

FOTINOULA
and the
CHRISTMAS GOBLIN



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First edition published 2020

Fota Press

www.fotapress.com

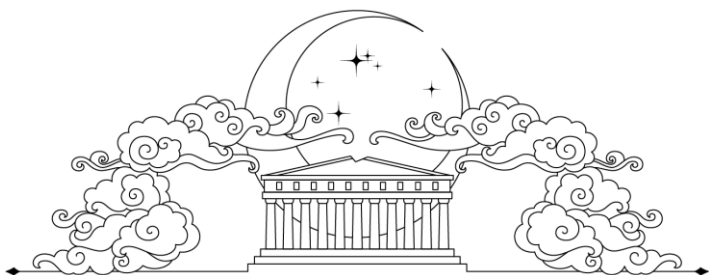
Cover design and illustrations by Victoria Chebanova

ISBN: 978-1-5272-6815-9

FOTINOULA and the CHRISTMAS GOBLIN



SOME FOLKTALES HAVE MORE TRUTH TO
THEM THAN OTHERS...



INTRODUCTION

R.G. Fraser-Green works as a computer programmer in Buckinghamshire, England.

One holiday in Athens, looking out across the city from the Acropolis, he realised there was a young girl sitting by his side on the wall that circled the hilltop. He was keen to practise his Greek – to him it was the most beautiful language in the world – so he decided to try talking to her.

Two people from different countries and of different ages might not usually have much to say but they soon found themselves chatting away, ignoring the tourists passing behind them.

Their conversation turned to the Christmas that had just passed. Her English was good and,

after a little hesitation, she told him a story in his own language. Sometimes if she didn't know a word she would swap back to Greek. By the time she had finished, the shadow of the Parthenon had fallen over them and they were the only two left on the summit.

'I've never heard a story like that before,' he said.

'I knew you wouldn't believe me.'

'I didn't say that. But I can understand why some people would find it hard.'

'That's my problem,' she said. 'How can I get anyone to listen – so they know of the danger?'

Lights flickered on in the buildings and streets beneath them.

'From what you've said, it seems to me your grandfather had the right idea.'

'You mean – write it down?'

He nodded. 'Then people would at least have the chance to make up their own minds.'

They chatted until the floodlights snapped on and lit up the Parthenon. She waved goodbye and skipped away down the hill.

The girl was called Fotinoula and this is her story.



PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

This story contains some Greek words that can be a little hard to pronounce. Below are a few of these words with some help on how to say them and a reminder of who or what they are. The letters in **bold** show you where to put the stress when saying the word.

Baba: *Ba-ba*

‘Baba’ is an informal word for father, similar to ‘Dad’.

Diples: *Theep-les*

These crispy fried pastry rolls are a favourite at Christmas. They’re drizzled in honey syrup, then sprinkled with chopped walnuts and cinnamon.

Fotinoula: *Fot-in-oo-la*

Fotinoula's real name is 'Fotini' (pronounced *Fot-in-ee*), which means 'Light', but Greeks often change the endings of girls' names to 'oula' as a way of expressing affection.

Kallikantzaros: *Kalli-kand-za-ross*

A Kallikantzaros is a type of goblin that only appears during the Twelve Days of Christmas. The plural is Kallikantzaroι (pronounced *Kalli-kand-za-ree*).

Kourabiethes: *Kou-ra-bee-eth-es*

These buttery shortbread biscuits are made with almonds and have a powdered sugar coating. They're baked especially for the festive season.

Melomakarona: *Mello-ma-ka-ron-a*

These Christmas honey cookies are made from semolina, olive oil, and walnuts. They're bathed in honey syrup and usually sprinkled with chopped walnuts and cinnamon.

Mirtoula: *Meer-too-la*

Mirtoula is Fotinoula's little sister. Her real name is Mirto (pronounced *Meer-toe*), which means 'Myrtle', a plant with white flowers and emerald-green leaves.

Papadopoulou: *Pa-pa-thop-oo-loo*

Mrs Papadopoulou is a neighbour of Fotinoula.

