

TALES FROM THE
KNOWN WORLD



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VALIANT THEY WERE

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Su-Lus

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, at which 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 raged 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 Braejr. 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 Alphasians. This Braejr was a xenophobic mud hole that would never rate against Alphasia, 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 charged with the same magic as the flame 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 Thyasian Calendar

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 Thyasian Calendar*

*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 a 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. Realising 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!” Crysalai 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 stabilise 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 memorise 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 Corruption

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 realise 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 practising 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 coverstone 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

scrabbled 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 undead 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.

Mirsa

Mirsa Sulescu ran through the mist, the wolves close behind her. Somewhere to her left the Lendheu pushed their

wagons faster. These landless Traladarans would serve her needs perfectly.

Balkrin Vanagas had heard the tales of the child who ran with wolves. If the nicest of the rumours were to be believed they would lose at least one horse to that pack, and they didn't have a horse to spare, but he could not bring himself to lose family or friends. The shutter behind him slid open and his wife Zanthira whispered something barely audible. "Yes. She is still out there with her wolves." Would she attack if they failed to reach the safety of the next village? Balkrin shook his head and returned his attention to the road ahead. He had eight wagons to keep safe. Then all at once the child and her wolves were gone.

Balkrin's mind exploded with curiosity. For a great many hours he had experienced a strange feeling that they were all being herded. The pack could have attacked fresh and overwhelmed them all, but now they had stopped chasing entirely. Balkrin considered what that change might entail. They had found a point of weakness?

They were not going to make it.

Ezerina stared out at the road from the back of the last wagon. A child fleeing wolves appeared from nowhere. It was the first time anything strange had happened to her. The first time ever that she had needed to make a decision that affected the lives of her fellow clan. There was a child, distressed and in need.

Ezerina Galynis had a feeling that this child could create change in the way the others treated her and her husband. Change was opportunity, and that was all she needed.

Ezerina unlocked the back door to the household wagon, looking over her shoulder to see if Trynkara Prusas might notice. “Come inside quickly, before the wolves have you,” her concern almost motherly. Mirsa smiled at the invitation and leaped into the arms of her waiting family. Ezerina stared into the eyes of the beautiful child and could only smile as she surrendered her breast to her new daughter. Trynkara Prusas was on the verge of dozing off when the shutter behind her opened.

“Ezerina?” Hands grappled her forcibly and she lost the reins. Trynkara Prusas could no longer manage a physical resistance as she was pulled backward into the Wagon that had been her house for so long. Everything she had been vanished into the darkness that now embraced her. The rear wagon entered a terrible shadow and did not emerge.

Rymvid Galynis waited a moment more to be sure it would not emerge. He turned to the boy next to him sitting amongst the goods bundled in this goods wagon. “Dinmiel, Alert your father. We have lost the last wagon.” Rymvid opened the rear door to the wagon, his sword in hand, and stepped out as the Wagon stopped.

Rymvid walked back alone toward the shadow of the old household wagon, Bronkar and his son stopped at the rear of the merchant wagon.

“What is it?” Bronkar was concerned as to why the wagon had vanished. Movement stirred a fear in Rymvid Galynis. Rymvid had his sword out and then put it away laughing. He waved Bronkar and Dinmiel to move their wagon on.

“Bronkar! Your wife fell asleep at the reigns, and my wife tells me that she will drive the Wagon.” Bronkar Prusas turned the idea over in his mind. There was something wrong with this situation but he couldn’t put his finger on it. The Wolves were gone. Where were the wolves?

“Rymvid, ride with your wife.” They needed to get moving again. “Dinmiel. Run to the front wagon and get them moving again. All is well. Then join me up on top.” The boy ran forward to signal the other wagons on. Bronkar paused for a moment and then walked down to the last Wagon to check on his wife.

Lair of the Beast

Mirsa awoke to the warmth of her parent’s bedchamber. The monstrous nightmare of something chasing her through a mansion filled with screams was quickly washed away with the morning sunlight. Her father was slumped at his desk, likely scribing some letter to the King.

“Papa?” her frail voice didn’t get his attention. Could he be asleep? Mirsa slipped out of the great bed and stalked her prey; a tug to his sleeve. “Papa...Are you sleeping?” A terrible face filled with horror and ash and blood spoke to her in an unfamiliar voice.

“Mirsa. You must feed.” Her world became cold and dark but she could make out some beast shackled to a distant wall. She screamed at what happened next. Mirsa woke in the warmth of her parent’s bedchambers. Despite the

darkness and cold outside, she could feel the warmth of the bedpans. Had the servants warmed the bed just for her? The door in the distant wall pushed open and a shadowy figure carrying something entered. "Mirsa. I found you food."

Mirsa screamed at the sight of her brother Zemiros; Her brother who was dead and sealed away in the family crypt. "Mirsa...Silence!" The effect was horrible. She felt nothing but compulsion in the commandment. Zemiros approached with a plate of food and Mirsa retreated diving over the edge of the great bed putting as much cover between them as possible. "Mirsa...come and eat."

The child wanted to resist but her body betrayed her. She fell on the food like a hungry dog forcing the now foul tasting foods that had once been her favourites into her mouth. Zemiros reached out to stop her but she couldn't. "Stop...Stop that." She halted mid chew and he fell back with some understanding of what was happening. "Do what you want,"

Mirsa spat out the food. She couldn't fathom why it would taste horrible. It was the first time she had ever been offered wine. It tasted like blood but her body didn't rebel against it. She could feel an overwhelming desire for more.

"It's blood." Zemiros spoiled everything. Mirsa hurled the glass across the room. She was angry with him now. He had forced her to drink blood and made her like it. He was a monster. Where were her parents?

"Go way!" Mirsa crawled back around behind the bed putting distance between them. Zemiros didn't move.

“Mother and Father are dead.” It was like a hammer blow to Zemiros. For Mirsa it was just another Lie. She looked angrily at him. He was a Wizard. Her Papa never killed wizards. Wizards were bad. He had hung that Wizard Barble...Bargle? Barble, and his brother swore vengeance. They were bad for Stealing that wagon of Turnips. If they wanted turnips she would have gladly given them hers every dinner.

“Liar, you’re just like the other bad Wizards.” He was obviously lying. Zemiros moved toward her and she moved away in response. She didn’t have much choice.

