



BALKAN FAIRY TALE

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Ragusa, Croatian hills, seventeenth century.

Jure Vitez was as much of a bastard as me.

Conniving, ruthless and powerful, he used his status as a one-time knight of Ragusa's aristocracy to bully everyone into doing as he wanted. I first met him in a tavern brawl in Dubrovnik. Jure had upset most of the clientele, I never did find out how, and they'd all set upon him. Never one to resist a good fight, I piled in to help him for no other reason than he was outnumbered. A little while later, bloodied, bruised and with a headache that threatened to explode my skull, we left victorious.

He invited me to his home where we celebrated our triumph with some good quality rakija, a local plum brandy that I'd started to enjoy. I soon realised I'd befriended one of the richest men on the Adriatic coast. His fortune had close connections to the pirates that tormented shipping routes to Venice and the brigands who robbed the trade routes through the Ragusan hills. The locals also paid him their taxes, that were supposed to be passed on as tribute to the ruling Ottoman Empire, truth was little of it reached Constantinople.

Of course, his power and his lack of ethics, along with the bastard-like behaviour I mentioned, made him very unpopular. That was why he decided to employ me as his sell-sword. I hadn't acquired many skills relevant to most human beings since arriving in their realm, killing people appeared to be about my limit. Nonetheless, we lived in violent times so it was a skill-set that came in handy.

In a way, Jure's home was a little like being back in Oberon's Dark Court, just without the same level of wealth and opulence. You didn't need to look too deeply to find the same fear and paranoia. A wrong word, a misplaced look, they all led to the suffering of family and staff alike. Where Oberon was concerned, I'd stayed clear of it, as an expert in political chicanery, until the very end. The same was true for Jure who treated me differently, a fact I assumed was down to my latent aggression.

Until the day Jure decided he wanted Marin to join us on one of our regular bullying expeditions.

'Get yourself a horse, Marin. You're coming with us today.'

We all glanced at one another; the lad's oldest brother, Miroslav, even guffawed until his father's glare silenced him. Marin stood in the doorway to their home, clinging to the woodwork with one hand, the inevitable book cradled in the other. He blinked his astonishment. His father, whose patience was shorter than the blade I carried in my boots for emergencies, narrowed his eyes when the boy didn't move.

'I told you to get a horse. It's time to undertake the same work as your brothers. You've seen eighteen summers now, you supposed to be a man. I don't want you hanging around the house with the women or you'll start acting like them.'

'Too late,' Miroslav whispered to me and chuckled quietly.

Moments later we left, Marin clinging on for dear life as our horses galloped at the



breakneck pace Jure always dictated. It wasn't long until the lad had dropped back to be enveloped in our dust, as we traversed routes that took us into the Ragusan hills. I reigned back my own mount enough to make certain the kid didn't fall off or get lost, the countryside was beautiful but lethal. Bandits hid in its peaks and

caves, to pounce on lonely travellers. If they caught the lad, he'd face two options, as a son of the most hated man in the region, he'd be ransomed or murdered.

'Don't wait for me, Balar.'

His words triggered a coughing fit as he swallowed dust, he hadn't covered his mouth with a cloth like the rest of us. I pulled my horse back just in time to stop him from falling out of his saddle as his coughing fit overwhelmed him. He looked over at me, tears filled his eyes, I didn't think the dust was entirely responsible, there was genuine fear there.

'He will be angry if you help me.'

I shrugged. Jure frightened everyone else but I'd grown up with his type, suffered far worse at their hands. We cantered on in silence until we reached our destination. The others waited for us at the entrance to a narrow valley filled with silver birch trees, a gentle

summer breeze caught their leaves, made them sound like the sea on shingle. Sunlight filtered through their branches, creating dappled shade from the oppressive heat. A place of peace, though not for long.

