Synopsis

George and family go to Athens as envoy. 10 years have passed. Philippos suggests it as a way to avoid the man in black, or having Georgios turned at 17.

Athens is an interesting city. It was occupied by the Ottomans in 1453. In answer to the prayers of its inhabitants, Venice took possession of it in 1687, but the rescuing Christian overlords proved to be even worse than the Ottomans, who took it back in 1688. there was an Ottoman governor, but Greeks were playing important rolls in the administration. One of those is Palomedes, the Master of Athens.

Palomedes played a behind the scenes role in driving out the Venetians, and also in having Greek participation in the administration.

George lives in a three story house with doctor’s rooms and dispensary at the bottom left. Those working there include Soula, Helena, Phoebe and Melissa. Erianthe, Sylvia, and Chloe are midwives.

George’s household is now George’s household is now 17, 11 women and 5 children :

- Erianthe

- Athena

- Phoebe

- Melissa

- Soula

- Sylvia

- Artemis

- Ariana

- Chloe

- Sapphira

- Helena

children

- Andromeda

- Zoe

- Zenobia

- Georgios

- Iolanthe

George now sleeps for three hours around midday, and works as a physician.

The Turkish governor of Athens is Mustafa ali Bey

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The coach drew up outside a three story residence of whitewashed brick. Its shutters were closed against the afternoon heat, and there were two doors, one on either side of the residence. The left door sported a sign written in Greek that proclaimed Doctor Podalirios, a renowned physician, could be consulted within. The sign also featured a picture of the rod of Asklepios - a staff entwined by a single serpent, the symbol of ancient Greek physicians.

A young man in black and white livery alighted from the coach and entered through the left door. A bell rang, and a young woman appeared. She was tall and slender, with long blonde hair and hazel eyes; pure Greek from the high lands. “How may I help you?”

“The Master of Athens sent me.” The young man displayed a signet ring on his right hand. “Is your master awake? He must come immediately. If not, then Soula must come. It’s a matter of life and death.”

“Melissa, send him through.” Soula’s voice rang out.

Melissa pulled aside a curtain behind her and gestured for the man to go through. She followed him.

Soula was seated in a chair beside a small table. Soula was in her mid twenties, with milky skin and blue grey eyes. Her long red hair was caught in a single braid.

“Argos, will you take some wine with water? George is dressing, we will both accompany you. What is the situation?”

Argos took the proffered glass, sipped. “I have little information. There is something wrong with the governor’s daughter, she might be dying, and she might have been poisoned. My master awaits in the coach, he will brief you when you join him.”

George appeared, a slim thirty something with shoulder length black hair, dark eyes, two days of stubble, and clad head to foot in black leather. He scooped up a tankard of wine with water and drank it off. “We’d best not keep him waiting. Soula, are you ready?”

“Yes.” She hefted two leather satchels. “And both bags are packed. Your hat and dark glasses are here.”

George carefully put the dark glasses - more leather goggles with smoked glass lenses, over his eyes, and clapped the broad brimmed hat on his head. “Lets go. Lead the way, Argos.”

Outside Argos unfurled a parasol for George, though it wasn’t strictly necessary. He handed Soula into the carriage, followed by their bags, then held the parasol for George while he climbed into the carriage.

George found himself sitting backwards facing Palomedes and Soula. Palomedes was dressed in black leather. His skin was pale, denoting his true Greek heritage, his hair and Elizabethan beard were red, and his eyes pale blue. “I’m glad you could make it George.”

“Argos said something about the governor’s daughter being ill, possibly poisoned.”

“Yes. The governor has arranged a marriage with a more prestigious noble house. Now she has fallen gravely ill. That much is true. The governor has enemies who do not want the marriage to proceed. Thus poison is suspected. I believe the marriage will be favourable to us Greeks. I want you to cure her, but we need to identify who is behind this. I will warn them personally.”

“If the poison is too far advanced saving her will be difficult. I might need you to lend some of your power. We will do our best.”

The coach was speeding up as they spoke, the four horses stretching out into a gallop. “You should hang on George. This will be bumpy.”

