

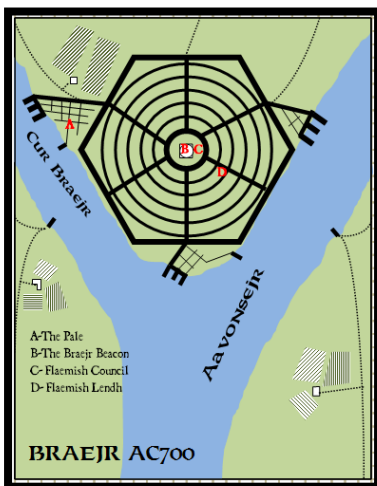
SULESCU



BOOK ONE: THE WARDING STONE

By Sean R. Meaney

Sulescu: (Archaic) Su – Lus; Swine-louse, a blood-sucking parasite.



A CORPSE ON THE TABLE

It had simply appeared. The Corpse was discovered to the horror of the kitchen servants and his mother who had been directing them in their morning work. His form was distorted with pain and torment of the moment of his death, but there was no blood pouring from fatal wounds. His body was simply naked, Covered in entropic body art of forbidden rituals and magic.

“Fetch cloth and warm water.” Lady Sulescu was ashamed of her anger. This was her only Son. He should at least be clean.

Sir Alt Sulescu awoke to the disturbance now alarming his household. Dressed, a sword in his elderly hands, he found his wife scrubbing the dark art off a corpse laid out on the heavy Kitchen table.

“Sula!” He dropped his sword and walked to her, thinking he might stop this madness. He looked at the deathly face and breathed

in at the horror of an unexpected discovery; Zemiros, their eldest child and only son.

“No.” The anger at his Son’s choices in life fell away and was replaced with crushing pain. The Sulescu line now ended with Alt Sulescu. Not even a bastard to claim the estate. Alt turned to stare at the horrified faces of his Servants until he found the one he was searching for.

“Petra,” the servant focused on his voice; “fetch the Priestess of Chardastes from her Residence.” A nod and she was gone about her task. He returned to his. He picked up a wet cloth and in the sight of his wife, wiped the corpse of its dark message. A she looked up.

“Thank you.” The tears of missing years washed away the black ink.

Sir Alt Sulescu stood resolute as the linen shrouded Clerics of Chardastes, their little bells resounding with every motion and step, carried the shrouded form of his Son down into the family crypt. The chamber

had housed so many of the Sulescu line; had given shelter to their passing moments. His eldest daughter Mirsa led the priestesses down with the light of a burning torch. He heard her every step as he followed their descent. Each step became an increasingly silent touch until he could no longer hear her shoes shift the grains against the sandstone steps.

Zemiros.

The name on the old crypt caught his attention. He kept returning every so often. There was a family name with history. This one had raped his way through fifty villages and burned their crude huts and fields. Rumour had it that the immortal Zirchev was one of his bastard children, their common resemblance was uncanny - His only act of redemption.

The Vast crypt looked like the inside of a Rope Hive. A thousand histories had ended here; closed away forever - a thousand dirty secrets, some terrifying and monstrous - A

family who were older than remembered time.

Who were they? Who had they been? Sulescu wasn't even the family name at the beginning. But millennia of cruel tyranny and vampirism had damned them all. They had become named for the Blood-sucking Parasites that they were.

Zemiros.

He had died in some confrontation with a Rival Wizard in far off Glantri. At least there was a corpse. Sir Alt Sulescu had heard stories of magic so terrible that there wasn't even dust left.

The Stone Bier that dominated the heart of the hive of the dead became illuminated by Mirsa's torch; the Priestesses carried the still-shrouded life of Zemiros over it and lowered him to his place of rest. The Knight of Sulescu stood for a moment with his daughter and watched the Priestesses of Chardastes conduct Prayers. Mirsa stepped forward at the summons of a Priestess and lit the shroud afire. Only when the Priestesses stepped back from the Bier and

the burning cloth was little more than ash
and ember did he follow them to the
surface taking his daughter with him.
Zemiros was home at last from far off
Braejr.

ARRIVAL IN BRAEJR

The River divided at the Braejr, its colossal black walls a hundred feet thick and high with only the great blue fire burning atop the Braejr Beacon to be seen of that hidden within.

Zemiros summoned his apprentice to the bow of the ferry.

“Morphail...what do you see?” His hand on the young boy’s shoulder provided a reassuring presence on the uneasy vessel.

“Great Magic, Master.” Morphail Voszlany wondered at the power of the Flame that seemed to burn not just atop the tower but from the entire city. Zemiros nodded at his Apprentice’s assessment.

“Well done. Yes, for centuries this city has drawn many powerful Wizards to it, and we are here to learn why;” Zemiros stared at the Fire and nodded, “Perhaps, if we are fortunate, within our lifetime.” The vessel continued forward toward the ferry docks.

“Flaemish Idiots”; Zemiros was insulted by their xenophobia. He had offered two good Diamonds for a plot of dirt within the city walls and they had rejected him purely on the whiteness of his skin. “No land for sale to us boy; we’re not inbred enough.” Morphail looked at his master with a downtrodden feel about him. The young apprentice really didn’t want to spend another night sleeping in the mud. Zemiros agreed with him.