Mirsa ran for the door in an attempt to escape.

“Mirsa...STOP!” It was like a wall. Mirsa found her body paralysed; her hand just short of escape. “I’m sorry Mirsa.” He scooped her up into his arms as he had done before he left, but this time she could not forgive him; would not forgive him. Zemiros would have to show her. He carried her toward the door, and suddenly she wanted nothing more to remain in that bedroom. Mirsa screamed as he carried her out into the hall where she had been chased like prey, where her father had been impaled on his own sword, where her mother had been fed upon.

“Shush.” She reduced herself to a ball of fears in his arms and cried.

Throne of Stone

“Murderer;” Mirsa hurled the mirror at Zemiros stepping over the wine glass and spilled blood.

“Must I command you to drink it?” Mirsa snarled at her brother the beast of Sulescu. “I will not have you feeding off the villagers when you finally succumb to hunger.” Zemiros approached the cornered child.

“You are no better, feeding off criminals.” Mirsa tensed. “I won’t be like you, Monster.”

Zemiros drew up at the scornful word. That pause was all that Mirsa required. The child ran now at all haste, diving through the glass windows that looked out over the sea. The bedchamber exploded with wind and glass shards sprayed across the floor.

“Mirsa.” Zemiros rushed forward to the shattered window at the thought of her injury and looked down. At the bottom the sea was smashing against the cliffs in the moonlight. She was gone.

Mirsa found herself clinging to a throne of rock no more than ten feet above the breaking waves. She felt soaked. Had she gone into the water? She had never learned how to swim and the water seemed very destructive. Her parents were dead; her brother an Undead beast that had murdered them; and she...? Mirsa curled up in a ball against the rock and tried not to think about it.

The Sun would rise soon. Mirsa snuggled for warmth in the memory of her mother. A dream perhaps; she stirred for a moment in the warmth of her mother’s lap.

“Mama, I had a terrible dream.” Mirsa could feel the warmth of her.

“Shhh...The storm will pass Mirsa. You will be safe on my throne awhile.”

“Mama,” Mirsa awoke to a sunrise with a compulsion to rub away the moss on a rock. ‘Petra’ revealed itself scared into the stone to the depth of a dagger’s hilt.

“Mirsa!” the mother of her dreaming screamed the words in her ears and Mirsa fell from the Throne of Petra into the Sea.

The churn of the muddy water and kelp dragged the child into the darkness of a forgotten bore in the cliff wall and the blow of a rock stole the moment from her.

Mirsa awoke in darkness. All around her she could hear the drip of water; the smell of salts, and feel of the wet of stone, and something else...

“How did you get in here?” The question was perfectly legitimate. Unfortunately it wasn’t hers to ask. Mirsa could see nothing, but she felt the rough hands lay themselves upon her small body, patting her down. “Damn shame that...she’s pretty...you know...for a dead girl.”

The hands had a friend. A hand in her mouth was suddenly checking for something.

“I’m not dead.” Mirsa struggled to speak out against the heavy handedness of her unseen interlopers.

“Halav’s Nipples, It’s an undead thing...a Vampire!” The hand jerked out of the mouth. “Quick, kill it! Drive a stake through its chest afore it falls on us in a frenzy of feeding.”

Mirsa screamed at the thought of anyone driving a stake through her anything, falling back into the water.

“I’m not a Vampire thingy you nasty monsters in the dark; Leave me alone!” Mirsa felt the gentle tug of a turning tide in the water around her legs.

“I don’t know Bartov, She could be just really cold. She might not be one of them Vampire things; Look out!” The bore jerked at Mirsa and a hand snatched her out of the Water before she could again be dragged away.

“Good enough for me...” Bartov liberated her from the raging water.

Mirsa found herself in powerful arms of something really hairy. The feeling reminded her of her father. The touch of it itched like a hair brush.

“Not going to eat me are you?” Mirsa felt uncertain at her prospects. The darkness erupted with laughter of several voices.

“Nay little fish, you’re far too scrawny for a meal,” came the whisper from the Itchy beard of Bartov.

The Lost Forge

Mirsa could feel it at first; A terrible rhythm through the beating of her chest. Was that her heart? Then after a time a faint glow from the tunnel ahead and she could hear it; metal on metal – a great hammer, striking on a distant anvil. Bartov carried Mirsa past the smithy’s forge. The opposite wall was decorated with a collection of large wooden buckler shields that seemed embedded into the wall of the long narrow tunnel. Dwarves worked metal over a large anvil.

“Bartov...you didn’t just bring a Human into our...Forget it;”
The voice admonishing the bulk that carried her. Bartov halted.

“Does it look like I’m in your precious forge Tarpov? No. I’m way over here in the corridor with my guest.” Bartov continued on toward the stairs cut in the stone that would take them up.

Bartov,” Bartov halted at the voice of the little fish in his arms.

“Yes little Fish?” Bartov’s voice seemed a little more relaxed. “I can walk if you like.”

“Let us see, shall we.” He touched her ankles. They still felt sore as his rough hands tested the bones until she made a noise of discomfort.

“All right, you seem to be healing.” He lowered her to the floor and she put some strength in her ankles. “Up the stairs little fish;”

Mirsa climbed the stairs, her head just below the stone of the ceiling. Bartov followed her.

“Bartov, My name is Mirsa.” He grunted at the whispered name as she climbed toward the sounds of an argument.

At the top of the hand carved stairs Mirsa found a great hall filled with more Dwarves than she could imagine leaning over a large table arguing. The chamber ceiling soared to twice Mirsa’s height at its domed centre. They halted, almost surprised at the sight of a Human child in rags.

“Fellow Dwarves, the plan progresses quicker than we’d hoped;” Bartov caught their attention with mention of their

mutual problem. “This is the Lady Mirsa Sulescu, My Hostage.”

In that instance of betrayal Mirsa leapt at Bartov, Her hunger and anger taking control. She was instantly met with Strength.

“All Vampire, this one...” Strong, rough hands restraining her, her animal scream mixed with the outrage of a child’s betrayal, Mirsa was dragged toward a stairs leading up into the dark. The chamber had one resident. The old dwarf, an iron throne against the wall coughed as the riotous struggle roused him from his rest.