Jure glared at his youngest son with an expression of distaste, a look that expressed disbelief that this boy could be the product of his seed. Physically he certainly didn't look like him. Miroslav and his four brothers were like their sire: tall, black-haired and built like bulls. Marin didn't look like his nervous and long-suffering mother Iva either. Having seen how frequently Jure beat her and treated her like his personal possession, I might have wondered if she'd looked elsewhere in the past, but she was too frightened to do anything so bold.

Jure's eyes flicked over to check on my reaction, I could see him considering whether to make any comment about the help I'd given. It might have been my steadfast contact with his eyes that made him decide to ignore us. Instead he pointed into the valley.

'These bastards sent my bailiff back with a black eye a few weeks back. They owe a season's tribute but they need to learn a lesson as well.'

Jure allocated roles to each of us, deliberately ignoring Marin. Familiar functions that centred on rounding people up, beating them almost to death and making an example of anyone who tried to stop it. His examples invariably led to hangings from nearby trees unless his mood was particularly sour, then they turned sadistic and involved cutting off body parts in a given sequence. I felt sorry for the people we were about to meet, Marin's presence had soured things before we'd even arrived.

They were a sorrowful tribe; emaciated, helpless folk who lived on the edge of survival. I wondered why they'd chosen to make their home in such barren terrain, where only goats fared well and few crops survived the harsh seasonal extremes. But Jure only saw opposition to his rule and sympathy was an alien commodity. We chased them down on our horses, rounded them up like cattle and set about shedding blood. They tried to resist but that only led to their leader, a man in his middle years with greying hair and ribs like a toast rack, getting strung up to thrash around until the rope broke his neck. I'd been proved wrong. Jure was in a good mood after all.

With school out, lessons completed, we set about gathering enough to represent their tribute. It proved difficult. Miroslav took great joy destroying the wooden huts the tribe called home, in his search for anything remotely valuable, setting fire to them eventually. Jure sat on his horse, beaming at his oldest son's enthusiasm. I'd kept Marin with me, after he'd vomited his stomach contents when Jure had forced him to watch the hanging. It caused Jure's distaste to turn to disgust, for which the lad would suffer later.

The two of us wandered the village, searching for things we could claim. The lad could only shake his head in pity at the sights that met us. I handed him a bag of goat meat and told him to present that to his father in the hope it might ameliorate the bastard. It smelled rank and the boy struggled to stop himself vomiting again, he held the bag as far away as he could, as he strode back to the others. Jure ignored him.

I was about to join them when something caught my eye on rocks outside a narrow cleft in the hillside. They were glyphs.

Inside the rock face were others. A young woman, who with food and a decent bath would have looked attractive, hurried over to me. Panic written across her face.

'What's in there?' I asked, pointing into the cleft of rock.

'Nothing.'

Her voice shook. I smiled, having checked Jure wasn't looking our way.

'That's not true, is it?' I let my smile exude warmth. 'Don't worry. I'm not going to tell him.' I nodded in Jure's direction.

She frowned, confused by my pledge. I traced my finger over two of the glyphs.

'This says "doorway", doesn't it?'

Her confusion melted into panic. She shook her head so hard it could have dropped off her shoulders. I placed a finger over my lips to encourage her silence.

'It's not a form I'm all that familiar with. If memory serves, it's used in Mag Mell.'



Her eyes, the colour of cobalt, widened. She looked around her, at the chaos and the screams and the girl Miroslav was pawing as he pressed her up against a tree.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

She paused to allow herself time to consider whether to trust me. The other girl screamed, Miroslav withdrew his hand from under her thin tunic and slapped her hard across the face. She sobbed as he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to the ground and climbed on top of her.

‘We are trapped here. The doorway. It failed. We cannot mend it.’

I nodded. ‘Gather your people together tonight. I’ll come back and help.’

With that I strode over to where Jure and the others watched Miroslav exert his masculine supremacy over the girl, cheering and adding bawdy comments. Only Marin averted his gaze.

‘We need to get out of here fast,’ I called as I got nearer. ‘These bastards are riddled with disease.’

