, dressed like ragged beggars, drinking from old fashioned horns. Some of the drinking horns changed shape, turning into hollow sculls or small statues. and there was a man dressed in black, with an old fashioned travelling cloak. He was gloating that he would have Helena’s first born, a boy.” George shook his head.

“I picked up some of that. We can’t let the man in black get away with it. He’s something like the personification of the dark cloud. We’ll talk with the others later. In the meantime, Ariana has given birth to a healthy baby girl. It’s going to be somewhat noisier for a while.”

“That’s good news. How are they both doing? That obviously didn’t take long.”

“So I have been told. Maria is a fine midwife, and knows how to encourage the baby to be born. Ariana is a bit sore, but otherwise in good health. Maria says she will be fine tomorrow. Now that you have remembered your dream, I should feed you.”

Ariana and Chloe were absent from the feeding, but both Helena and Sapphira were present. The two talked babies with Melissa; it seemed they were discovering the excitement a baby could bring.

Late that evening Maria, Daphne, Zoe and Zenobia dropped in to check on young mother and baby. Zoe and Zenobia remained talking with Ariana and Chloe, while Maria and Daphne had coffee with Soula, George, Artemis, Sylvia, Helena and Sapphira.

“Soula, you wanted to talk about the man in black.” Maria said as they sipped their coffee.

Helena’s ears pricked up. “Who’s he?”

“We’ll get to that.” Maria looked expectantly at Soula. “Soula, why do you want to talk about him?”

“George had a dream.”

George recounted his dream, with commentary by Artemis. Helena interjected once “Nobody is taking my baby! I’ll kill him!”

“Can he be killed?” George asked.

“Maybe not. I met him once, over a hundred years ago.” Maria said flatly. “He made me feel sick to my stomach. He said he was the father of all vrykolakes. Artemis is right, he is the personification of the black cloud. The time I met him, there was a cloud of darkness in one corner of what is now our communal hall. He walked out of it, and when he went, it cloaked him and vanished. He spoke to my husband mostly. Daphne was wearing a blessed cross, and he touched it. Tell them what happened Daphne.”

“The cross was inside my bodice, but he sensed it. He said something like ‘Don’t think that can protect you.’ He put his hand on my bodice above the cross, and it burned me.” She was unlacing her bodice as she spoke. “I slapped his hand away and leaped back, but I still have the scar. I was a human servant for thirty something years, and I have a scar.”

Daphne’s bodice fell open, revealing a cross branded into her chest between her breasts. It had healed the way a brand does, leaving a deep scar. “It has looked that way ever since, but it healed human slow. We don’t know what he is, but we think he is a demon.”

“Soula, I know you think I know everything, but I don’t.” Maria stated. “He scares me, and he is evil. I started to tell him off, and he slapped me so hard I flew across the room. Half my teeth fell out and he broke my jaw. I had enough sense to hold my jaw in place, and it healed.”

“At least you healed.” Daphne complained. “Even your teeth grew back. The man in black is vicious, evil, and is manipulating all of us to serve his own ends. If he wants Helena’s baby, I don’t know what we can do to stop him. He scares me too.”

“We ask God and Jesus to help us. St Maria as well.” Soula answered. “Demon he may be, but he still has to obey God’s orders. We must start a prayer group and pray for Helena’s baby.”

Maria looked unconvinced, but said “It may do some good. I am leaving for Athens after Chloe gives birth. The snows sometimes close the roads of late. The winters are becoming colder I swear. For most of my life we didn’t even get snow.”

“I remember when I came here there was the occasional dusting of snow.” Soula said. “Now there is too much sometimes.”

“I’ve never seen snow.” Helena exclaimed.

“Neither have I.” Sapphira added.

“Nor I.” George added. “Our village is lower down, though I have seen snow up this way. Is there nothing else we can do about the man in black?”

“Asking help from God, Jesus and Maria would be more potent than anything else.” Maria said.

“George, your power may come from him. We keep the black cloud at bay, our power must come from God.” Soula explained. “I would say if we pray, our prayers will be answered. We rescued Helena with God’s help, trust that we can save Helena’s child with God’s help.”

There seemed to be little more to say on the subject of the man in black. George felt helpless, but resolved to be guided by his women. “At least we know more than we did.”

“It’s months before Helena gives birth.” Soula said. “We prepare and get on with our lives.”

$$ - Ariana gives birth to Zenobia. The man in black

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Three days later George woke with with Phoebe snuggled against him. She was feigning sleep until he moved. “Good evening George, how did you sleep?”

“Well, I think. No dreams of the man in black, at least none I remember. How are you?”

“Good, though perhaps a little bored. The high points of my day include daily sex and minding Andromeda. I work at copying your text; otherwise the day passes with daily chores and gossip. I think I would like you to go to Athens; Melissa and I will both go with you.”

“I think you will all wind up going with me. It will be quite different from here.”

“I am looking forward to that. Oh yeah, today’s news is that five of the girls returned from their village. That’s seven now. I believe they will visit their relatives again, but obviously some of the villagers are small minded and disapproved of single pregnant women.”

“Soula was saying that would happen. But that means the rest are staying.”