“Bartov? How goes the search for a solution to the question?”

“Success, my King.” Bartov grappled with the ravenous child, a firm grip on her neck. “Ah my hungry little fish, you get to feed to your heart’s content.”

His King coughed.

“Good. Bring her forward. This will require some delicate manoeuvrings...” The decrepit form of a very ancient Dwarf was revealed to her. “What is the creature’s name?”

The old King waited for an answer from his most trusted friend.

“Her name is Mirsa Sulescu my Lord.”

The Old Dwarf smiled through diseased teeth.

“I am King of all the Halfling Lands and you shall make me Immortal that I may reclaim my Kingdom.” A coughing fit wracked his old form.

Mirsa, held firmly by the Dwarf she had trusted as her father, fed on the blood of a Dwarven King.

“My Lord?” Bartov pulled Mirsa off the old Dwarf.

“Gurnvic, check him.”

Dwarves went to the corpse of their old King slumped bloody on his Iron throne.

“He is without life.” Gurnvic Orc-smasher turned to face his brother Bartov.

“All is as it should be.” Bartov laughed. “Now you my little fish are going to return him to us...In due course. Gurnvic, fetch the others.” Bartov smiled at his brother.”

“That wasn’t the plan Bartov.” Gurnvic smelled Treason.

“The plan has changed. Now get a move on, Sunset cometh.”

Last Call

Zemiros picked at the shattered glass. The windows that had been hand-poured by his great grandfather from molten beach sand were gone. He absently searched for a bell to summon a servant who would never come. He would need the services of an Artisan from the village. The sunlight, indirect though it was, reminded him that it would not be during the day. They usually gathered at the village tavern around sunset. Zemiros contemplating an uncertain future stared out at the sea. Ale would be nice.

The Village was still. Zemiros approached the village Tavern just after sunset. The crowd, tenuous as it was in their sombre mood, conversed on the horrors in which they recently become participants. The conversation froze in terrible silence when they noticed the entry of Zemiros once

again into their once simple rural lives. A few familiar faces caught Zemiros's eye. Gregor and Johann didn't seem all that keen on conversing, their grim faces stiff at the sight of him.

The Barkeep was the only one who smiled and spoke his name.

"Lord Sulescu, if you would care for a table..." Zemiros raised a hand and dropped a collection of gold coins on the makeshift bar top.

"Drinks for everyone...could you have someone who knows how to work in glass speak with me, I have a shattered window in need of repair." Zemiros was already retreating for an empty seat against a wall.

"Of course my Lord...Drinks on Lord Sulescu!" The barkeep subtly indicated to one of the villagers that he needed to speak with him.

Armand, Village Warden, approached from the smoky side of the Tavern.

"My lord, a merchant named Alma Radu wishes to converse with you." Zemiros contemplated the fact he as yet had no drink. His brow furrowed at the prospect of giving over his gold to some travelling hawker.

"Send him over." Armand waved the merchant forward.

"Lord Sulescu." Let the sales pitch begin. Zemiros had experienced this sort of thing with the Traders of Darokin. He didn't much care for it. He held up a hand to pause the merchant in his tracks.

"Wares on the table good merchant." Alma Radu was surprised by the comment. He had heard it from Darokin

traders. He didn't expect a backwoods Traladaran lord to be that well travelled.

"Of course;" The Cloth wrapped parcel in his arms was considerably weighty. He placed it gently on the table in front of Zemiros and began to remove the cloth wrapping that concealed his most valued prize. It was an ancient clay pot with a large stone stopper in the shape of a dog's head. A stele of strange symbols marked what must have been the front of the pot.

If there was anything that Zemiros enjoyed it was something new. His eyes opened wider at the lure of it.

"Where did you find it?" Alma Radu smiled. He would finally be rid of the wretched thing.

"I acquired it from a dealer in such rare artefacts in Selenica..." He could tell by Sulescu's interest that he knew the community. "He assured me that the Item was found during an excavation near some place called Surra-Man-Raa." Zemiros knew of it. It was a coastal community of Ylari Sorcerers. He also knew the penalty for raiding tombs in the Nithian Highlands carried a death sentence. There were no legitimate dealers in such antiquities. He still wanted it.

"How much do you desire for it?"

"It was purchased at considerable expense. A price may be beyond anyone's means to estimate simply because it is as you see...unique."

Zemiros nodded.

"Indeed it is." Zemiros reached within his fine Ochalean silk coat and fished out a Diamond. The Merchant choked at

the sight of it. He reached out for it, incapable of resisting the first offer. "Deal done;"
Zemiros knew merchants. This one had been no different.

The Curse of the Black Dog

Zemiros scraped at the script on the old ceramic jar. Alma Radu had been truthful about one thing. It was real. The Trader had somehow acquired the artefact in distant Ylaraum, most likely on some raid by tomb robbers. Although his tale of a purchase of it from some vendor at the now perpetual merchant's fair at Selenica had the ring of truth, that nest having quickly become a market for looted grave-goods from Yalraum and Traladara, the trader's sun tan implied that he had indeed spent considerable time in the sunlit desert searching for treasure. There was still pigment around the eye of the dog headed Jar stopper.

<Read Languages> The spell revealed nothing of the pictograms. That instantly took Zemiros by surprise. Even he could see there was meaning in the symbols. The ship and the bird with its feet on the ground had meaning. How could the spell have failed?

<Detect Magic> Nothing. There was no Enchantment; Perhaps another spell.

<Read Magic> No result. They were not a spell. The pictograms were proving elusive.

<Dispel Magic>, the spell cast, Zemiros considered his options.

<Read Language> Still there was nothing. Again the symbols denied him. Was there some agent he could not detect?

<Detect Evil> Nothing. It was lifeless. He had squandered six spells on the damn thing and come away with nothing. It resisted him as though the script were the most powerful and resolute of all things.

Was that it? Was there some agent preventing the deciphering of the Symbols? The mere idea was insanity. Who could do such a thing?

Zemiros returned his attention to the eye of the dog and with an inked quill scribed the symbol on a scroll. The eye meant 'watchful guardian'. The dog was a guard dog of sorts. Under it he attempted to scribe faithfully each of the seven symbols that had denied him. Then he artfully drew an exacting image of the Jar.