George peered through the small glass pane that showed their forward direction. The street directly ahead was empty, while further along the throng of people was fleeing in absolute terror, clearing carts and stalls out of their path as they went. “What are you making them see?”

“I am making them feel terror. Death and Satan have come for their souls.”

“Flying would be quicker ...” Soula began, “but we’d be exposed to the sun.”

“Yes, that could be deadly. We also need to arrive in the coach to avoid too many questions.” Palomedes laughed. “I just realised that I might be able lift the coach and horses, but that might spook the horses. Hmm, I might experiment with that. We should be at the governor’s palace within five minutes. I will encourage the servants to run, but they will be human slow. We need the governor to give us permission to see his daughter.”

“I want to see her room. I want to know what she ate and drank today. I will have more to say when I examine her.”

The coach was slowing, though it took the turn into the grounds of the governor’s palace at break neck speed, picking up again to a full gallop along the sweeping drive. “The governor is waiting at the door. Argos, I think we should slow.”

George peered through the small window again. Argos was standing crouched on the driver’s seat, bouncing and swaying, controlling the four horses with his mind.

The four slowed as one, a remarkable feat, while Argos applied his considerable strength to the brakes. They stopped alongside the four waiting men. The governor stood out as a richly dressed forty something, his heavy black beard neatly trimmed, and his dark eyes and long nose reminding George of an eagle. The governor wore red trousers and a green jacket with gold buttons and military insignia, the other three were more plainly dressed in white trousers and shirts, and red and green jackets. Servants George judged.

The governor opened the carriage door as soon as it stopped. “Palomedes, have you brought your physician?”

“Mustafa, I have. This is Dr Podalirios and his wife Dr Soula, should you require that only a woman should see or touch her.”

“I want her saved, Allah willing.”

“May we examine your daughter, Bey Mustafa?” George asked.

“Of course. Follow me.” The governor was surprised to find himself breaking into a run, and further surprised that the Greeks kept up with him.

The girl lay still in a dimly lit room. A woman whom George assumed was her mother sat by her side, crying and bathing her head. George and Soula hurried to the girl’s side. Soula used her mind power to compel the woman to stand and walk a little away from them.

“Is she ... ?” The governor asked.

George was looking into the girl’s eye. “She has a pulse, and is breathing. We have come in time.” He bent to sniff her breath.

“What is wrong with her? Will she recover?”

A convulsion wracked the girl’s body as George poured healing energy into her. She fell still. “She has been poisoned with belladonna. Soula, prepare the antidote.” *We don’t have any, and she’s too far gone. Use tincture of gentian, ten drops in ten mills of water.* George added via telepathy.

Soula set to work while George poured more healing into the girl. Another convulsion wracked her and this time she cried out.

Palomedes put an arm about the governor. “Mustafa, you and I should prey to God, and let the physicians work.”

Soula dripped the medicine between the girl’s lips while George continued with his healing energy. The girl shuddered and shook, crying out from time to time. Ten minutes passed, then fifteen, before she breathed deeply, then sighed. “Ugh, what’s that awful taste in my mouth?”

Soula held a cup of water for her to rinse her mouth. The mother approached, but seemed content to stare at her daughter, a look of relief on her face.

“She is weak, and should rest.” George announced. “But she will make a full recovery. Bey Mustafa, we need to talk about how this might have happened.”

“Whoever did this will try again.” Palomedes added. “Soula, would you instruct her mother in her needs?”

Mustafa was becoming agitated. “How could someone have poisoned her? Who could have done it?”

“I will question the kitchen staff.” George volunteered. “Belladonna is a small, bluish berry that is sweet to taste. There is always the possibility that someone picked them innocently. Five to ten berries will kill a child, ten to twenty will kill an adult. A very small dose will dilate the pupil of the eye, enabling a physician to diagnose certain diseases. Women sometimes use it for the same reason, to make their eyes appear larger and more seductive. So it is possible for a poisoner to buy it in liquid form, and pour it over food or into drink, to poison someone. We need to find out what she ate and drank between two and three hours ago. I must leave it to you lords to find the person responsible.”