I almost choked with laughter as Miroslav leapt off the girl and gazed down at his groin in panic.

‘What disease, Balar?’ he squealed.

‘Saw it in Venice,’ I said. ‘It’s where this lot come from. Starts with a red rash but it rots away any part of the body that touches the infection.’

Miroslav, trousers around his ankles, waddled over to a bowl of water near the remains of a hut and poured it over himself. He examined his groin with the look of a man anxious that his favourite toy isn’t damaged.

‘What treatment is there?’ Jure asked, anxiety for his son’s welfare written in the frown lines.

I shook my head with sadness as I tried to think of the worst concoction I could think of. In the end I quoted the same one used in Venice for syphilis, it was revolting, almost as deadly as the disease itself. The threat urged us on to our horses and we rode back with

even greater speed and urgency. I remained behind with Marin as we followed at a sedate canter.

‘How did you know?’ Jure asked later. He had a face like thunder, we’d heard his bellowed commands for a physician as we made our way along the farm drive.

‘I’d started to have the same kind of fun as Miroslav. But I always make women undress first, to make sure they’re clean. You do the same, don’t you?’

He gave me a distracted nod.

‘There’s a physician coming from Dubrovnik. Hopefully he can him treat in time.’ He held my eye and extended a hand. ‘Once again, I’m in your debt, Balar.’

I shrugged. The man actually looked scared, had he been anyone else I’d have felt sorry for him. But he was a bullying bastard, so was his rapist son, and they deserved all the heartache I could give them. I couldn’t resist one final comment.

‘You need to have a talk with your boy. Tell him how to deal with his women.’

He nodded with the same distraction as before, raked his fingers nervously through black hair now saturated with sweat then rubbed his bristly chin thoughtfully. There was something else working away inside that head of his and that worried me. Eventually he sighed heavily.

‘You don’t approve of the way I treat Marin, do you?’

I held his eye. We’d suddenly entered dangerous ground, like treading on a frozen lake, uncertain if the ice would break and trap you in its black depths. I smiled, it was an effort but I was good at acting. You couldn’t call yourself Fae unless you could claim the ability to perform and adopt other roles.

‘I grew up amongst soldiers. Our commander had three sons. The youngest was like Marin. Nature can be a bastard to you sometimes eh?’

The guy kept looking at me, knew I hadn’t answered his question.

‘What happened with your commander and his son?’

‘They grew apart. The boy left home. They never saw each other again.’

Finally, his dark brown eyes left mine and stared at the ground.

‘I don’t know what to do with him Balar. He disappoints me more than I can say. Wish he wasn’t mine sometimes. Often. If he was an animal, I’d have shot him in the head by now.’

I managed to nod my sympathy. What an actor.

‘Look Balar.’ Eyes back up and drilling into mine. ‘You can get through to him. You showed that today. You’re patient. Do this thing for me and I will give you anything. Turn him into a man.’

Jure turned on his heel and marched into his house, the matter concluded. He’d given his instruction, explained the reward and that was it. He expected it to be done.

I made my way into the kitchen, summoned by the aroma of good food. Iva was a shrinking violet where her husband was concerned but she came to life in her kitchen, where the wives of two of her sons helped her create culinary magic. She didn’t like me, I was too close to her husband I suppose, not to be trusted. I sat at the table, smiled as innocently as I knew how and had a large bowl of stew slammed down in front of me with a scowl.

‘Where is Marin?’ she snapped.

He’d taken his horse to the stables but after that, he’d disappeared and I told her so. She snorted her disgust.