Zemiros considered opening the jar but put it from his mind. It would likely be trapped given its ability to resist the power of his magic.

"Now;" Bartov released his grip on the heavy iron spear held aloft by his fellow dwarves and it dropped a thousand feet, through the reinforced wooden ceiling of Sulescu Manor. They all flew in pursuit of it, the great cable crafted from a dozen ropes for the Spear descending toward the rooftop.

The explosion of shattering timbers instantly drew Zemiros from his work as the Black dog headed pottery was shattered casting ash across the wood floor.

Within moments Bartov and his Dwarf companions had gathered to collect up the great rope, their plan escalating rapidly.

Zemiros had gathered his wits enough to realize the core of his residence had been gutted. The ceiling had collapsed above the hallway and the hallway was now a broken shattered jumble of timbers up through which a huge rope cable was now being drawn taught via the hole in the ceiling.

Likely it was a siege weapon. Fury at the assault overcame logic and Zemiros ascended through the hole in the ceiling. Where he had expected some Gnome-built aero-stat a veritable clan of Dwarves flew from the ruination of his home, drawing the cable of their siege weapon; beneath him the roar of cable friction against shattered timber became louder.

Zemiros unleashed a torrent of fire balls into the midst of his retreating foes. They simply shook it off and then dove, descending with terrible haste, dragging the reinforced timber keep off its foundation stones, over the edge of the cliff, and into the raging sea.

Heir to a Broken Home

The Dwarves and their siege weapon were gone, vanishing into the sea with their weapon of destruction. The shattered remains of Sulescu Manor, the waves breaking it against the cliffs, were still in the process of sinking into the sea.

Eventually it would be gone. Behind him in the distance, the horrible noise that had accompanied the destruction of the Mansion had roused the entire village. Zemiros Sulescu descended toward the water. He might still have time to retrieve what he could.

The Reinforced box that the Sulescu had called a manor had seemed so invulnerable. Zemiros shook his head at the sight of the carnage. The darkness obscured everything. "Light;" The spell gave everything an eerie glow. Around him the waters seemed to be filled with a murky taint. His room would be at the bottom of all this destruction, somewhere. Zemiros oriented himself to the new reality. There. He spotted a number of his prized artefacts floating loose of their place on the shelf, his spell book amongst them. Waving away the illusion he found nothing on the shelf that he had liberated from Braejr. The Crystal and his spell book could be saved; the prospect that they were now the sum total of his personal possessions annoyed Zemiros greatly.

<Dimension Door> The spell returned him to the top of the Cliff and he turned away from the ruin. The cellar was intact beneath the stonework that had supported the weight of the Manor. At least he and the villagers would not go hungry.

The Villagers; they had amassed before now exposed stonework with what little they could grab. A few were naked except for a weapon.

"Sorry if the noise woke you...The building fell off the cliff; Rot-wood most likely." They could see it was a lie. The

building had lasted for over a century. It was indestructible. Some great force had destroyed it all and Lord Sulescu was keeping the how from them. “Armand?” he couldn’t see his village Warden.

“Yes Lord Sulescu?” The voice came from the back of the gathered mob.

“Armand, could you please post a guard on the Cellar Stores to make sure no one loots them. I will be popping off a while to see about getting it rebuilt. The Residence I mean.” Zemiros knew that was a lie as well but they didn’t need to have more horrors heaped upon them. He had some Dwarves to hunt down and interrogate. Where to start? “I don’t suppose anyone would know where I might find some Dwarves about these parts?” It was worth the shot. A voice in the crowd:

“My lad Stephan mentioned spotting a few loitering about the King’s Barrow at the far edge of the grazing field while he was tending the goats.” The speaker cleared his throat and went silent.

“Oh well done; we will have the house rebuilt in no time.” Things were progressing rapidly. Zemiros wondered if it was the same dwarves. “Off to bed the lot of you. Tavern-master, might I assail you for a moment?” The weary barkeep loitered with the Village Warden as the rest departed for their homes. Zemiros handed the large crystal to the Barkeep. “Be a good fellow; keep that on the bar for me; it’s not for sale but it took damage during the building collapse.”

The Barkeep seemed confused. He could tell the huge crystal was fine.

“It will give travellers something to gawk at. Might put it on a shelf and start a collection of oddities.” Armand patted the barkeep on the back. He understood wizards to be capable of considerable vagabond behaviour. Zemiros Sulescu was no different.

“And now my Lord Sulescu let us see about putting you up for the night.” Zemiros sighed at the prospect of being put up in the tavern or in the bunk house where Armand resided and held up a hand in protest.

“Perhaps another time Armand; you need a good sleep and it is late enough to be morning so I will head off with an early start.” Zemiros left the ground and the departing villagers of Sulescu behind. “See you when I see you...Oh and if anything washes up see if its furnishings.”

Zemiros was gone. The Village Warden looked about.

“Gregor! Where are you going? You have watch on the Stores till morning.” The Naked villager grumbled something about clothing.

The Barrow Wight

The child cowered in the Dark, fearing the return of her captors. The old one had abandoned her and departed his throne room filled with a new vigour.

Mirsa preferred the blind darkness to the torment of her dreams. That way lay a nightmare about dead dwarves being roused from their slumber with a single command:

arise. Mirsa's eyes snapped open at the word. She had awoken to it on a stone bier in the family mausoleum and fed on her first life. That command echoed across eternity. It was the commandment that bought with it hunger.

"Hold Her." And they had held her down and forced her to feed. Mirsa screamed with rage and hunger at the betrayal, but she had fed. She filled her belly as a thirsty wolf at a river, and each time Bartov had compelled her to arouse them from death with a single command: Arise.

Mirsa's eyes opened to the darkness. Somewhere light spilled up a stone cut stairway and dripped like tallow-fat into the throne room of a once dead Dwarven King. She was alone; and her only bonds the fear of being betrayed by a Dwarf named Bartov. Her friend in the dark had betrayed her.

Mirsa forced herself forward to the light. The great rhythm of the Dwarven Forge was gone and it no longer beat in her chest with its life.