“For now. The two women who returned them will now return and interview each girl that stayed to ensure they are not being pressured into staying. There have been cases where a pregnant girl is forced to take herbs to cause an abortion, then forced to marry some old grandpa. We intervene when things like that happen, or are planned to happen. They are better off here. We let the girl make her choice, then enforce it.”

“I hadn’t realised.”

“Strong women.” Phoebe laughed. “We look after our little sisters even when they return to their home village. Anyway, time I fed you. Everyone is waiting impatiently for sex.”

$$ - return of five girls

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$$ - 3 days later. Sylvia

George woke suddenly, ugly dark dreams falling away. Sylvia was snuggled against him, a look of relief on her face.

“George, you were having a nightmare. I couldn’t pull you out.”

“The man in black was taunting me. He told me I could run but I could never hide. He said he would take each of you from me, one by one.”

“We must tell Soula. We have to protect all of us, and I am not sure how.” She sighed. “On a happier note, we have another addition to our family. Chloe has given birth to a healthy girl.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. I’ll have a look at her later. How is Helena, and Sapphira?” George added Sapphira as an afterthought.

“Helena is fine, happily pregnant and enjoying sex with most of us. Sapphira and Helena like each other, they are becoming friends. We hope one day they will become lovers. And we hope that once that is accomplished, Sapphira will become our lover. I mean there are five of us who are Helena’s lovers.”

George mentally raised an eyebrow, but knew that her female friends were part of what kept Helena happy. And Sylvia was right, that might help Sapphira. “Play it slowly. What about Ariana and Chloe? I’d have thought they were likely friends for Helena.”

“Artemis and I seduced the two of them together. Occasionally they get together with us, but they share a bed and keep each other satisfied. Different people like different people. Casual sex is fine with a friend, but lovers implies love for each other. Being lovers is far more fulfilling than casual sex.”

“Yes, I agree. I should get up so you can feed me, and we can get on with the evening.”

$$ - Chloe gives birth to Zoe

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Small babies wake at odd times during the night, and George was happy to play with them or change them when they did. Little Zenobia was brown haired and blue eyed, resembling her mother Ariana. Little Zoe was dark haired with hazel eyes, countering Chloe’s blue eyes. He was also beginning to get to know both Ariana and Chloe better.

At least one of his women was awake when he was awake, sometimes two. Artemis was amused the first time she saw him. “The big bad monster, rocking little Zoe to sleep, and singing a lullaby to Zenobia. You’re a natural at this, George.”

“Well, I had three of my own. I always helped Ana however she needed. I may not be able to feed them, but I can comfort them and play with them and get them to sleep. And I’m inured to their crying, just pick them up and comfort them and see what they need.”

Soula entered, and smiled at him. “You look happy, George, something we’ve not seen before.”

“I finally have a family again. Children make a home out of a house. I don’t have to struggle with why things happened to me, or ponder everything I’ve lost. Right now, my purpose is comforting these two. I can do that, and it makes me happy. Nothing else is important.”

Later that night, Philippos called people together for an announcement. “We have decided to send Matthaios and his family to Athens as our envoy. They will travel together with Maria and her party. Matthaios will be there for an initial two years. We will appoint someone else if he desires to return, and we will reappoint him if he requests to stay. Maria will stay there as long as she deems appropriate. She will also be advising Matthaios when required. Maria’s principal concern is formation of a council that extends to all communities of vrykolakes. This is a task that could easily take decades. They will leave next week.”

$$ - Departure for Athens (Maria, and retinue), Matthaios

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Autumn turned to winter, and snows covered the higher areas. Helena took George outside in the evening to walk around in the snow, an experience she had not had before

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Spring came, and with it Helena’s and Sapphira’s bellies grew big. Daphne returned from Athens with two of Matthaios’ women. Daphne cam to see George, Helena and Sapphira.

“Maria promised to attend your birthing, but she is unable to return at present. She asked me to supervise. I think the two of you will give birth within the next month, and only a few days apart.”

Sylvia laughed. “Work forward nine months from when they went into the Turks’ brothel. That makes them due the end of this month.”

George was excluded from Helena’s birthing chamber, but a few hours later she presented him with a beautiful boy. “I think I will call him Georgios.”

Soula, Sylvia and Artemis all agreed. George demurred.

“Papa, I have no husband, I do not know who is his father. I am not naming him for any Turk. There is one man in my life who has helped me through all my troubles, and who has helped me become the mother I now am. I will name my baby after him.”

Soula smiled. “Well said. George, you should know by now to do what your women advise you to do.”

Resigned, George said “Thank you Helena. I can be stupid at times.”

Three days later, Sapphira gave birth to a baby girl she named Iolanthe. She looked like her mother

$$ - Helena gives birth to Georgios, Sapphira gives birth to Iolanthe

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Christmas was approaching, and with it came the snows. One particular dull, louring day, late afternoon, Helena, Sapphira and Soula led George out of the cave.

“The sun’s still above the horizon. Is this safe?”

“Look at the clouds. It will start snowing again soon.” Soula remarked. “You should be perfectly safe out here.”