“Thank you, doctor. I will leave you to your questioning.” Palomedes, Master vampire of Athens, used his considerable power to calm both the mother and the governor. Mustafa my friend, we must discuss how to stop this from happening again, and which of your enemies might have tried this.”

“Of course Palomedes. Let us go to one of the meeting rooms. I have enemies who would kill to destroy this marriage.” Palomedes and Mustafa left the bedroom.

Soula turned to him. “She has eaten no berries today, but a little over two hours ago she drank a sweet fruit juice that she could not identify. I will help question the kitchen staff.”

The girl’s mother rang a small bell, and when a serving woman appeared, said to her in Greek “Conduct these nobles to the kitchen. They will question the kitchen staff.”

As the woman led them away, Soula asked, “You’re Greek? Are you a slave?”

The woman was about thirty. “I am Greek, I am employed as a servant, a lady’s maid. I also speak Turkish fairly well, sir.”

Soula, as George’s principle human servant, possessed similar powers to him. She captured the woman’s mind as they walked. “What is your name?”

“Maria sir.”

“Did you bring the girl a jug of fruit juice?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you touch the drink in any way? Did you add anything to it?”

“No. I was sent to the kitchen to fetch a pitcher of juice. I had to wait while the girl made it. She used fresh berries and other fruit from a basket in the pantry. She mashed the berries and fruit, strained them through muslin cloth, poured the bowl into the jug, and I took it too her. The kitchen hand tasted the juice, I did not.”

“Thank you. You will forget you have had this conversation.” Soula released the woman’s mind.

They entered the kitchen. Soula asked “Where is the girl who makes up the juice for the governor’s daughter?”

No one seemed to know. Soula turned to the servant who had led them here. “You may go. The rest of you, gather around, I want to ask you some questions.”

George let his senses stretch out. He could feel every living person in the mansion, could call them to him if he had a mind to. Where was the servant who made the juice? He touched lightly on the minds around him. Oooh. There was one mind that was ill, weak, possibly dying. Where?

Unerringly, George pushed open the pantry door, walked through the darkness to a corner near some shelves. A young girl was huddled on the floor, barely conscious.

*What ails you child?* George said mind to mind.

*I cannot move. Am I dying? I don’t feel well.*

*I am a physician, I can heal you.* George touched her face, poured his power into her. *Did you eat some berries? Bluish red in colour? How many did you put into the juice?*

*I found three bunches of ripe bluish berries in the pantry, and I ate three of the berries. They were sweet, I put one bunch into the juice I made. Why?*

*The berries are poisonous, and they made you ill. They also made the governor’s daughter ill. How do you feel now?*

*Much better, I can move. Will I get into trouble?*

*No, you weren’t to know the berries were poison. Someone put them there deliberately. Can you stand up? Show me where the remaining berries are.*

The girl led him to a shelf with a basket of berries and fruit. “This is the basket I made up from the fruit I found. These are the berries.” She said in Greek. George picked up the remaining bunches and put them in his pocket.

“Over here is where most of the fruit is. I usually pick through it to find things to use for Durriye’s juice. The three bunches were sitting here, on top of the pomegranates.”

“What’s your name? I’m George.”

“I’m Cassa.”

George led Cassa over to Soula. “Does anyone recognise these berries? Did anyone pick them, or purchase them from the market?”

No one had seen the berries before, and George could see that each person was telling the truth.

“Someone must have brought them here deliberately and left them where Cassa would find them.” Soula said to George. “Do any of you remember someone coming into the kitchen today? Someone who wouldn’t normally be here?”

There had been a couple of men come into the kitchen with deliveries, but no one could remember faces, or what they delivered. “Special deliveries should go to the head cook, that’s me.” One woman said. “But that is usually fish and fowl, or spices which are expensive. Fruit and vegetables are often left in the pantry. I have been busy this morning organising breakfast and lunch. The fowl are still alive, so they are in a holding cage, and the fish are still in a vat of sea water outside. That’s the only way to keep them fresh for the evening meal.”

George and Soula asked a few more questions, but gained little further information.

“Let’s tell Palomedes what we know.”