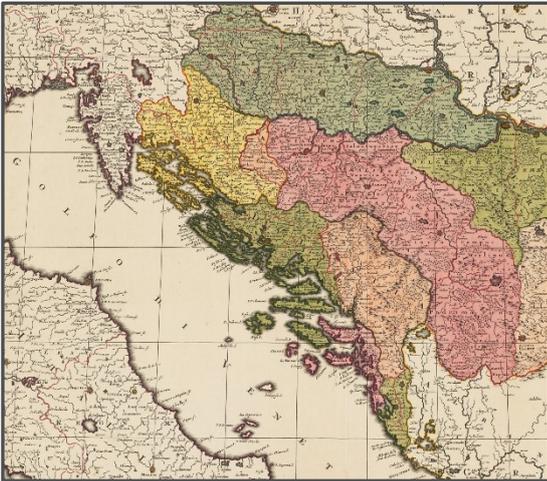
‘Iva, I do my best to look after the lad. He got through today. I don’t think Jure will be angry with him.’

She stood, like a bird about to take flight, long legged and uncertain in her stance. She nodded once, sighed deeply and returned to preparing her husband’s meal. With a full belly I made my way up into the loft where I slept. It wasn’t a palace but the bed was comfortable, I had the place to myself and when events downstairs turned to shouts of anger and things got smashed by an irate Jure, I was far enough away from it all.

I sat and stared out of the window at the beautiful vista of Balkan hills decorated in purple flowers. Amidst those peaks were a race of people with bloodlines linked to mine. They were Fae. Distant relationships admittedly but that didn’t matter. My own folk might have disowned and exiled me but these pathetic remnants shared no part of that

humiliation. They had suffered like me; cut off, lonely, condemned to live their lives amongst human beings. Today I'd been reminded, as if it was needed, how barbaric a realm this was.

I knew I had to help them for that reason. They deserved a chance to get home and if



I could assist them in some way, I'd do it. It would involve risk, leaving the house in the dead of night to navigate the hills, possibly encountering bandits in the process, but I didn't care about that. If I was honest, I would enjoy the thrill. I'd travelled the length of the Adriatic coast tempting the fates, the Italian term for my own race, to take me. Just as they'd done at home, the fates rejected me here too. I continued to survive despite my best efforts

to do otherwise. But when you measure a lifetime in centuries, loneliness is a transient and fickle companion.

Darkness gradually plunged the house into slumber. I tiptoed down staircases and out into the night that was balmy and still. In the stables the horses dozed too, the heat of the day had made the place smell of hay, giving it a soporific atmosphere. I led my horse quietly out of the stable.

'I thought I'd find you here.'

It startled me for a split second, until I registered the whispered voice. The pale outline of Marin stood in the entrance to the stable.

'What are you doing here?' I hissed.

I could just make out his face as scudding clouds revealed the moon.

'I could ask you the same question.' He was grinning, like he'd won a great victory.

If it had been anyone else, I'd have knocked them out, left them to wake up the house once they'd regained consciousness, when I'd be too far away to be found. But this was Marin. I hesitated and his grin widened further.

'You're going back to them, aren't you?'

I could see the conniving slyness of his father in his eyes for the first time and the idea of knocking him out suddenly increased in likelihood. He might have read my expression because his own changed.

‘I don’t know what you said to them. But I know you’re helping them somehow. I heard one of them whisper it to another just before we left. And that story about the disease. That was all a lie.’ He giggled, like a kid still. ‘A good one. Nice to see Miroslav so afraid for once.’

‘What do you want Marin?’

He held my eye, just like his father did, without blinking, without averting it as confidence faded.

‘I’m coming with you.’

I had little choice and he knew it. By leaving him behind I ran the risk of him waking the house, then my mission would be sabotaged. He grinned as I sighed and shook my head in resignation, vanished into the darkness and returned less than a minute later with his horse, already saddled. We walked the animals along the farm drive so as not to wake anyone. Even then we needed to take things slowly. The moon offered some illumination but we ran the risk of horses stumbling into holes or ruts along the track into the hills but as both animals were nervous, we kept our pace to a slow trot.

‘So why are we going back to those people?’