Rebetiko: *Reb-et-i-ko*

A type of Greek folk music.

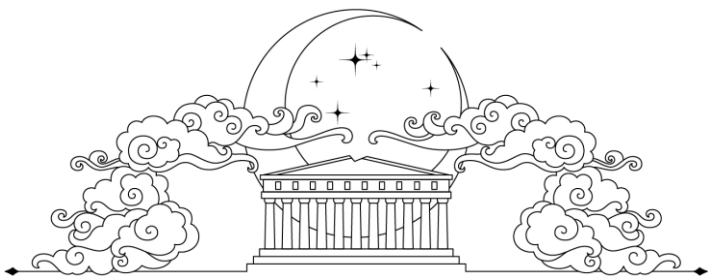
Vasilopita: *Vas-ee-lop-ee-ta*

A cake made especially for New Year's Day. The name comes from two Greek words – 'Basil' (after Saint Basil) and 'pita' meaning 'pie'.

Zeibekiko: *Zee-bek-ick-o*

There are different types of Rebetiko songs which vary according to their rhythm. One of these rhythms is called the Zeibekiko.





CHAPTER 1

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Grandfather hadn't visited us that Christmas, if he hadn't told me what he did about the creatures. Then I stop myself because I can't bear to think about it.

'The Kallikantzaroi?' I said. 'Who are they?'

As soon as I said it something changed in Grandfather. One moment his eyes were on me, then he seemed to look straight through me.

'Your baba didn't tell you?' he said.

I shook my head. It was four months ago since Baba had left on his latest voyage, but I still would have remembered that name. Kalli – kant – za – roi. What did it even mean?

‘So, my own son never believed me, after all.’ Grandfather leant his walking stick against the kitchen table and collapsed into the chair next to me. ‘What about Mirtoula? I don’t suppose he said anything about her – anything unusual, I mean?’

I thought back to that August morning when Baba had left. I’d given him a sailor’s cap with a handsome pleat around the rim as a going away present. He’d pulled the peak down over his forehead and promised to wear it every day until he returned. And yes, then he had mentioned my sister and it had all been very strange. ‘He asked me to keep an eye on her,’ I said, ‘especially over Christmas.’

Grandfather looked up. ‘What exactly did he say?’

‘Well, he didn’t really say much. He just gave me this.’ I pulled out the necklace from beneath my T-shirt. A bronze figure of a robed woman dangled from the end of the chain. She wore a crested helmet, gripped a spear in one hand and held up an owl in the other. Beneath her outstretched arm, a shield leant against her leg.

‘His goddess Athena!’ said Grandfather.

‘That’s what I can’t understand – he always takes her on his voyages to keep him safe. But he said he’d never been away over Christmas before so he wanted me to have her. Then he made me promise to look after Mirtoula.’

‘And? Did you agree to look after your sister?’

‘Grandfather, she’s such a baby. I told Baba to wear the necklace to keep him safe, but he wouldn’t take it back.’

‘But you did promise to keep an eye on Mirtoula over Christmas?’

‘She can be so annoying – she keeps following me around. I said to Baba I’d give back his Athena as soon as he returned.’

‘Fotinoula. Did you promise?’

Every year, when Christmas came around, Baba always seemed to spend all his time with Mirtoula. I knew he loved us both the same, but still, it was like she suddenly became his favourite. Now it seemed Grandfather was talking about her in the same way, and I’d had enough.

‘The Kallikantzaroi,’ I said. ‘Who *are* they?’

Grandfather drummed his fingers against the

table. 'You're so young. I don't know if I should be telling you – if you're the right person.'

'I'm eleven. I'm not a little child.'

'You're still a good few years younger than I was when it happened.'

'What happened? What do you mean?'

'There is your mama, of course. No. That would never work.'