“We are looking for the Pale”.

The Pale was nothing like the monoculture within the walls. It was crowded with the homes of several Wizards and alive with the cultures they represented. Still, the buildings were primitive, crafted by the hands of labourers from timber and stone as opposed to Magic craft of the distant Alphantians.

This Braejr was a xenophobic mud hole that would never rate against Alphantia, yet the only thing that would draw powerful wizards to it was the secret of the *flaem*.

Still, it would never survive the bigotry of its overlords if they were incapable of embracing change.

Zemiros walked along the Dwarf-craft stone paved road in search of a free plot and spotted a Flaemish farmer overseeing the activities of his foreign labourers from the back of his cart.

“You Sir, do you perhaps have a plot of land you might consider selling?” Zemiros waved his two Diamonds in the light.

“Certainly not to you pale dogs.” Zemiros hated that but had noticed that he had drawn the attention of one of the farm hands toiling in the mud planting Garlic bulbs.

Selmo of Darokin was interested in the offer. He had had enough of muddy fields to make ends meet in this place. He got up and walked toward the Foreigner and the boy standing in the roadway.

“Oy! Get back to work or I’ll dock you the full day’s pay.” The bastard on the Cart was annoying.

“A silver piece...I’ll pass.” Selmo the Dwarf smiled at the prospective buyer of his half acre.

“I have a half acre in the Pale if it interests you...and I’ll only charge you one Diamond for it.”

“What do you think?” Selmo’s plot of land was at the far edge of the Pale overlooking the Cur Braejr. Selmo’s large Timber residence was back against the roadway, and the land down to the river seemed mostly occupied by vegetable gardens, and a small dairy involved in cheese making.

“Tell me about cheese making.” Zemiros was smiling. Morphail had a suspicious feeling that he would be intimately involved in the labour until his eyes fell on the Tavern that was wedged in a narrow plot of land separating Selmo’s half acre from what looked like a Storehouse with dock frontage.

‘The Wizard’s Lair’ was a large Tavern frequented by pretty much every Magic-

user in the Pale. Arkady Malinche late of Kerendas was adding a newly crafted magic item to the wall of exotica. His addition was a bottle with a ship in it, except that the ship was currently in a port somewhere in the Thyatian Empire taking on cargo.

Zemiros walked toward the Bar leaving his apprentice staring at the ship in the bottle. There was something pure about it. Zemiros smiled as Morphail reached out to touch the wonderful thing.

“Morphail...find us some seats,” Zemiros turned back to the Barkeeper, “A jug of Wine and some buttermilk for the boy.”

THE UNBURNED PAGE

Fifth day of Griffon, seven hundred and third year of the Thyatian Calender-

A discovery of sorts, though I am yet to exploit its value. The Flaem as I am calling it has been discovered in a piece of rock crystal. An old Dwarf had placed it on the shelf of exotica at the Tavern. What was thought to be little more than an iron shuttered lantern with a continuous illumination enchantment has thanks to my inquisitive young apprentice revealed itself to be a significant find: The crystal within the iron box is charges with the same as the flaem that burns over Braejr. I must seek out this dwarf and learn how he came by the rock.

Sixth day of Griffon, seven hundred and third year of the Thyatian Calender-

My apprentice has been beaten and robbed by several Flaemish toughs for getting in

their way. Unfortunately the message he was to deliver to Mordon Finehammer with regards to the rather radiant crystal in the tavern was stolen along with the weekly funds I provide my apprentice. The Lawful Authorities of Braejr don't seem all that interested in a prosecution.

I will spend this evening with my Bowl of Scrying and see if I can discern a likely felon; in the mean time I am out a Ruby, The cost of employing a Flaemish Priest to heal my apprentice. Who knew that when I plucked young Voszlany from a life of slopping pigs and mucking out stables in Marilenev that he would prove so 'accident prone'.

Reminder: Check cheeses tomorrow.

Seventh day of Griffon, seven hundred and third year of the Thyatian Calender-

The tavern was raided during the night by Flaemish priests. Apparently they seized the radiant crystal and questioned the barkeep as to its origins. I must act quickly to get to

the dwarf before they do. Religious zealots have a bad habit of disposing of heretics playing with religious artefacts and I suspect the dwarf will likely take his secrets to the grave if I don't.

- Zemiros Sulescu

This is the only known surviving page of Zemiros Sulescu's Braejr Journals. As we see, Zemiros Sulescu had a talent for fine Calligraphy that he had instilled in him during his own apprenticeship with a cruel rod. Unfortunately his Manual on yellow mould cheese making survived intact, fetching three thousand Daros in a recent Merchant Guild Auction.

– Morphail Wozlany

THE BOTTOMLESS WELL

The City of Ardelphia was a great metropolis of multiculturalism compared to the mud hole of Braejr. It was 'the Pale' and 'The Wizard's lair' spread across a square mile. People poured into it seeking cultural enlightenment and mercantile profit. Zemiros Sulescu could see it mapped out below him in perfect one to one scale as he descended through the clouds, his Cloak of Flight carrying him to his destination.