“These are belladonna berries.” George held aloft a short branch sparsely covered with blue-black berries. “Someone left three of these branches with the berries and fruit intended for your daughter’s juice. The head cook and two assistants go to the market every morning for provisions. None of them remember seeing these berries. No one seems to have visited the pantry who shouldn’t, yet someone placed these in the basket. I believe that person was an agent of your enemy, or one of your enemies, which was why no one saw him or her. I also believe that since your daughter has survived, they will try something else.”

“Thank you, George.” Palomedes said. “At least we can take comfort that it wasn’t one of the staff. The governor and I have come to a similar conclusion, namely it was an agent of one of his enemies. And they will try again. We have not yet reached agreement on how best to protect her.”

“I would station some of your female servants with the girl at all times.” Soula offered. “Some of us would be able to detect poison by smell alone.”

“Yes. But you would not be able to detect an unwanted intrusion by an agent. I think we could give out a story that the girl has gone to the mountains for her health, and then bring her in secret to my estate or yours. That way no agent could gain access.”

“As a physician, we have strangers coming and going from our house.” George replied. “Soula, could we accommodate the governor’s daughter, plus her servants?”

“We have room,” *but I don’t think we should put her up,* “but it may not be to the standard the governor’s daughter requires. Palomedes, you have a much bigger house, and guards as well.”

A discussion ensued. The governor took some persuading before he warmed to the idea.

“I am not convinced my daughter would be safer hiding amongst the Greeks.” Bey Mustafa protested.

“She would not be hiding, as such. She would be a house guest of a wealthy, trusted Greek family, along with her servants. I doubt your enemies would expect that to happen.”

“My enemies would seek to use that against me if they found out.”

“If they find out, then you know which one tried to have her killed. You would have very good reason to move against them.”

“Ah, you are right there. I have decided. My daughter and two servants should be guests of Dr. Podalirios. How long for though?”

“It may require months, perhaps until she can be married. We must keep her safe to be married. I would home to have discovered who is behind this long before her wedding.”

“Yes, of course. I should tell each of those I suspect that she has been sent to a different destination, and monitor which one sends out messengers to that destination. I think I can arrange that.”

“I think I might assign watchers to the houses you designate to me as potential enemies.” Palomedes offered. “You would arrange the same, and between us we should not miss anything.”

“Yes, protect my daughter, and expose my enemy! I like the idea.”

George reflected that he and Soula hadn’t been consulted in most of this. They had made a polite offer, and Palomedes had taken them up on it, and convinced the governor to go along with it. Since Palomedes was the Master of Athens, he was in effect George’s lord, and he had to do what his lord asked him.

“We didn’t mean that offer to be taken seriously.” Soula protested to Palomedes while they rode home in the carriage. “We don’t really want to look after some pampered daughter of the Ottoman governor. Our family will now get the blame if something happens to her.”

“I think she will be considerably safer among your family that among all of mine. My house is like the governor’s - there are people coming and going at all hours, and it can be difficult to keep an eye on those up to no good. You do not have strangers in your house, you have a family that is mostly females. Your family is well placed to look after the governor’s daughter. Besides, should someone try to make mischief, you will detect them immediately.”

“And our family arrangement isn’t conventional.” Soula added.

“But she is human. All of you can ensure she does not notice.”

“And she will come with some sort of entourage. I hope you have kept that to a minimum. We have a spare room, not a spare wing.”

“There will be a lady’s maid who speaks Turkish as well as Greek, and one of the kitchen staff, another girl. I am counting on you to ensure those servants are under control all the time, and only allowed out when one of you can accompany them.”

“You do know that we do not keep servants? All of us women divide the chores between us? I’m sure she will expect at least a dozen servants.”

“I am a little surprised at that. I have servants in addition to human servants. Some chores can be delegated to the servants, and the rest of you can get on with enjoying your lives.”

“Maybe we’re betraying our peasant background.” George said. “We are all from villages, though when I stayed with my uncle studying medicine, he had three servants - the cook, and two general purpose girls who cleaned and washed. But since I became a vrykolakas I leave the domestic arrangements to my human servants. If they want domestics, they can arrange for them.”