I told him to keep his voice down, even in the dead of night, bandits could attack if they heard us coming. It didn’t stop him from asking the question again, this time in a whisper. I gave him a load of rubbish about wanting to make things right after his father’s attack but he didn’t believe me, instead he told me I was treating him like an idiot. What he said next made me think he was probably right.

‘You are much older than you appear, aren’t you Balar? The others don’t spot your mistakes because they’re stupid, they don’t read and learn. But I recognise them.’

I asked him to define some of my mistakes, he counted them on his fingers. They centred on events I’d experienced in Venice and elsewhere, such as the return of the plague. Moments from fifty years ago, in the case of the plague, more like seventy. I’d been

careless I realised, the consequence of a long life where you measure time differently. For me those events had felt recent, to humans they were a lifetime.

Suddenly, and thankfully, our conversation was interrupted when a dark figure leapt in front of us, holding a lantern in one hand and a sword in the other. I might have used my own sword, strapped on my back, but these guys didn't operate independently, there'd likely be a crossbow aimed at us. Sure enough, as we halted the horses and dismounted as instructed, two more figures shambled out of the woods on either side of the track.

The one with the sword had military experience, the way he held his sword and his stance, gave him away. Many of those who'd fought in successive, failed campaigns against the Ottoman empire had suffered real hardship and turned bitter, they'd become outlaws. This man, with his shaved head and scar down one cheek and across his chin, was clearly one of these. The second that entered the glow of the lantern was the muscle, he was tall and built like a bear, with the hair and beard to go with the look. Their other comrade was a kid, no older than Marin, but his slight frame and stature made him look much younger. He was nimble, to be fair to him, he skipped around Marin and had a knife to the lad's throat immediately, there was a nasty glint in his eye I didn't like either.

'Drop the sword,' the soldier-guy grunted. 'We'll take your saddle bags and the boy. You can be on your way.'

I pretended to consider his request. 'Why the boy?'

'He's the spawn of that bastard, Jure Vitez. We'll ransom him. Now do as you're told, otherwise we start slicing bits off the lad. Stjepan here is always eager to inflict some damage, the little bastard enjoys it. So better do as I say.'

The bear-like form of the muscle ambled closer, grinning at me in a way that suggested his brain might not be functioning properly.

'Counter proposal,' I said. 'You leave us alone and I won't kill you.'

I delivered the threat in a calm and deliberate manner, the soldier recognised the tone and for a second, he paused. But a glance over at Marin and the money he represented, the hesitation vanished. I launched at him, thrusting my blade with such speed

he had to step backwards and parry at the same time. The bear looked on in surprise as our swords flashed in the moonlight, uncertain whether it was safe to intervene.

My opponent was good, traditional in his moves but after a couple of minutes he was breathing heavily, his reactions had slowed and I was driving him backwards the whole time. I could see panic appear on his face, he kept looking over at the bear to step in and help but the big man was too busy watching our flashing blades.

Stjepan kept shrieking that he would cut his victim's throat if I didn't stop but I gambled that he wouldn't take any decisive action without the approval of his leader.

Finally, my opponent got careless. I pivoted unexpectedly so I was at his side, elbowed him in the kidneys so he slumped and that gave me the opportunity to run my blade into his thigh. He screamed in pain as he hit the ground, at which point the bear realised he needed to act. At the same time, now their leader was incapacitated, Stjepan started getting assertive and my gambling came down to one option. As the bear threw himself at me, I snatched the small blade I kept strapped to my calf and threw it at the knife-wielding boy.

I heard a howl as a ton of fat and muscle landed on me, grabbing me from behind and pinning my arms in an aptly-named bear hug. He lifted me off my feet and tightened his grip around my chest, breathing suddenly became difficult. I had very little time before my strength would give out as my lungs lost the ability to inhale air.