The City was crowded and muggy. The Stone paved streets filled with travellers and traders and Zemiros joined them vanishing into the crowd. Mordon Finehammer had been working on particularly deep water well located in the market plaza in the Diamond District. After several hours Zemiros found the finely fitted stonework well surrounded by a dozen hawkers who were disinterested in simply moving aside.

Zemiros simply erected a *Wall of Stone* around them and painted it with a real time

Panorama of a pit fight between two Ogres happening right at that moment somewhere in the Broken Lands using *Zemiros's Greater Observation*. Realizing they had been inconvenienced, they left by a single exit in the enclosing wall to explore what was so interesting on the outside of the Stone Wall that it should elicit cheers of excitement.

Alone, Zemiros descended over the edge of the stone well with a *Water Breathing* spell dropping down into the dark water with nothing more than a *Light Stone*.

Somewhere near the bottom of the half mile deep shaft a cavern tunnel flowing with water revealed itself. A growth of radiant crystals drew his attention but as he approached it in defiance of the natural flow, his magic failed and suddenly he was struggling to break the surface of the subterranean flow that dragged him away. Zemiros surfaced in the dark and his stone of illumination returned just long enough to gain the attention of the young elf maiden bathing naked at the water's edge. There

was something mystical about the way she cart-wheeled backwards in a single motion retrieving the dirty robe and crossbow. Zemiros gasped at her beauty – even the crimson mask painted over her face seemed perfect - though the effort of breathing drew even more of her fury.

Zemiros Sulescu gave her a moment of Modesty and cleared his throat and looked away. She slipped the clothing over one arm at a time, swapping the crossbow to opposite hands and quickly pulling the cloth rags that were once the *Porador Clan* colour over her head so as to accept as little risk as possible that he might attack her. She would keep her eyes on this shifty surface wretch. The concept was suddenly made difficult for her as Zemiros began removing his wet clothing.

“Greetings from the Surface World,” His Elf was poor, and laced with a humour that didn’t really translate any degree of diplomacy. The Porphyry maiden with the crossbow wasn’t having any of it. Her hide boots slipped with difficulty onto her feet

and over her legs, the spores of the mould she had encountered continued to itch. Still Crystalai of the Porador Clan couldn't have this 'surface dweller', as inept as he seemed to be in dwelling on the surface, following her about during her initiation as a Shaman. "Go away." She waved the Crossbow menacingly. Zemiros was overjoyed that her elf was better than his, still that angry little squeak in her voice suggested he had stumbled on a young Adult, still she didn't resemble any of the Surface elves that he had encountered in his shearing years.

"Which way should I go?" Zemiros cleared his throat as he caught a glimpse of naked thigh. She obviously understood what it meant when he cleared his throat and raised the crossbow.

"Go away now!" Crystalai was only a Junior Acolyte and her magic was restricted to one spell: "*Sleep*;" The spell spilled from her tongue hastily but to no effect against the human. Zemiros smiled.

"It goes more like this - *Sleep*." The Shadow-elf collapsed in a heap, her crossbow

discharged taking Zemiros in the lower leg
and he collapsed with a yell.

“Damn. That was idiocy.”

REFUGE OF STONE

The injury wasn't entirely bad. The young Wizard rummaged through his waterproof backpack to find that his treatise on yellow mould cheese making had survived but his Journals had not. Their inks had failed to stabilize in the water. He dumped them on the floor of the cave and searched for the healing ointment that was there somewhere.

The bolt was protruding from both sides of the leg. Zemiros pulled it in the direction it had penetrated. It shifted slowly and he continued to remove it against the intense pain that tortured him.

The healing salve restored the leg, and he returned the quartz jar to the backpack, turning his attention to his sleeping female companion currently curled up in the mud of the cave.

Zemiros held her crossbow as he stood across from her. The look she returned was uncompromising. She would need the

crossbow if they were both going to continue. Zemiros rested his forehead against the weapon and closed his eyes in a moment of contemplation.

“OK. This is how it will be done. You have some understanding of where you are going and I need you to lead me there.” Zemiros didn’t really feel he had a choice in the matter. The only escape magic was the wish put on him at birth to return his corpse home to Sulescu after he was dead and he wasn’t interested in making that visit. He tossed her the crossbow.

“Let’s go. I assume you have people who tell you what to do, and it will be with them I will speak.” Crysalai understood the words that he spoke. It was something she could agree to. The Marking Shaman could deal with this one.

“This way.” The words spilled from her throat with that bat-like squeak that enticed Zemiros to learn more of her people. Was it just her, or were they all stubborn and annoying?

He followed her into the darkness of the Warrens.

The bloated yellow maggot was particularly large for its kind. The acidic slime that seemed to perpetually sweat from its hide and dribble from the small circle of fangs that anyone might have discerned as its mouth burned on the stone around it reacting with something in the mixture of earth, air and water. It lay dormant in the dark, not particularly having eyes to see with; rather it sensed heat of living things. At this moment it watched two hot objects move past the intersection of its tunnel for a single moment.