<Light> Zemiros created the source on a large rock and tossed it down the tunnel into the crypt at the far end. The wizard stared down the now well lit postern tunnel at the stone. His explorations would be forced to a crawl down the low hanging tunnel of the Kings Barrow. The crypt was despoiled. The debris of an abandoned age, of little value to the looters seeking a pile of silver or gold, scattered. The low, domed ceiling still inconvenienced the uncannily tall wizard but he could see it was of a skilled craftsmanship. It was oddly well skilled for what was supposed to be a

human Barrow. The style was most certainly Song of Halav, or supposed to be. The entrance was off alignment. Not by much but enough to miss the Solstice Star. Perhaps it could have been a later period barrow.

Zemiros fished about on the floor for his light stone and a sample of the pottery. The Ceramic was fire-pit style pottery-Petra technique. Except that they never made the same piece twice.

Zemiros stared into two different pottery bases and turned them against one another until he could see something familiar. They were identical down to the scratches. These had been cast on a bronze die; no, the pores were wrong- a stone die. Somewhere an artisan had crafted a stone die with such perfection as to duplicate the real thing- Petra technique pottery. It was all Dwarven-craft. Where was the way in? Somewhere in this chamber was a door that would take him down into the fortress that this Barrow was designed to conceal.

Zemiros stepped back from the stone bier and looked about for signs that it had moved. There were none. Still that was deception in its own right. It was designed to look like it didn't cover a secret stairway down into some secret dwarven fortress. The floor didn't show any signs of recent traffic and the walls of the burial chamber hid any sign that they might slide or pivot.

Zemiros stopped mid thought. It was now obvious he would never find the entrance so he would need to ignore it completely.

<Clairvoyance> The spell descended through the stone floor until it reached a chamber with a table.

<Dimension Door> The portal exited below him about thirty feet perhaps into the secret hall.

Mirsa panicked at the sudden appearance of the tall shade in the dwarven hall. She slipped down the stairs to the Dwarven Forge by which the now hated Bartov had introduced her to its secret existence and looked back at the intruder.

“Well well...The little fish is loose.” Bartov took her by surprise.

Mirsa’s Wolves

Mirsa Screamed at Bartov’s touch. In the distance the shadow of the intruder turned to run forward toward her cry.

Bartov looked up at the unexpected intruder and snarled. The arrival of this individual meant that Zemiros had found them.

Bartov released his grip on the girl, stepping back momentarily to pull a dirk from his belt to defend him-self from the Barrow Wight that had come for him. That mistake was all Zemiros needed.

<Reinforced Door> The Space between the Dwarf and Mirsa was filled with a heavy wooden door.

“Mirsa!” The voice of her brother feared and hated as he was became relief and joy.

Mirsa smiled and climbed toward him as Bartov the Betrayer beat on the heavy timber door behind her. After a moment the noise stopped.

Zemiros looked down at Mirsa accusingly.

“What have you done?” Mirsa looked at him with confusion— why was he angry with her? “You bit them yes?”

Mirsa was clothedmouthed about the events she.

“You felt hungry so you drank their blood.” Mirsa nodded, her tongue stilled with emotional pain. “I told you this would happen and now you have taken the lives of these Dwarves.”

Mirsa balled up at his feet and sobbed.

“I didn’t want to...they made me do it.” Zemiros seemed taken aback by the suggestion...they made her do it? That was insanity. Zemiros pulled the weeping child to her feet and shook her. “Explain now. Exactly what happened?”

The sound of an Axe began to work at the heavy wooden door that occupied the tunnel below the pair.

“They made me bite them...Bartov...he forced me to bite them all.”

Her voice was stalled by the loud splintering as the door ruptured.

“Bartov?” Mirsa pointed at the Dwarf chopping the reinforced door down. Zemiros looked at the Dwarf and his face darkened with anger.

“Here fishy fish.” Bartov snarled at her.

“And you bit them all? They didn’t bite others?”

Mirsa nodded and ducked behind her brother as Bartov and the other Dwarves were revealed behind a pile of splintered timbers.

Zemiros smiled and pulled Mirsa unwillingly from behind him and bent down to speak in her ear.

“Tell them to stop in your loudest voice.” The voice of Zemiros was almost compelling and the Dwarves behind Bartov turned in a plan to flee.

“STOP!” The effect was immediate. The Axe stopped as did the Dwarves.

Bartov had made a mistake. The Clan was now enslaved by this little girl for all time and he knew it. Only Mirsa, confused by the sudden peace, biting at her lip didn't know why they had stopped when she had demanded it of them. Zemiros nodded knowingly at Bartov's distress at losing everything to a child and burst into laughter.

“Now Mirsa anytime they do anything you don't like you need only demand they stop.”

Mirsa didn't really want to push it. She was still afraid of Bartov and the dwarves and very angry with what Bartov had made done. For now she cowered behind her brother not really trusting his words.

Mirsa still didn't understand why the mean dwarves would obey her words.

“Now, if you would all come through so I can get a good look at you all and have a few words.” Zemiros seemed suddenly stern and serious. Zemiros retreated with his sister in his shadow to seats around a table and claimed one at

the far end opposite the gathering Dwarves. “How are you at carpentry?”

Zemiros seemed almost civil. One of the Dwarves coughed. They all knew what this was about.

“I have a few decades of work with an Artisan.” An elderly Dwarf who seemed older than the others spoke out.

“Excellent...now what sort of drink do you brew in this place?” Zemiros smiled, the Dwarves seemed content to repay in labour for the damage they had done, and Mirsa stared at them all confused.

The Expendable

“Load the next one.” Gregor the Engineer waved to the crew of the Catapult and they began winding the engine back. The Engine ropes seemed to strain under the pressure until they locked the mechanism.

“Locked Sir,” Jerod the Knight had been promoted sideways by the Baron to Siege Engine Crew so he didn’t really like it here. Gregor let the hostility of being ordered about by a Peasant slide.

“Bring me another Kobold.” He waved to the beast-handler. The Kobold straining at its rope was under no illusions— he didn’t want to be hurled at the side of a Keep either. The last had – for the grace of god and a slight cross wind at the last moment – struck the wall of the Tower keep full on. The Bloody pulp had left a stain on the white wash on the stone wall before falling into the moat. Of course the next would be different. It had to be. Thog had other plans. As he was loaded in the cupola of the catapult by the Knight who had referred to his now deceased fellow Kobold as a ‘smelly little bugger’, he contemplated his options. The saw blade hung from a twine around his neck. Unfortunately the last to try a runner had been cut down and returned to the Catapult. Thog looked at the Stain on the whitewash. The Knight was still leaning over the Hook that was attached to the Rope used to draw the catapult back and Thog had heard the Leader of this siege crew speak the word often enough- all he needed to do was get it right. “Fire!”