'Grandfather, you can tell –'

'It has to be you. I've been over this so many times in my head – there's no one else.' He gripped the table. Then his words came tumbling out. 'The Kallikantzaroi are the Christmas goblins – dark creatures from the underworld. They cut away at the World Tree all year long in order to bring it crashing down –'

'Wait ... What? The World Tree?'

'They wouldn't teach you about that at school these days, would they?' He took a deep breath and relaxed his fingers. 'The World Tree holds up the Earth, but during the Twelve Days of Christmas, when the sun stops moving, the Kallikantzaroi are able to climb up the tree to the surface.'

I peered back at Grandfather and searched

his face but there was no twinkle in his eye or twitch of his mouth. 'Are they ... friendly?'

He sagged back in his chair and his chin dropped to his chest. 'Friendly? You ask me if the Kallikantzaroi are friendly? Oh, what am I doing? You're too young for all this. Much too young. I wasn't even alone and look how that ended.'

I blinked. It was late and I knew I was tired, but this wasn't like Grandfather at all.

He scrunched up his forehead and his voice became harsh. 'Their eyes are like none you've ever seen before, but once you have witnessed them you'll wish to never do so again. They are blood-red from living in the darkness -'

I drew back. Grandfather glanced at me then continued more softly. 'These creatures can only come out at night. But when they do creep out of the shadows you need to be on your guard. Each Kallikantzaros will try and sneak into a house, either through the door or by climbing down the chimney.'

I turned to the kitchen window. 'You mean they've been creeping around each night since Christmas Day?'

Grandfather nodded. 'As soon as darkness

fell they would have started to emerge through holes in the ground and onto the city streets.'

'So why are you only telling me this now?'

'We don't worry about them too much for the first few days because we know they're only mischievous. Think of your sister when she's been cooped up inside on a rainy day. No, it's when New Year arrives that we really need to be on our guard – they start to change for the worse.'

'Worse? What do you –'

'Quick, Fotinoula!' came Mama's voice from down the hallway. 'We've only got a few seconds left.'

Grandfather squinted at his watch. 'Is it that time already? There's so much more you need to know.'

'You'll have to tell me later. Come on.' I snatched up the shiny red fruit which Mama had bought especially for this moment and sprinted along the hallway to the front door. Grandfather shuffled after me, his walking stick thumping on the carpet.

I flicked the light switch and plunged the hall into darkness. Grandfather took my arm and we

walked down the three steps to the pavement.

‘Just made it,’ said Mama, glancing at her watch.

‘That’s a funny looking apple,’ said Mirtoula. Under her coat, my sister wore her birthday present of a lion costume. As usual, she hadn’t managed to tuck in all her hair, and jet-black curls poked out from around the hood.

‘It’s not an apple,’ I said, ‘it’s a pomegranate. But there’s no time to explain what it’s for.’

On both sides of the street, our neighbours stood outside their own front doors and waited. The streetlights blinked, and one by one cut out. Murmurs of excitement rose up from beneath each lamp.

‘That’s different,’ I said. ‘They’ve never turned the streetlights off before.’

Thick clouds stretched across the sky and blocked off the moonlight. I could now only just make out the outlines of the families huddled together on the pavement.

‘Get ready!’ came Mama’s voice from somewhere on my right. ‘It’s time. Five, four...’

I joined in the countdown with Grandfather and Mirtoula, ‘...Three, two, one.’

We all drew in a deep breath. 'Happy New Year!' we cried.

Shouts rose up from around us. The distant crackle and boom of fireworks floated through the night. One rocket soared above the others and its flash lit up the street.

Mama's hand grasped at my arm and I found myself squeezed against her body in a hug.

'Mama, I can't breathe,' came Mirtoula's muffled voice from her other side. Mama must have released her because her next words were clear. 'Why did we turn the lights off?' she said.

'To say goodbye to the old year,' I replied. 'And now we'll turn them back on to welcome in the new one. But first *you* have to do something.'

I untangled myself from Mama's grasp, found Mirtoula's hand and guided her over to the foot of the steps. 'You've got to step inside for good luck.'

Mirtoula wriggled inside the hood of her costume as she tried to look up at me. 'Why do *I* have to do it?'