Food; the sensation was overwhelming and the great foul beast wriggled desperately to pursue, its hunger demanding. It reached the intersection quickly and once again caught view of two distinct sources of heat moving down the shaft ahead of it.

A spit of acid sprayed past the closest target and grazed the second; and suddenly both vanished. At this moment its great bulk

impacted on the odd wall blocking its path. The acid reacted with the substance of the wall instantly.

Zemiros was lucky to get his *Reinforced Door* spell in place. It wouldn't hold for long but considering the alternative had been to memorize a *Fireball* – he thought of the many fatal mistakes young apprentices had made with that spell in close quarters – It was the right choice. He turned to the injured elf and examined her hurt. Some acid burns. She was lucky to be alive. He picked her up and ran.

The cave he discovered was no water-cut cavity formed over millions of years. It had been at one time a steel box. At the centre of the Steel box was a strange iron humanoid wearing a crown. It could have been a lizard-man. It could have simply been artistic.

The Crown however was Gold and mounted with four large rubies and taunted him. I am worth something. You must take me. A cry from his companion drew him back to the

real world. She needed healing. Her beautiful and perfect body needed his utmost attention.

Zemiros shook that sensation off. Their relationship had to be all business or he might wake to find himself without his manhood. He erected a second *Reinforced Door* out in the tunnel and retreated to the iron box in which they now hid. He made all effort to find the healing ointment.

THE CROWN OF CORUPTION

Zemiros moved now carrying her in his arms along the tunnel. They had to put as much distance between the second *Reinforced Door* and the Iron Vault as possible. It was unfortunate that her crossbow had not been spared in the assault of whatever that acid spewing worm was.

A Waterway; Zemiros almost fell into it with his prize in his arms. The cold water was particularly cold. He didn't have a boat and they needed a means of getting down river. He broke open his Spell book and began searching for the one he knew was there. There was only a Partial ledge but it would have to do. He dragged his companion around onto the ledge that overlooked the water.

"Wall of Stone." The words vanished from the page of his spell book. It was a necessary sacrifice. The river was cut and directed back down the shaft he and his companion had left behind. So the river no longer flows in this direction. They would be

safe. As the water flow dropped to reveal a rough tunnel he lowered himself down from the edge and pulled his companion down after him.

The river used this tunnel to go somewhere, and now they would find out.

The Cave they sheltered in wasn't ideal but there was now a fungal forest a hundred yards from where they were. Zemiros collapsed looking for sleep.

He had healed her wounds. She had paid him in kind.

Crysalai expended, rested on Zemiros, his naked form still seducing her mind. Was it impossible to be shaman now? Was this part of her initiation? Was he even real? She bit down on his flesh and Zemiros Screamed.

"Halav's manhood Woman! Are you planning to eat your food now you are done playing with it?" She stared at him.

He was such a heretic. He would be difficult to convert to the way of Rafiel. She knew

the words were wrong in her mind the instant she thought them. The refuge of stone was absolute the instant she thought them. The refuge of stone was absolute on the matter of 'Outsiders'. They could never be together least it offend Rafiel.

She lifted her hands off his body and found them blackened with ink. His naked form was scribed with the fourteen verses of The Refuge of Stone. His heresy was now hers.

"What's wrong?" Zemiros caught the look of horror on her face.

When had she done this? She struggled off his naked form shaking her head. This was all wrong. She huddled crouched in a corner of their cave attempting to conceal her naked self from her despoiler.

"I..." the words fell silent and she grabbed at her robes, pulling his backpack over and spilling its contents. The crown, its great bloody rubies victorious, fell at her feet and she reached out to return it.

Zemiros was on her instantly.

"Mine!" the blow of his hand threw her back against the wall of their refuge of

stone. Broken by this culmination of events Crystalai of the Porador could only watch in horror as her maddened seducer placed the crown on his head, fell slump as though he were suddenly being crushed by an insurmountable weight, and was disintegrated with a scream until only the crown remained.

The light of the marking Shaman fell over her and she was forced to look at him.

"I failed." The very idea of sympathy for the Junior Acolyte left the Shaman the instant his eyes fell on the burdensome Crown in the mud.

"Yes." Crystalai cringed at the confirmation of her overwhelming self doubt and destruction of ego and she looked away. The marking shaman bludgeoned the broken shadow elf with his soul crystal until she was dead.

"Mine!" Shallatariel snatched up the crown, leaving his bloodied soul crystal in its place. He had his heart's desire, placing the crown on his head.

THE BONE MAN

The precession emerged from the depths of the family crypt before the awaiting mourners. The fifty ton cover-stone pushed aside to reveal the staircase once again grew arms and crawled across the hole like a bloated tick until the stairs were once again hidden from prying eyes. The stone arms twisted insanely to become nothing more than engravings in the wheel of the stone, the Priestess of Chardastes led all outside into the open air.