The crew let fly before they had realised their error. The Hook hurled the Knight ahead of the kobold who he had been placing in the Cupola.

Jerod the Knight screamed.

Gregor the Siege engineer could only watch as Jerod bounced off the edge of the tower and descended into the courtyard– the scream of a man in great pain. The Kobold on the other hand had landed short– on the battlements. Alive and well he ran along the stonework evading the soldiers who had turned to look at the Knight who had dropped in on them – the bloody mess still alive and screaming. No one noticed as the Kobold reached the ropes of the drawbridge and began sawing with the tool he had been provided. A guard was alerted to the sound of the saw on rope and turned on him.

“Kobold on the Ropes!” Thog dropped over the edge in search of a location under the cover of the stonework where he could cut the ropes without being killed. The Saw cut furiously into the ropes as the Soldier above him could do little more than swing his spear blindly in the night attempting to swat Thog with what amounted to a wooden pole. The Ropes of the Drawbridge gave way and the heavy timber barrier dropped across the watery impasse and Thog was dumped into the foul ditch below. On the Hillside the Baron screamed:

“The Drawbridge is down!” His horde of rabid warriors shocked and surprised by what they had just witnessed seemed to have not heard a word. “Attack!” Baron Von Hendriks pushed his commander forward and descended

the hillside toward the now open invitation in a storm of Metal. Men inside seemed to panic. The bridge was down. Thog didn't really want to stick around. He had seen Human Battle before – the last one had landed him in his current predicament but he couldn't just leave the rest of his Kobolds to these humans. On the Hill a half-dozen Kobolds were being handled by the Beast Handler who seemed more interested in the Siege of the Keep than his job. Having settled on a plan Thog pulled himself out of the muck and dodged his way between the legs of the Warriors now colliding on the Drawbridge in conflict.

Malvo the Squire tripped over the Kobold and was almost trampled by the warriors who pushed him aside. He looked around at the diminutive beast he had come to grief on. It was the Kobold who had been catapulted in and cut the ropes on the Bridge.

“Sorry Sir! My fault entirely,” That act of insanity had in Malvo's mind earned the little fellow a ‘Sir’.

“As you were young Knight...” The Kobold did his best to replicate the voice of the Baron to the open mouthed surprise of the Squire. Thog ran on up the Hill and left the Squire to rejoin the battle. If there was one thing Thog had proven skilled at in his years in his Kobold Tribe it had been Mimicry.

Valerias Monster

The Trail to Specularum had been quiet for this time of year. The bandits so expected never came. Even now, past the very edge of Radlebb wood, the Capital drew into view. The Young Alexi of Kelvin rode his horse with pride. Tomorrow Duke Stephan himself would make him a Knight. It was quite the honour.

There ahead, perhaps thirty yards ahead, stood a little girl grubby in her pale blue smock. Her brown hair freely about her shoulders. A Stuffed bear clutched in her arms. She was smiling. Alexi Smiled back. He halted his horse now some fifty feet from her.

"Apple is pear,"

"Pear is Tree."

"Find my monster,"

"Rescue Me!"

At the conclusion of her song she looked at Alexi with fear. She turned and ran for the wood-line. In a moment she had stumbled on something that was not there and had fallen through some bushes. Alexi looked about. No one. Alexi dismounted and led his horse forward to the bush she had fallen through. At the bottom of a newly collapsed sink hole, a dirt covered Skeleton protruded from the Collapsed soil. Alexi struggled down into the hole. The rags of a long gone blue smock and stuffed bear were amongst the dirt and bones. Amongst the bones, a distinctive sapphire hilted

dagger. A Sack. He would need a sack to take it all in to Father Nicolas. She would have to be put to rest. Alexi stared at the Dagger. There was something wrong with a dagger being here. She didn't trip.

The Examinations of Father Nicolas

"Not two miles from Specularum?" Father Nicolas pulled the twine tie on the sack and emptied its contents onto his heavy Oak examination table. The soil and remains spilled forth.

"I hope I didn't miss any of it." Alexi was having difficulty with the concept of touching the dead. Father Nicolas sifted it about.

"You missed a few of her toes. Don't worry, I'll come with you to get the rest." Father Nicolas sorted them quickly from memory. Aside he put the Dagger, cloth from the dress, and the stuffed toy.

Alexi was disturbed by it as Father Nicolas turned the bones. There was something about this that turned his stomach.

"You were right. She didn't trip." Father Nicolas waved Alexi closer.

"See here, this is the point where the dagger went in. See the marks on the bones." She didn't trip.

"Not your ordinary Peasant Girl." Her teeth were healthy. The better grains, proper meals. "Perhaps twelve. From a well-off family."

"The twelve year old child of a well off family. Murdered on the roadside not two miles from Specularum?" They would be talking about it even today.

Father Nicolas examined the Cloth fragments. A fragment of lace in the sleeve. He looked up. The old man pointed towards a bookshelf.

"There. It should be second shelf from the top."

"What am I looking for?"

"Hmm? Oh, Lace-works by Lady Anita Brun." Alexi sorted through the shelf.

"Yes. Yes. That's the one. Bring it here."

"Yes. Very distinctive indeed. All right, turn the pages." Each page was a sample of Lace-work. Different, unique. He bid Alexi to pause the page.

"Yes. That's the one. Alright, Reference page at the back please." Alexi obliged.

"Yes." That confirmed it.

"There was a time when the finest of families wove their own cloths and worked their own lace. It was a measure of honour and family to do so." Father Nicolas sounded like Alexi's grandmother talking about how it was in the old days. He half expected a scolding for getting dirt on his clothes.

"So the lace isn't from that machine at Elway's lace and cloth." Mechanical weavers. No.

"No, Very distinctive, Torenescu. Only family to still make their own lace."

Father Nicolas wiped some of the soil from his hands. "This young lady is Valeria Torenescu."