'Because you're the youngest, of course.'

'It's tradition,' said Grandfather. 'If a good person is the first to enter a home, they'll bring

good luck for the coming year to everyone who lives there.'

'But remember – you must step inside with your right foot,' I said. 'If your left foot enters first, you'll bring us all bad luck – for the whole year!'

Mirtoula peered up into the blackness of the open doorway.

'Of course,' I whispered, 'You are only four. Maybe I should –'

'No! I can do it!'

I rested my hand on the back of her shoulder. 'We'll be standing just here.'

Mirtoula climbed the steps, one at a time, and at the top grasped the door frame to steady herself.

'Right foot!' I called up.

'I know!' Mirtoula shouted over her shoulder. She stretched her leg across the threshold and placed it down on the door mat.

'Perfect,' I said. 'Now, can you reach the light switch?'

Mirtoula stretched up and clicked the light back on.

'Well done, darling,' Mama called up.

‘Right. Stand back everyone,’ I said. ‘This could get messy.’ I took the pomegranate in both hands and raised it above my head.

‘What are you doing?’ Mirtoula called down.

‘She’s going to smash it,’ Mama replied. ‘The more seeds that are scattered in front of our home then the luckier we’ll be this year.’

I knew I’d only get one chance to do this properly. I tensed my body. ‘Happy New Year!’ I whipped my arms down with all my strength.

Mirtoula jumped back with a squeal.

The fruit flew through the air and shattered on the middle step, spraying juice and shiny flecks over the white surface.

Mirtoula squatted down and clapped. ‘Are those the seeds?’ she cried. ‘There are hundreds of them!’

‘That’s a lot of good luck,’ said Grandfather.

‘Not bad!’ I said. ‘Not bad at all! But we’ll have to clean it up later – now comes the most important part.’ I skipped over the mangled fruit and grabbed my sister’s hand. ‘Come on. It’s time to cut the vasilopita.’

We clattered through the hall to the kitchen. I shrugged off my coat and flung it over the back

of my chair, then helped Mirtoula off with hers.

‘Hey! Stop pulling.’

‘Come on, Mirtoula.’

We sat down at the table. A large brown cake with a powdered sugar topping lay in front of us.

Mama followed us into the kitchen with Grandfather on her arm, and once he was seated she pulled out a long-bladed knife from the cutlery drawer and stood in front of the cake. ‘Ready?’ she said.

Mirtoula and I looked at each other and nodded.

Mama scratched a cross in the cake’s surface three times then cut a slice. ‘This piece is for Jesus.’ She pressed the knife down once again.

‘That one is for Holy Mary,’ I said.

‘Now for Saint Basil,’ said Mama.

‘Saint Basil?’ said Mirtoula. ‘Why do we cut a piece for him?’

‘Don’t you know who he is?’ I said ‘Saint Basil brings presents for children.’

‘But I had my presents three days ago.’

‘That was your birthday. This is New Year. Saint Basil brings presents for all children at New Year – but only if they’re good!’

Mirtoula gave a great yawn. 'I'm always good,' she said rubbing her eyes. 'Make it a big one, Mama, so he brings us nice presents.'

'OK, a nice big slice for Saint Basil. And this piece is for our home, and now for Grandfather.'

'And the next piece is for Baba,' I said. 'Come home safely soon.'

'This portion is for me,' said Mama. 'And now for you, Fotinoula.'

'And the last piece is for ... oh, Mirtoula!' My sister's eyes were now shut and her chin rested against her chest. 'The last piece is yours,' I whispered. 'We've got to see who'll find the coin in their slice and have good luck for the year.'

'Let her sleep,' said Mama. She sat down and lifted Mirtoula on to her lap. 'It's been a long day, but she managed to see in the New Year for the first time.'

Grandfather reached over and picked up the knife. 'Would you mind if we cut one more piece?' Without waiting for an answer he pulled the cake towards himself. 'I'm glad Mirtoula's asleep. It's for the best that she doesn't know about it. The final slice – as it should always be – is for the Kallikantzaroi.'