Something woke in utter darkness with a monstrous, raging hunger. It fell a short distance and crawled about the limits of its stone cage finding ancient bones on which to chew. No. It was the smell of something that had come and gone; something alive. It crawled upward until it reached a barrier. A small opening expended cool fresh air.

Dimension Door.

It fell upon them now, screams of terror only enriching the pleasure it felt of the moment of feeding. Still each death seemed to make the hunger worse. It became an orgy of tastes.

The screams roused the Knight of Sulescu from his sleep. They were no longer the nightmare of the return of his Son that had haunted him. Now they were real. Terror blended with the Source of that Terror. Alt Sulescu pulled on the once white padded armour that he now took to wearing as a Coat for warmth. Whatever new horror this was, it was making its way through the residence one victim at a time.

A scream came from his daughter, Mirsa's bed chambers. The Bastard Sword that he had been given as a gift by the King of the faraway Kingdom of Darokin was out of its Scabbard. It wasn't his daughter, rather it was his wife now held in the terrible grasp of a once human monster. Alt screamed as it tossed her drained corpse aside like an

angry child done with its doll and came at him. The foul Ghoul came at him.

“No!” Alt screamed the word in recognition of the ashen beast that had recently dug its way from the grave to butcher his family and servants and in that moment of recognition was a terrible collision.

Zemiros awoke in the darkness, the pain and madness of those last few moments now drifted into view. A voice in his head had simply demanded it of him, berated and beaten him, into desiring the crown. Thoughts of his lover in that darkness washed over him. Then as he again loved her, she became his sister Mirsa, bloodied and broken, and he fell back striking out in horror. Crysalai fell against the cave wall. A shadow loomed over them both. His father’s face came at him and a fury of blows and his Father was dead, the sword he had held used to stake his old form onto the reinforced walls of the residence. A blur of meaningless faces, screaming in terror; a

crown with four red rubies lay in the mud and the red of the rubies became a river of blood flowing through a subterranean artery from which he drank his fill.

And then he was alone in the darkness.

“Light”- The Spell tumbled from his parched lips slowly. The chamber illuminated revealing a crypt but he didn't see it, his eyes shut. It was cold and dry but he didn't feel it. He was thirsty, his throat a dry well. He desperately needed a drink. Where was that vagabond Apprentice of his.

“Boy! Fetch me something to drink.” Zemiros opened his eyes. He wasn't in his residence in far off Braejr. A name on the crypt wall gave away the secret. Zemiros. He read the words again to be sure. He was resting on the Bier in the Sulescu Crypt. The Insanity of it confused him. He should be dead. The only way for that damn corpse retrieval wish to function was if he had died. Had he died for a moment? Had that all it had taken? Had his heart stopped for a moment?

No. It had to have been more than that. He wiped at the ash left by the burned death-shroud of the Chardastes. He had been dead or in some deep sleep for them to not realize he was still alive.

That was it. He had died for a moment and been in a deep sleep that looked like death and the idiots had laid him in the crypt.

Zemiros Sulescu burst into laughter; the thirst in his dry throat reduced quickly it to a cough. Still there was something that haunted him from the dark corner of the crypt; something that he needed to remember.

THE MOURNFUL STONE

Zemiros had no way to know what day it was or even the time; worse still, he was short of spells. The cover-stone; It had a password. Zemiros sorted through a childhood he had forgotten and came to the death of his Grandfather. Martuk Sulescu. There were words spoken by his father Alt and the cover-stone moved aside. What were they?

“Samussehasen;” Zemiros had whispered the phonetic of a single spell symbol he had been practicing that day.

“Zemiros! Hush,” had whispered his Mother angrily in response to his misbehaviour. He pushed past her words to the image of his father and the shape of his lips as he spoke the song. He could hear it: The Song of Zemiros.

Nothing happened. Zemiros recited the words again just to be sure. The cover-stone refused to move aside. He sat for a time and contemplated the version of events as

he had thought them experienced. No. The words were correct.

“I am Zemiros Sulescu. Move aside.”
Nothing happened.

A burning Brand perhaps. Zemiros returned to the centre of the Crypt and located a leg bone.

There was no name on this one.

“My thanks, whoever you are.”

He needed Cloth. There wasn't any...Hair. He needed Hair. Grandmother Alya Radu, her long trestles were always something to see.

“My apologies Grandmother”; He tied her tangled hair to one end of the borrowed leg bone and went in search of something he could spark a fire with. A Hip Bone as a rubbing board against the Joint of a leg bone.

Failure; He had seen an Orc Shaman do this very thing. It should have worked. Perhaps it was the species of the bone. Zemiros pushed it away from him and looked around at the collection of Ancestors.

He roused now, searching the lowest shelves first. Then the next until he was forced to climb the walls. He found one that was sealed. The Bronze cover took a bit to break, but within lay a selection of Scrolls. What lay behind them was another matter. The ancient ancestor turned on him and scabbled along the rather deep shelf to get past him to freedom. His price for being undead was to be walled up in his own tomb. Zemiros crushed the creature's skull to powder with an ease that took even him by surprise. He shouldn't have been able to do that. He stared at the Scrolls, most of which had been obliterated; all except one.