The others were dressed in heavy warm clothes, George was still dressed in light clothes, though they covered most of his body, including leather gloves, a scarf and a broad brimmed hat. He ventured cautiously away from the area that would be in shade should the sun poke through, out into the potentially sunny area.

“This is weird. I don’t feel cold or hot. I know where the sun is, I know it could shine on me, but there is no sense of danger.”

Soula balled up some snow and threw it at him, laughing. A moment later the four of them were embroiled in a snowball fight.

A figure walked out from the trees. It was dressed in an archaic style, and all in black. George took stock of the man. Black bucket topped boots, a long loose overcoat the fell to the mid calves, flapping open to reveal a black coat, more fitted, that fell to his knees. There was a loose black scarf, a cropped black beard, shoulder length black hair, and a tri-cornered hat with a black feather in it. The man even wore black leather gloves. From the way his overcoat moved as he walked, there was a curved sword underneath. He carried no luggage, seeming to be out walking.

Helena dropped her snowball and ran to George. Sapphira ran to Soula, who put an arm around the girl and joined George.

George greeted the man as he approached their group, adding “Where did you walk from? It’s a cold day for a walk.”

“I have walked a long way.” The man stopped near them. “But we do not feel the cold. Such a touching family group. George, Soula, Helena and Sapphira. See, I know each and every one of you. I am here to visit Philippos. I am Vir in Nigrum, you may have heard of me.”

George’s face went hard. “The man in black. We have heard of you.”

Helena gave a little shriek. Sapphira hid behind Soula.

“Should we conduct you to Philippos? Or would you prefer to go by yourself?” Soula asked matter of factly.

“I know my way around. Thank you. Oh, Helena, your son is far too young. He should be at least nineteen, a man, before he is turned. Good day.” With that he walked towards the cave entrance.

“You can’t have him!” She yelled at his retreating back.

George looked toward the man, then at the way he had come. “He hasn’t left any tracks in the snow. How does he do that?”

“Magic?” Soula suggested. “He’s very powerful. Helena, stop fretting. Georgios is safe for now.”

The happy mood was lost, and they returned to their lodgings.

The next evening, Philippos called a meeting. It was held in the open space near where Philippos lived, and had the advantage of space for everyone.

“Some of you may know we had a visit yesterday from the Man in Black. He is possibly the father of all vrykolakes, and he has our interests at heart. He approves of the formation of a council of elders across Europe to ensure that all of us conform. He left this morning for Athens, where he will talk with the Master of Athens.”

“Is he a day walker?” George didn’t recognise the voice, but he thought it was one of the women from the above ground village.

“Yes, he is. He is obviously very old, and very powerful. Now, the reason I called all of you together is that he issued a couple of instructions, and all of you need to hear them.

“First - no one, and I repeat, no one is to turn any human against their will. A human must ask to be turned. He said that all of us who have been turned against our wills cause disharmony to him. He refused to go into detail, but he will come down very hard on anyone who turns someone by force in the future.”

“Is that because God is troubling him?” It was the same woman as before - Magdalena from the above ground village. “God steps in to protect the soul of those who are blood raped. I don’t wonder that disturbs his peace.”

“Most of us here know about the black cloud, and know that it is held at bay.” Philippos responded. “You women play an active role in that. That may well be what he meant, but as I said, he refused to go into details. So, you have been warned, all of you. If you blood rape someone, and force them to become a vrykolakas, I will not protect you from his wrath.

“The second is that he does not want more than six human servants per vrykolakas. We all have more than that. He agreed that those of us who were turned against our wills may have more than six, so we will continue with as many women as is practical.”

“That’s all of us, I think.” Petros noted. “Only the original bandits were willing converts, and they are all dead.”

“They all lost their souls.” Magdalena said. “You men seem to keep them. That’s how we know that God is protecting you. Of course that riles the man in black. Don’t make any more vrykolakes, even if someone begs you to. That imperils your soul.”

“That means my son is safe.” Helena exclaimed to George and Soula.

“Yes.” Soula said. “There is still a danger from a stranger vrykolakas who might blood rape him, but the man in black won’t be coming for him after all. That is good.”

Back home, Helena asked, “Why would the man in black come here today to say he doesn’t want unwilling vrykolakes? I don’t understand. I mean I think I know, but I’m not sure.”

“You are not a human servant.” Soula said gently. “You haven’t seen the black cloud that stalks a vrykolakas. A few human servants seem to be able to keep that cloud at bay. A few more human servants and the vrykolakas becomes a force for good, like your father. But that doesn’t seem to happen with a willing vrykolakas. According to Maria, the original bandits were willing converts. Maria’s group were the only ones who became human servants to the bandits. After all, they were the bandits’ wives or girlfriends. If Magdalena says they all lost their souls, and that God is helping our menfolk, then I believe her. That is obviously an irritant to the man in black. He has monsters and he can’t control them or take their souls.”

“He must be a demon. Why else would he want souls?”

“To me, the important point is that we lose our souls by choosing evil.” George offered. “If we did not make a choice, then He won’t punish us for becoming monsters. He will judge us by what we choose to do.”

$$ - Visit by the man in black

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Athens

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