“To date we haven’t needed them.” Soula said. “We don’t miss what we’ve never had. Maybe some of us will get a taste for domestic servants once we see how the governor’s daughter and her servants behave.”

Three coaches pulled up outside an hour after sunset. The first contained mother and daughter, and a number of trunks. The second contained the two servants Maria and Cassa, and more trunks. The third contained Palomedes who bounded out accompanied by several human servants and helped to carry the luggage inside.

“The mother is not staying.” Palomedes said to George and Soula, “She is merely seeing that her daughter is settled.”

Some of George’s human servants, Sylvia, Athena, Artemis, Helena and Sapphira helped carry the luggage, and Erianthe and Phoebe led the way, accompanied by mother and daughter. Names were exchanged along the way, but Palomedes did the formal introductions.

“This is Fatma, the governor’s second wife, she is the mother of Yeshmin here. Yeshmin doesn’t speak Greek, but Maria, her lady’s maid, speaks Turkish, and will act as interpreter. Cassa here will help prepare meals for Yeshmin, both girls are Greek. Now Fatma, you have met Dr. Podalirios and his wife Soula, these ladies are Erianthe, Athena, Phoebe, Melissa and her daughter Andromeda, who is twelve or thirteen, Sylvia, Artemis, Ariana and her daughter Zenobia, who is ten I think, Chloe and her Daughter Zoe, who is also about ten, Sapphira and her daughter Iolanthe, who is nine, Helena, George’s daughter, and her son Georgios who is also nine. Yeshmin will have several girls near her age for companionship.”

“That is good.” Fatma replied. “May I enquire what the relationship is between all these women? You said to me they were family, but they do not resemble each other.”

“Most of us are George’s wives.” Erianthe replied matter of factly. “I’m number two, Sylvia is number three, Athena is number four, Artemis is number five, Phoebe is number six, Melissa is number seven, Ariana is number eight, Chloe is number nine, and Sapphira is number ten. Helena is George’s daughter, as Palomedes said.”

“Oh, that is more than my husband has. Well, I trust you will all take good care of my daughter. I will visit from time to time, but I have been instructed not to visit often, lest I give away my daughter’s hiding place. Is this where my daughter will sleep?”

“Yes, she will have her this room to herself. The two servants will have to share next door. There are so many of us that all the other rooms are occupied.” Erianthe replied.

“Some of the trunks will have to stay in the corridor, there isn’t room for all of them in both rooms.” Sylvia added.

“Lady Fatma,” Palomedes addressed the governor’s second wife, “we should leave soon before we attract too much attention. Anyone important asking questions will be told that this was simply a private medical consultation between a noble lady and a female physician.”

“Yes. A wise deception. Therefore we should not tarry long.” Fatma hugged her daughter, then swept down the stairs. Palomedes accompanied her, while George, Soula and Erianthe followed.

“George, Soula, I thank you for doing me this favour.” Palomedes said. “I am sure she will be a pleasant guest. However, your entire household needs to be aware that someone may attempt to kill her. You will have someone accompany her whenever she leaves the house, and be wary of secretive intruders.”

“Yes, everyone is aware of this. We had a discussion before you arrived. The two servants will be accompanied if they leave the house as well.” George replied. “My meal practices will have to change, this isn’t a big enough house.”

“I appreciate that. But you are now in Athens, not the Underhill village. Some practices may need to change.”

Palomedes helped lady Fatma into her coach. She gave a command, and her two coaches drove off into the night. Palomedes turned to the others.

“I would suggest that one of you women sit out each night and keep the daughter and her servants under control while George feeds.”

“Yes, we have already decided that is what we need to do.” Soula replied.

“Everyone’s agreed.” Erianthe added. “And since someone tried to poison her, she will have to eat the food we prepare.”

“And Helena has decided to teach her Greek. We’ll all help of course.” Sapphira added.

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Things were quiet for the best part of a month. Yeshmin made friends with the younger members of the house, even though the conversations went through the interpreter. Everyone treated Yeshmin and the two servants as part of the family.