Zemiros climbed down and placed his prize on the stone bier. The Scroll by its very nature was brittle, and the few words were so old it was impossible to comprehend. There would be no key to escape here. He returned to the hank of human hair and pile of bones that he had hastily abandoned.

“You will burn...or I am not a Sulescu.” He rubbed the Bones through the hair and he wasn’t going to leave without discovering fire.

The bone shattered from the pressure Zemiros had placed on it. He pushed his failure aside.

“Aaa!” the cry was one of frustration as he abandoned his seat on the stone stairs.

Damn it. Zemiros got up from the step and contemplated his prospects. This wasn’t going to happen. He shook his head. He was going to die of thirst long before that stone moved aside.

“By Halav I want brandy-wine.” Resting an elbow on the Stone bier at the heart of the Crypt he contemplated dying without that Halfling brandy-wine.

The Light spell failed. He sat and contemplated the irony of a Wizard with no escape spells.

“Nyx take me!” Zemiros yelled the profane words in the darkness.

THE DEFILED BIER

The Bier erupted with a terrible cold that even Zemiros now felt as he was hurled back from it through the darkness. He desperately needed to see what was happening. The temperature in the pitch black Sulescu family crypt continued to plunge into a bottomless winter.

At least this turn of events confirmed a few of the darker Sulescu family secrets: They had most certainly been followers of Nyx. Zemiros the first; The Crypt had been constructed by him when the Sulescu had been little more than Farmers. They had always been farmers. It was his own coward father, Alt Sulescu, who had sought a knighthood with that dolt of a Marilenev who proclaimed himself king of all he surveyed. There was nothing wrong with being a farmer. The thought carried him into the cold and dark.

Again the Hunger Surfaced. This time however there was no means of escape,

only the terrible cold. It searched now, finding a shaft long and deep, in the walls of its prison, and it dug, pulling away the old stones once tightly fitted, digging into the earth until it was free. The warm air of night did nothing to sate its hunger. It needed to feed.

Solta Ebonov was returning to his home with his digging tool. He and the other villagers had spent a day burying the corpses found in Sulescu Manor. Whatever it was that had slaughtered them had fed on Servant and Noble alike.

The horror of Sir Alt Sulescu staked on his own sword two feet off the ground would be with him to the end of his time. Unfortunately that time was now.

The rough beast pushed him to the ground. For a small moment he thought it one of the Villagers messing him about until it tore away at his neck and punched his flesh in a feeding frenzy. His horrible scream, quickly silenced alerted the other villagers that the

Beast was not yet done with their little Village.

Zemiros awoke in the wretched cold and dark of his tomb. He could see now, Light was coming from somewhere. He climbed. It looked like the Hole in which his un-dead ancestor had found to be an inconvenient prison. He knew the feeling.

As narrow as the shaft was he reached the source of illumination. It burned at his flesh and he felt real pain at the prospect of Light. Exposure to that black flame was likely the source. Despite the pain, he needed out, and the sooner the better. He dug as though his life depended on it.

The earth was quickly loosened and he was out in the burning light of day. He was stuck. Two farmers were hurrying across a field. Zemiros gave a yell to draw their attention then another yell to give them an encouraging hurry-up.

“Over here. Yes that’s it. Sorry to be a burden but you don’t think you could dig

me out. I'm sort of...stuck." Johann and Gregor stared at the stranger.

"Who are you when you are at home stranger?" They were already forming an opinion as to that question. The killings had to have a perpetrator that was far more intelligent than some wolf or Bear.

"Zemiros Sulescu. Now dig me out lads, it's a little snug here." They backed up the instant he spoke his name.

"Stay back you undead thing!" Johann raised his shovel. Gregor knew exactly what was going on here. Zemiros Sulescu was back from the grave and had butchered everyone. He slapped Johann on the chest.

"I am not undead!" Zemiros shook his head. Farmers! Salt of the earth they may be, but backwards they defiantly were.

"You watch the evil fiend and I'll get the others." Gregor was off.

Johann stared at the filthy creature from the Darkness.

"So what's it like being undead?" Johann was just making polite conversation.

“By Halav’s beard, I am not undead!” Zemiros was feeling awkward now. At some point in the long silence Johann pulled a clay flask from beneath his clothes and took a swig. Zemiros cleared his parched throat. “You don’t have any Halfling Brandy-wine in that bottle.” Johann shook his head. “Kaver!” Fermented Turnip Alcohol - Zemiros was familiar with the Substance. It was very popular in these parts. “Mind sharing some while we wait for the angry mob to come burn me at the stake? It’s been at least a week since I had anything other than water.” Johann offered his flask up wearily. Zemiros took a good swig before returning it. “So how was this year’s Turnip harvest?” Johann raised an eyebrow of suspicion at the question and leaned on his rake. “It could be better.” Zemiros nodded looking around for someone a little more helpful.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

Zemiros explained the rather unbelievable chain of events that had caused him to be buried alive in the family crypt at some length; the gathering crowd slowly settled in for repeated telling before someone burst into laughter and compelled the others to dig him out.