Mama rolled her eyes. 'Oh, not that old folktale.'

Grandfather looked at her but said nothing. He pressed down and the blade clinked against the plate.

'These Kallikantzaroi sound horrible,' I said. 'Why would we give them a piece of our cake?'

'It's a sort of peace offering,' said Grandfather. 'They love sweet food – wouldn't you if you'd spent all year underground eating nothing but worms and toads? We hope if we offer them some vasilopita they'll take it and leave us alone. Of course, you wouldn't want to watch them eat it. Their manners are disgusting – especially because of their tongues.'

I'd been trying to imagine what these creatures looked like but this stopped me dead. 'Their tongues? What about them?'

'They're so huge that they keep flopping out of their mouths. That's why the Kallikantzaroi speak with a lisp.'

'Are their tongues big for a reason? You know – like elephants have long noses to drink with, and giraffes have long necks so they can reach leaves on high branches?'

The knife thudded against the table and Grandfather looked away. 'I think we've talked enough about them for one night.'

I peered at him and tried to work out if I'd said something wrong. 'They are just an old folktale, aren't they?'

'Oh, of course they are, darling,' said Mama. 'Stories of goblins stealing little children - '

'What?' I blurted out.

'- it's all nonsense. But people have been talking about these creatures for hundreds of years so I suppose it's a tradition you should know about. You don't need to worry about them. I know how you sometimes get lost in your daydreams.'

I fixed my eyes on my wedge of cake as my cheeks burned red. Mama was right about my daydreaming. Sometimes my imagination would carry me so far away that I wouldn't even hear people speaking to me. I'd been in trouble at school when my mind had drifted off in class and my teacher had asked me a question. I knew only too well that dreaded feeling of being jolted out of my thoughts to see the teacher standing in front of me with folded arms. Everyone would be

looking at me and I'd have no idea what the teacher had just said.

We all nibbled at our slices of cake, taking little bites in case our teeth crunched down on the coin. I squashed my last piece against the roof of my mouth with my tongue, but there was nothing hard inside.

'No lucky coin tonight,' said Mama, standing up with Mirtoula in her arms. 'We'll just have to wait to see who finds it.' She turned back to me. 'You know how difficult things are at the moment. You won't be too disappointed, will you, if you only get a few little presents?'

'I heard you and Baba talking before he left. I know they had to cut the pay again for the sailors.'

Mama nodded and carried Mirtoula away to her bedroom.

I gathered up the empty plates. 'Grandfather, will you tell me more about the Kallikantzaroi.'

'I'd rather not talk about them just before bed.'

'But what happens after the Twelve Days of Christmas? You can tell me that, can't you?'

Grandfather sighed. 'Before dawn breaks and

the sun begins to move again on the day of Epiphany, they have to scuttle back down underground.'

'But then they'd start sawing at the World Tree again, wouldn't they? It would have fallen down by now.'

'It would have done, if it wasn't for one thing. During the Twelve Days, when they're above ground, the World Tree heals itself, so each new year they have to start sawing at it all over again.' He prodded the table with his finger. 'Now that's enough for tonight.'

I took the plates over to the sink and gave them a rinse. The Kallikantzaroi couldn't be the brightest if that happened every year – if they never learnt that leaving the World Tree for the Twelve Days would allow it to heal. Why didn't they just stay down there to finish the job? Was there something that drew them up? 'Good night, Grandfather.' I kissed him and made my way through to Mirtoula's room.

I loved seeing Grandfather, but whenever he came to stay with us he slept in my room, and I had to sleep on a mattress on my sister's bedroom floor. It wasn't too bad – not after

Mirtoula had got over the excitement of sharing and had stopped whispering to me in the dark – but it wasn't the same as having my own room.

Of course, I would have happily slept on that mattress for the rest of my life if it meant I could see Grandfather one more time. I couldn't have known that Christmas would be the last time I ever saw him.