The trouble with the bear hug, as I'd learned long ago in the Fae training camps, was they left the hugger with nowhere to go. You needed to squeeze the life out of your victim before he could do anything to retaliate, but that took time and strength. I'd learned then that the answer lies in shifting the hugger's centre of gravity, throwing him off balance. I hurled myself to one side, headfirst, with such force he staggered. My feet touched the ground again, giving me purchase to keep pushing, to use the man's weight against him. Sure enough, we reached the tipping point as I leaned further and further to one side and we tumbled onto the ground. He was much slower, cumbersome even. I was on my feet, sword still in hand (my training sergeant used to kick five bells out of me if I dropped it in any struggle) and with its point in the bear's shoulder. The poor guy looked at me, like he didn't understand why I'd want to hurt him and started to cry.

The leader lay bleeding from his thigh wound, the kid thrashed and howled on the ground as he tried to pull my knife out of one eye and the big man held his shoulder and sobbed.

'I told you what would happen, didn't I?' I said to the leader. He didn't reply but cursed me repeatedly.

'You didn't kill them,' Marin said quietly once we were back on our horses and far enough away. 'Why not?'

'I'm trying hard to avoid doing that. I've killed enough people in the past.'

He watched me out of the corners of his eyes and stayed silent for a while.

'Throwing your knife like that, as the big man attacked you, it could have hit me.'

I shook my head. 'No, it couldn't. I wouldn't have thrown it otherwise. When I was younger than you, the man that trained me made me throw a knife to hit a target. If I didn't hit the centre, he'd beat me. Once I hit the centre every time, I had to do the same thing while fighting someone. If I failed, he beat me. When I could do that, he had me aim for a knot in a piece of wood that was twice as far away, while still fighting. I wouldn't have missed.'

Marin shook his head in astonishment and went back to riding in silence. Eventually, with a voice filled with hesitancy, he turned to look at me again.



'There are legends about the valley we're returning to now. Stories of a doorway to another world. It is guarded by creatures that are supposed to protect the forest as well, they are called Lesovik.' He paused. 'Are you one of them?'

'Not exactly,' I said. There didn't seem to be any point in lying to him. Not now. 'They are from my realm though.'

'And that's why you're helping them?'

'They are trapped here Marin. Something has happened to the doorway, as you call it. These people are from a rural part of my world, a place we call Mag Mell. They are farmers. Their understanding of the technology that operates the doorway is probably very basic. I don't know if I can help, but I'm going to try.'

‘And will you return with them? You know, if you mend this doorway?’

I told him I couldn't. I didn't explain all the details, there was no point, just that I was exiled. I knew he'd know what that meant. He didn't reply immediately but when he did, he showed the kind of empathy that made him so unlike his father.

‘You must be very lonely here. Away from all your friends and family. Knowing you can never return. And forced to live for such a long time amongst strangers.’

I couldn't answer him. Everything he'd said was right.

‘It's strange isn't it?’ he continued. ‘I can't wait to leave my family. I hate my life, I hate my brothers, my father especially. I hate what he does. And how everyone treats me because I'm his son, they think I'm like that too. I want to be different. To be myself.’

We rode on until the moon slowly slid below the treeline and rosy fingers of dawn stretched into the sky above us.

‘Can I stay with you Balar? I know you're not going back there. Let me come with you. Please?’

I ignored his plea but mainly because I couldn't think how to answer him. He didn't get chance to say anything more, our hosts were waiting for us at the entrance to the valley.

There were more than thirty of them, a few men but mostly women of all ages. Most had hidden in the caves when we'd visited before. We rode past the tree where Jure had hanged their leader, thankfully empty of his corpse now, but it didn't stop Marin and I exchanging guilty looks. Their suspicion of Marin was palpable, their hesitation and guarded words told me they weren't entirely sure about me either. I dismounted, Marin followed and remained at my side as if he was glued to it and approached the woman I'd met earlier.

‘My name is Balar. I have been exiled in the human realm for a long time. I made some enemies in the Dark Court I'm afraid.’

That earned me gasps and shocked looks but it quickly turned into curiosity.