His naked and filthy form evoked some nods before one fellow offered him use of an old cloak that covered him sufficiently.

Armand had been Warden of the Village of Sulescu for some years. He placed a hand on Zemiros's shoulder and drew his attention.

"It's probably not likely the others will speak of it but we buried your family last evening along with a number of the servants – it's likely that fiend from the crypt you mentioned had escaped and done for them all." Zemiros collapsed and emptied what little was in his stomach on the ground.

Zemiros struggled to his feet and made for the main house.

“Gregor, go with him.” Johann turned to Armand.

“You could have at least waited until he had a meal in his belly and a half mug of ale.” Johann shook his head.

“He needed to know.” Armand was adamant he had done right by Zemiros.

“He needed food and shelter. He won’t find it in that house.”

Zemiros stumbled through the field of fresh graves until the great broadsword drew his attention. Would that be the last moments of Alt Sulescu, the Knight who swam the river Volga in armour?

“They said the King of Darokin give him that sword for battling an army of Orcs in the Halfling lands three years ago.” Zemiros touched the hilt listening to Gregor’s words.

“The Battle of Black Fire or some such up in their Mountains;” Zemiros nodded. That would have been just as he had travelled to the land of Braejr.

Zemiros found the Manor abandoned and dark. There was no life here in the blood stained halls of its ruination. The Villagers had simply removed the corpses for burial. The signs of a brutal slaughter were everywhere.

It didn't seem to be the work of a mere skeleton. Not this much carnage. Whatever it was, it wasn't over. It would never be over.

The two foot thick reinforced walls were banded with iron straps and great iron Spikes that gave the Manor an indestructible quality. Zemiros pushed a concealed door panel on its central axis and opened the concealed stairs that would take him directly into his father's bed chambers. The path carried a price. He found the body of his youngest sister; her little body dashed to pieces on the Iron banded stairs and drained dry. He picked her up gently and made his way up the stairs to the abandoned bedchamber. With

the concealed door pushed aside, he placed her gently on the bed and went to look out through the window at the raging sea. A merchantman sailed there, plying the trade routes. Zemiros wished he was there now.

After a time he accepted his fate. He was bound to the estate for the rest of his life. He left the room sealing the bedchamber. For now Mirsa would rest.

His own bedroom had been emptied. His father's anger no doubt had taken a toll on his collection of personal artefacts. Still Alt could not have had access to the prize he sought. At the end of the bed chamber, where a vacant wall that never gathered dust and never held any art propped up the ceiling. He reached through the permanent illusion causing it to vanish. A collection of prized artefacts that had once occupied the corner of a Tavern in far off Braejr revealed themselves. On one shelf his spell book sat, the book end that propped it up was a radiant crystal sitting in an ornate gold

frame rather than the shuttered iron lantern that it had called home.

Somewhere in Braejr a tavern held a collection of very good fakes, which unless you looked closely would seem as they had always been.

THE OFFENSIVE MESSENGER

Amdar Sulanov was a Knight. You could tell that instantly by the way he sat on his Warhorse. He had been instructed by his Monarch to investigate rumours that the Knight of Sulescu had perished with his household at the hands of some undead thing, and if so lay claim to the Estate as his own.

Finally his years of loyalty would be rewarded. Still an undead foe would pose risks. Amdar was not an overly pious warrior of the church of Traladara. He never really considered the immortals to have any place on a battlefield and he certainly did not want anything they or their 'worshippers' had to offer.

A marker stone caught Amdar's eye and he halted his destroyer. The Words were barely visible. Su Lus - the old word for Sulescu. He had reached the outskirts of the Estate. He nudged his destroyer forward.

The Villagers seemed to stare at the Knight advancing toward them on the warhorse as though they had not seen such a spectacle in their lives. Only when he was close did he halt his loyal companion.

“You there”; Gregor looked around to be sure the nobleman on the horse was referring to him, yanking his old cap from his head; “Yes you! Is it true the Knight of Sulescu and his family have been butchered by some undead beast?” Gregor nodded.

“Yes my Lordship, Sir Alt Sulescu and his entire household butchered to the last servant, not two weeks ago. A terrible thing it was.” Even better; “And the undead beast, does it still trouble the Village?” Gregor puffed himself up with pride prepared to tell him the entire tale.

“Oh no my Lordship, It was destroyed by His Lordship’s Son in a furious battle of some telling”. Amdar Sulanov had no time for the tale now. He held up a Gauntlet to stop the peasant from imparting it.

“Where is Sulescu’s heir now?” It seemed he had not yet earned his estate. Gregor was a fountain of information.

“Up at the Manor house my Lord...still grieving the terrible loss.” Sir Sulanov tossed a copper at the serf and pushed his Warhorse forward ignoring anything else he had to speak of.

The king’s Knight pushed open the great reinforced portals that he was expecting to be locked and impregnable.

“Lord Sulescu!” Amdar didn’t wait for an answer, he simply entered the hall. His fine armoured form reflected in the great mirrors of polished bronze. He was all alone.

“Lord Sulescu!” He turned to discover a poorly dressed man standing in his shadow; a servant perhaps?