"Sir Claudio Torenescu? I didn't think he had a daughter."

Alexi was confused by this.

"No. His elder brother, Andrei Torenescu, Once Lord of the Estate this city was situated on." Alexi scoffed at it. Even he knew this story.

"The young landed knight and his family were killed on the other side of Radleb Wood past Firlan Moor by Bandits. That's five miles from where I found her." Father Nicolas felt the weight of the stuffed bear and began tearing into it. A metal tube revealed itself. Father Nicolas washed it clean. Gold sheet, crimped at the ends. Family seal stamped into one of the crimping.

"Yes. Interesting isn't it. I wonder if she ran all the way?"

A Night in a Grave

"This is it!" Alexi pointed at the small tree partially snapped and dangling foliage down. It was getting dark. Alexi dismounted and then helped Father Nicolas down from his cart. The old man looked about.

"We won't have much time." Father Nicolas pulled a copper wire sieve from the back of his cart.

"All right, lead on." Alexi pushed past the bush and knelt by the sinkhole.

"Do you want me to do this?" Alexi looked at the old man.

"If you don't mind." Alexi climbed in and Father Nicolas passed him the sieve.

"Just scoop the soil around the edge further from the head. Shake it back and forth slowly." Alexi nodded his head.

It was well dark by the time Alexi had sieved the last of her bones from the grave.

"Is that it?" Alexi looked up at the old priest.

"Yes. Thats all of them. Well done. Usually this sort of thing takes me all night." Father Nicolas dropped the last piece in the small pocket on the inside of his grey travelling robes.

Alexi didn't really want to hear that the old man went through graves. He struggled out of the hole.

"All right, back to the capital it is." Father Nicolas patted the Bone filled pocket.

"What am I forgetting?" Alexi passed him the Sieve.

"Ah." The old man packed the sieve back into his cart and Alexi Untwald helped him onto the cart. Alexi dusted himself off and climbed on to the back of his horse. Father Nicolas looked at Alexi.

"Do you have lodgings?" Alexi looked up.

"No Father, I was supposed to spend the evening until dawn in Chapel contemplating the humility of floor at the feet of our lord." Father Nicolas smiled.

"A cold floor it is too." Alexi hated the cold. "All right, you may spend the remainder of the evening in bed at the church. I have a spare cot in one of the cells, but first a bath and hot meal."

"But I have Penitence tonight and the interview with the Duke is tomorrow." The old Father shook his head.

"No. I will make arrangements with the Duke tonight."

“This investigation must take precedence.”

“I will send my messenger to him tonight to inform him that I was forced to delay your Knighthood while I polish your lesser used attributes.” Father Nicolas rode on. “My last word on the matter.”

Alexi nodded and hurried his horse forward to keep up.

The Wolf and the Dragon

Kaisar Goreng stared with hostility at the Kai-Mother. "What does the Kai-Mother desire of the Kaisar?" Had the Heldaan Envoy gone as far as whispering treason into the ears of the Kaisar? <gold-dragon> sighed at the prospect.

"Do not take that tone with me Nasi. You are a little Kai who does not even see the knives at his back." <gold-dragon> waited for a response.

"The Heldaan are not a knife at my back." Kaisar Goreng got to his feet in a rage only to back down as the Kai-Mother's personal guard gripped the handle of the <dog-knife> at his belt. The Kai-Mother became aware of what had caused the Kaisar to pause mid-rage and smiled.

"At least you know what a knife looks like."

"This Empire recorded the great cataclysm in the one hundredth and fifty seventh year of the Imperial Calender and the millennia of Yazak migration that followed yet here we are five thousand years later and you would have these outsiders involve us in the conspiracies of their petty immortal."

"They are not petty conspiracies Kai-Mother, their dispute was why magic failed for a week."

"No Nasi. They were a knife in the darkness, they were not the hand." <gold-dragon> breathed in and out. "No. My decision is final. You will compel them to depart the Sar immediately then you will take the barge across the bay to the White Mosque and contemplate your obligation to the

law before the Kadaitch." Kaisar Goreng squirmed in his seat at the prospect of it.

"Yes Mother." <gold-dragon> shook her head.

"That is Kai-Mother My Kaisar." Despite the Kai's attempt at appeasement, the Kai-Mother's personal guard failed to release his hand from the <dog-knife> at his belt.

"I will not allow you to drag the Sar into a dark tryst with Vanya the Outcast." The prospect of a <dog-knife> in his immediate future loomed and for the first time Kaisar Nasi Goreng felt close to death. Nasi watched as <gold-dragon> relaxed her eyes and Kaisar Nasi Goreng was spared the knife. <gold-dragon> relaxed back into her chair.

"I will however tell you the tale of the second Kaisar: <golden-eyes>." Kaisar Nasi Goreng closed his eyes at the prospect.

"<golden-eyes> was much like his father. He enjoyed the prospect of freedom and enjoyed many years simply travelling the Sar by flying Barge, yet in his later years, he was devoted to the time he spent in the White Mosque that he had helped build by hand."

Nasi had not known that the second Kaisar had built the White Mosque. Certainly he had ordered its construction that Clerics of Law might establish it as a bastion of Law at the heart of the empire, yet he had never heard that the Kaisar had worked the wood of its construction as a common labourer until now. Nasi was still focused on the thought of a Kaisar working timbers.

"<golden-eyes> had gathered to him in his travels many clerics who had devoted themselves to the Philosophies of Law. The more prominent you probably know from your history studies."

"<Kelintji-slayer> who had come from the Yazak Steppes where he taught the importance of Laws to the humanoids there offered up his callused hand to the Kaisar in thanks for his toils in the cause of Law, yet <golden-eyes> spurned his hand and holding up his own less callused hand, said: "Hefting a few timbers to build a mosque does not make me a martyr to Law." <Kelintji-slayer> placed his hand on <golden-eyes> shoulder, smiled and replied:

"I never said it would." He pointed at the large portal stone that sealed the Martyr's Crypt over which the Mosque was being constructed.

"The Martyrs to Law are over there."

"Now come, the others are having lunch and will be discussing the development of Laws for the Sar. Perhaps you might like to participate."

"Now you understand. It is not enough to found an Empire, build a Mosque, or even to be Kaisar. You must be more."