‘Does that mean you have a good understanding of the portals?’ an old woman asked. She stepped forward, holding on to a wooden staff with steely resolve. Her face was lined, not with age but with determination. She told me her name was Ailbe, the way the others deferred to her told me she'd taken on the mantle of leader.

I told them I would have a look but couldn't make any promises.

'And the boy?' Ailbe asked, staring directly at him without hiding her distaste.

'He's left home. The events here have shown him he has no place there.'

The lad fidgeted self-consciously as their eyes assessed him. I nudged him and told him to follow me, before we faced any more awkward questions.

The cleft in the rock was narrow at the opening but widened out quickly until we were in a cave just big enough for us to walk without needing to stoop. The traditional archway had been formed naturally, by water I suspected, a little stream ran along the centre of the cave, to spill out of it and tumble down the valley. The cave itself was damp, trickling water echoed amidst its dark interior, gravel covered the floor, the same colour as the rock around us.



I dropped to my knees and swept away pea-sized stones that covered the copper plate at the base of one side of the arch. I looked up and found Ailbe watching me. The good-looking woman I'd met earlier, who introduced herself now as Doireann, couldn't hide the hope in her voice.

'Well?'

'The crystals that need to be placed here. Where are they?'

I'd hit the nub of their problem, I could tell by the darkened expressions of the two women and I had a good idea of the cause. I didn't wait for their answer.

'Flood water washed them away, hasn't it?'

They nodded simultaneously. It struck me, by such a simple gesture, how similar they were, the same grey eyes filled with resolve, the same high forehead and firm jawline. Mother and daughter. Ailbe sighed, it echoed softly against the cave walls.

‘We’d been on the hills all day, foraging and bringing in the goats ready for winter. There had been days of rain. When we got back the cave was flooded, much of our camp had been washed away. Including the crystals.’

It turned out they’d used the portal for centuries, a means to supplement their diet and their livestock on the other side. In days gone by the local people had respected them, considered their arrival to bring good luck. They’d helped them improve their understanding of the landscape, hence the legend. Now everything had changed and all they wanted was to go home.

My knowledge of geology wasn’t good. It had been a long time since my school days and I’d rarely paid attention to anything that involved books then, but I did remember that rock clefts with running water were good places to find agate. It wasn’t an ideal crystal by any means, it would probably only survive one opening, but that was all they needed.



‘Get your people to search the stream for agate. It’s a crystal with a waxy, greyish surface, we will need two pieces that are the size of my palm.’

Ailbe set her people to work instantly. They approached the task as though their lives depended on it, which I suppose it did. It wasn’t easy searching in near darkness but as the sun rose and its light penetrated the valley and its silver birch trees, it energised everyone. Marin got on his knees and began searching too, a gesture that earned him some good will.

‘Will you come back with us, if we find the agate?’ Ailbe was at my side, she’d been watching me for some time. ‘You must be very lonely here, in this awful world.’

The second person to say as much in as many hours. It was tempting to say yes. Mag Mell was a long way from the Dark Court. Mag Mell was a landscape of never-ending meadow, perfect for farming and little else. I would never be a farmer. Knowing me, I’d probably go crazy and start killing everyone.

‘No. I’ll stay here,’ I said eventually.

A cry of triumph from a woman, who held her dripping hand above her head, caused us to rush to see what she'd found. In the sunlight the piece of rock shimmered as droplets fell from its surface with its bands of grey, orange and white. Agate.

Ailbe took it to show the others, it served to motivate their search with renewed enthusiasm. Ironically it was Marin who found the next piece. He beamed with pride as he held it up for me to assess.

In triumphant procession we marched in twos and threes into the cave, my heart pounded at the possibility I'd given them the wrong information, or that the agate wouldn't be powerful enough. They ushered me to the front, to place each crystal on the two copper plates. I could hear the indrawing of breath from everyone present as I stepped back and waited. Nothing. Not even the initial vibrancy in the air that prefaced the arrival of the portal. Nothing.