“I seek Lord Sulescu...” Amdar wasn’t entirely sure the wretch had comprehended him. There was defiantly something wrong with the fellow. Perhaps it was that only Amdar was reflected in the mirrors.

“Vampire!” Amdar screamed the words as he attempted to leap back against a mirror, pulling for his sword. Zemiros decapitated his foe with a curved Dagger.

Zemiros stepped back from the dead knight. He rummaged through his belongings and discovered a letter signed by the king granting him the Sulescu Estate if Sir Alt Sulescu and his family had indeed perished at the hands of some undead beast. Obviously Zemiros’s presence was going to be an inconvenience to anyone of ambition.

It was time to send a message to this disrespectful King.

The King of Traladara returned to his bedchambers on the summons of his panicked Guardsmen and Servants.

There amongst the blood soaked sheets and pillows a severed head drew every one’s attention including his.

“Whose head is it?” One of his most trusted Soldiers rolled the head over and examined

it thoroughly. "Well?" He wasn't use to waiting for answers.

"One of your Knights...Sir Amdar Sulanov, I believe." The one he had given the Sulescu Estate, if he had the ability to claim it. Apparently he did not.

"Ready my personal guard and warhorses; we ride now."

THE SIEGE OF SULESCU

Zemiros wasn't sure how long the orange light of a burning village had flickered through the window as he sat contemplating the collection of spells only that for some reason he had felt nauseous and looked up to consider whether they might be cooking a meal at the village tavern. The Village burned in the distance. There were perhaps a dozen riders on horse and four times that dismounted, all of them clad in armour plate that now had a distinct orange hue to them. Several were rounding up villagers who objected to having their homes burned by their betters and butchering them.

The Tyrant Marilenev sat on horseback at the centre of the field surrounded by most of his Soldiers. He was overseeing the shaping of an Impaling pole.

Zemiros emerged from the dark manor house and caught the King's attention.

“Zemiros Sulescu! So the vampire’s hunger reveals itself at the smell of blood.” The King snatched the Impaling pole and advanced on the Wizard, most of his men following on Horse and foot.

Reap Field; what happened next was a horror. The ancient farming magic Zemiros had plundered from the crypt that was designed to sever every stalk of grain in an acre field at half a foot above ground became something more terrible the greater the power of the magic user. Every horse and every horseless soldier simply no longer had feet attached to their legs, vital blood sprayed from arteries; A great and terrible scythe had reaped its harvest. The screams of wildly flailing war horses and warriors alike erupted across the acre of turnip field where survivors had for the most part simply been thrown from their terrified and tormented steeds into the mud and others crushed and flailed upon in the panic.

The horror of what he had unleashed had paused the Soldiers and villagers in the next field.

The King was however still standing, having used the impaling pole to vault from his maimed warhorse. Still the King was alone with a Wizard of considerable power and called his few remaining men who could stand.

“Soldiers rally to your King!” The baker’s dozen that still had their feet advanced through the carnage to their liege.

“I’ll have you on my spear yet vile wraith.” Zemiros turned and walked toward the chapel that sat over his family crypt; the Iron Fist of Marilenev waited for his soldiers to be around him before following.

Zemiros was standing by the great coverstone that had proven unwilling to step aside when the Marilenev pushed in the doors of the chapel.

“You certainly are a formidable foe; but how formidable? I will be in the crypt below this cover stone if you care to send me to

my rest.” Zemiros opened a Dimension Door and vanished from view. The King of Marilenev compelled his men forward. Those who advanced on the stone to move it found themselves grappled about the ankles by great stone hands that grew from the sides. Some were crushed, and others torn asunder with a brutal force. The Tyrant of Marilenev turned and fled the destruction.

In the distance Peasants were spearing the maimed horses. Others were taking instruction from the deceitful Vampire with regards to his maimed soldiers.

“When you are done butchering the injured horses for meat, dig a large hole and bury any of his surviving soldiers in it. Don’t take chances; use spears on the ones you are unable to drag to the pit and push them in.” Zemiros Sulescu watched the dark shadow of a fleeing Marilenev dog departing the chapel with as much haste as possible and

he was suddenly stricken with an odd hunger.

The Marilenev monarch ran for his life, stripping off his burdensome armour as he searched for an escape. The woods offered some cover and he made for it. By the look of it he could journey the whole distance to the Castle in a week; Sooner if he could get one of the surviving Horses.

THE WARDING STONE

An hour of hard travel had put some good distance between him and the community of Sulescu. The King of Marilenev emerged from the wood a good mile from the village at the Marker stone to the estate and the Road to Marilenev. He would send his Wizards to dispose of this fiend.

Zemiros was waiting for him. He had wiped the moss from the marker that he had never noticed to reveal that this was no Estate marker. It warned Vampires that this was the private estate of a Nosferatu Lord titled Zemiros.

His invisible hand grabbed the King by the throat and Zemiros whispered to him.

“I’m going to make it last for a very long time.” and they rose into the air, hunter and prey flying toward the distant fortified Manor house that would now become a larder. The Tyrant of Marilenev screamed.