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Something woke George. At this stage of his development, he slept lightly for a few hours around midday, and again for a few hours after midnight. It was dark, and Sylvia, his sleeping companion for tonight, was asleep. He could hear the sounds of sleeping throughout the house, and the soft voices of Erianthe and Phoebe talking softly in the kitchen area. Ordinarily he would have dismissed things and gone back to sleep, but not while he was guarding Yeshmin.

He slipped very quietly out of bed, extending his senses to all the life forms within the house. There should be nineteen, but he counted twenty one. Identify everyone. The house was ‘U’ shaped, three stories with a courtyard inside the ‘U’, sloping roof, and balconies on the courtyard. There were no external stairs, only internal ones, and all the windows had bars, allowing them to be left open for breezes. While the main rooms were accessible from an internal corridor, one wing was accessible only from the balcony.

*What’s happening?* Sylvia asked mind to mind. She was still in bed, but wide awake.

*Two intruders. I am just locating them.* George broadcast that. Anyone awake would be here in seconds. The women slept two to a bed, though since one always shared his bed, the sleeping arrangements were always different each night. Yeshmin sometimes shared her bed with one of the girls her age. She was asleep with Iolanthe. Ah, yes. *There are two in the area under the roof. Looking for a way to the floor below.* Taken some of the tiles off, that must be what I heard.

Sylvia was out of bed, padding silently towards him. *Let’s meet them at the access ladder.*

George clamped down on both minds, rendering them zombie like, completely under his control. Sylvia pulled the access ladder down, unfolding it, while George commanded one of the intruders to open the trapdoor. Two black clad figures descended the ladder and stood waiting obediently.

“Someone should tell Palomedes.” George said as Erianthe, Phoebe, Ariana and Chloe came upstairs.

“Ariana and Chloe should go.” Erianthe said. “Never go alone at night.”

“No, I’ll go with Artemis.” Soula volunteered as she and Artemis came upstairs. “We’re dangerous.” Soula had thrown a blue nightgown over her nakedness.

“And we can both fly.” Artemis added. She had dressed in black leather trousers and shirt.

“How many more of you?” George asked the captives. At their blank looks, he tried again, mind to mind.

They answered in Turkish, but he understood their thoughts. “Three more in the courtyard, towards the back, two more keeping watch from the street.”

George felt around. “I have them. It is safe to leave now.” Soula and Artemis departed through the balcony door.

“What is your purpose here?” George asked the prisoners.

“To kill the governor’s daughter, and any who seek to prevent us.”

“Who are you working for?”

“A man hired us. I do not know his name.” *A young man, Turkish appearance, late twenties, simply dressed, but a good cut, and carrying money. Companions with him, bodyguards.* George would recognise him if he ever saw him.

“What are you? Hired killers? Cutpurses? Cutthroats?”

“We were elite soldiers.” *Pride.* “We fought against the Greek insurgents and guerrillas. We were successful. Our patron died, we had to become mercenaries. We are good at what we do. We will kill you all when you sleep.”

“I have you all in the palm of my hand. You will reveal everything you know, every evil deed you have done. And then the Master of Athens will pass judgment on all of you.”

“I think we will take these down to the parlour to wait for the Master. Some of you should keep watch on all the minds around us. I am doing so, but I want to be sure we do not miss anyone.”

“I will keep watch.” Sylvia offered.

“So will I.” Erianthe offered. “Everyone else in the house is asleep. You have seven strangers under control. I sense our neighbours sleeping, but no other strangers. No one else awake.”

“Excellent. Let’s go.” George led the way, the two intruders followed, then Phoebe, Sylvia and Erianthe.

A few minutes later, George heard Palomedes speak softly outside the door, knowing full well that any vampire or human servant would here him. “We are here George. Let us in, and bring the others in.”

*We’re back too.* From Soula.

Sylvia opened the door, George caused the other mercenaries to make their way to the front door and enter.

Palomedes entered with two of his senior vampires - Aleksander and Dimitri, and several male human servants. More than enough muscle for the task at hand. Soula and Artemis followed behind.

George briefed everyone with what he had found out.

“That’s excellent, George. I’ll take it from here. We need to track down everyone they know, especially the person who hired them. I think he might be the son of one of the Turkish nobles.”

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