All eyes turned to me for answers.

I wracked my brain for them, wished I'd paid better attention in school. Then it struck me. Perhaps the stones were still damp, that would inhibit the connection to the copper plate. I hurried back, grabbed one, rubbed it on my shirt until I was sure it was completely dry. Hurried over to the other and did the same thing.

Outside, screams. The sounds of panic. And horses' hooves.

Jure Vitez arrived like a tempest, billowing black coat and face like thunder. With him, Miroslav and two of his henchmen. I reached for my sword but Ailbe placed a skeletal hand on my arm and nodded at the lump of agate in my other hand. As the four men strode along the edge of the stream to meet us, I hurried back into the cave and replaced the dried crystal on to its plate. Instantly the air thrummed. We stepped back and a moment later the portal formed, a fizzing grey curtain of energy.

Ailbe marshalled her people through it. Delay meant death, either from the draining of the agate crystals or from Jure's hands. They needed time and I was ready to provide it. I ran out of the cave, sword in hand to meet him.

The glow from the cave, the rush of people entering the crevice and not coming out again, caused him to slow and lose some of his anger. Then his attention shifted from the

cave to the young man at my side. Marin glanced at his father but quickly turned his attention to me.

‘I’m going with them Balar. They told me about a huge library. There are even human hybrids who work there apparently. I’d rather be there than here. You understand, don’t you?’

The lad glanced at his father, there was fear on his face but there was also defiance.

‘It’s the repository of all the knowledge of the realm, Marin. You’d fit in well there. Good luck!’

He sprinted into the cave without another word, joining Ailbe and the last of her people. I raised my sword as a warning. Jure stepped closer, Miroslav at his side.

‘If you didn’t want us to know where you were going, you should have killed those bastards back there. What are you doing here? And where’s Marin?’

The reflected light from the portal flickered and vanished against the entrance to the cave, it sounded like they’d all got through in time. I smiled at the murderous thug in front of me.

‘Marin’s left. So have the others.’

Jure snorted his derision so loudly it echoed off the rock face.

‘And gone where? Hiding in that cave?’

When I didn’t answer he gestured for Miroslav to investigate. I let him go, he wouldn’t find anything. Sure enough, seconds later, he appeared again with a bewildered expression.

‘Marin and the others have gone to a place where you can’t harm them, Jure.’

‘Get them back here!’ Jure screamed at me, his face blood-red with fury.

‘You’re responsible for all this Jure. You drove your son away. You are a bully, a maniac who sees everyone as a commodity to be used for your benefit.’

The man in front of me curled his lip, bunched his fists and roared something guttural and incoherent as he launched at me. I felt the same rush of blood, the same need for vengeance, but for different reasons. Jure was everything I’d come to hate about my early

life, the endless bullying and mindless violence. I'd never been able to vent my fury at those men but now I had an alternative.

We collided, two bulls eager to kill the other, to dispense as much pain as possible, to shed enough blood to determine the victor. To bring death on black wings and screams of agony. We were both brawlers from way back, we fought dirty, we gouged and bit and kicked but I had one advantage. I had an eternity of experience.

I stopped only when Jure's face turned into a squelchy, bloody mush. When the pain in my fists finally penetrated the blood lust in my head. I stood on wobbling legs, kicked the corpse a couple of times for good measure and looked around for Jure's men. They were already running to their horses, aware their wages wouldn't be forthcoming now their boss was dead and unwilling to face the monster that killed him. Even Miroslav ran. I chuckled.

I washed off the blood in the stream, savouring its icy invigoration, and surveyed the valley as the morning sun dried me. I'd had enough of the barbarism of this place. I left the valley and its doorway to the realm I could never revisit. I needed to find somewhere else to call home, a place where I could live out the rest of my days in isolation. The only thing I could hold on to, as I struggled to retain my grip on this new realm, was the knowledge I'd helped my own race return home. And given one human being a chance for a new life. That was enough to sustain me.