"Now, off you go." <gold-dragon> smiled at her son.

"And remember; be strong, yet polite with the Heldaan Envoy when you inform her that she is expelled from the Sar." Nasi sighed and prepared to leave the Kai-mother's Apartments.

"And don't forget your visit to the White Mosque." The Kaiser bowed his head to <gold-dragon> until she had touched his head with the palm of her hand.

"Yes Kai-Mother." The Kaiser departed cleansed of his burden. <gold-dragon> waited a moment. Her servant, Ket, entered.

"The Kaiser's palanquin has departed." Ket was prompt. The Heldaan would be dealt with if she had to tear their Warbirds from the sky herself. <gold-dragon> sighed and turned to the next task.

"And now to the other matter at hand!"

"Commander Fein reports a greater Kelintji approaches the Tiers." Ket smiled inwardly at this fine coup because he knew she enjoyed an outing.

"Prepare my flying barge. I depart now." Her bodyguard looked at her questioningly as Ket left to make the necessary preparations.

"Yes?" The Kai-Mother stared at her protection.

"Nothing Mother," replied <golden-talon>.

"I should hope not."

Kaiser Goreng sat in the Hall of Law and waited for the Envoy of the Heldaan to arrive. He knew she would not like this. Anna Vik Rappard walked past the announcer of prisoners without pause.

"Anna vik Rappard, Envoy of Vanya the Eternal, Sword of the Heldaan, Daughter of Imogen Daemonsdottir." A hundred spear-men looked up in unison as she was announced.

"Why?" Anna waited for an answer.

"It is the decision of the Kaiser that the Heldaan should be driven from the Sar." Anna stared at the Voice of the Kaiser. "I would hear it from him." The Envoy of Heldaan pointed at the Kaiser. The Voice of the Kaiser retreated to consult with the throne. Anna waited for an answer. The voice returned.

"Is the Envoy of Heldaan so deaf as to be incapable of hearing the Kaiser speak?" Things had changed since Anna had been smuggled from the Kaiser's apartments. He had surrendered so much to her. What had gone wrong? He had gone to visit the Kai-Mother. Anna's eyes progressively closed. She had been foolish and now she stared at the Kaiser in suspicion. He had led her to believe that the Kai-Mother was this little old woman living out her life in her royal apartments and yet this old woman had taken away her garrison and her Warbird dry-docks in a single meeting. Anna ran her fingernail across her thumb nervously. Nasi leaned forward and spoke.

"If the Heldaan wish to conquer, perhaps they will find the Desolation of Sinar more to their liking rather than the armpit of the immortals." She could see he had given her what he could.

"As you demand, Kaiser!" Anna vik Rappard bowed her head slightly and walked away, her aide in her shadow.

"The Synod isn't going to like this." whispered Franz Torkeep. As if in reply to his whisper, the hundred Kelintji-slayer escorted them from the Hall of Law to the landing platform where their light Warbird waited. Sixty Heldaan

flanked the walk. Torkeep signalled their Sergeants to board.

Anna and Franz paused. Their long cloaks fluttered and whipped in the dry wind as the Knights boarded. The Kelintji-Slayer guard surrounded the Warbird and pointed their spears inward. It was a purely ceremonial sign of hostility.

"We're leaving!" Anna and her aide stepped onto the ramp which was still closing as the Warbird lifted clear of the sea of Spears. Anna looked out across the Imperial City below her. Franz spoke up:

"By Vanya How I would love to take that palace with a couple of Warbirds" Anna looked at her long time companion. "You may yet get your chance." Anna looked back until the boarding ramp locked.

"Where to?" Franz's became a voice in the near dark hold of the Warbird. "Signal the Others. We go south-west across the Arm of Vanya."

"The Desolation of Sinar?" questioned Franz.

"Yes." Anna vik Rappard Replied. The Warbirds headed south-west.

The Kai-Mother watched from the battlements of the Tiers of Pain. The Greater Kelintji Scratched at the stone of the first Tier. It was almost fifty feet from nose to rear as it struggled to lift its great bulk to the next level. Commander Yath Fein leaned in on his walking stick. The decades had taken their toll on the young Commander she remembered from so long ago.

"Is he the last of his breed?" <golddragon> questioned Yath.

"No. There is a female up north. Our Scouts spotted her. She comes down to Wicked Ward in search of Honey. There are some bees nesting there." The Commander was sad at the prospect. <gold-dragon> contemplated the tragedy. The Tiers had kept the barbaric hordes out but it had destroyed one of the rarest and most beautiful creatures in all of the realms. At this moment, she regretted ordering the construction of the Tiers so many millennia ago.

"I don't want them to be the last."

"Perhaps I shall have the scouts find some of the female's spore. Perhaps we can create a trail of scent he might follow to Wicked Ward." <gold-dragon> smiled at Commander Fein's ingenuity.

"An arranged marriage sounds most appropriate. Most appropriate indeed."

Rikard's Gamble

"The game is dead-eyed molly," Rikard sat at the table with a pair of dice balanced on the back of his left hand and smiled as he emptied a pouch of its gold into a large wooden bowl at the table centre. "And the buy in is ten gold royals."

"Not a farmer's game tonight." Franz of Armstead dropped in a pair of Thyatian Platinum pieces into the pot instantly raising eyebrows. "Found them in the mud under the docks on Fogor Isle. Just the two."

At the suggestion of freely available coins a few patrons slipped out through the door into the night.

"And there go half your patrons." Leaf Beatenbow laughed at the desperation of men as he dropped ten gold coins of varying nations into the bowl. "My gold is as good as any."

"I'll be representing the farming guild tonight Tavern-master Rikard." Farmer Miklos surrendered a mix of gold coins to the bowl belonging to various owners currently crowded in the room. "If you dont mind us buying in."

"I take anyone's gold," Tomin Creary deposited his coins. "so long as they are offering."

"Sorry I'm late." Eben Rhily smiled, pulling up a chair as his gold coins dropped in the bowl. "I believe my gold makes the pot sixty."

Everyone nodded and stared at Rikard expectantly as he lifted the dice and dropped them across the table.

"House rolls first." Rikard swore as the dice settled on a pair of 'ones'. "Dead-eyed molly."

"I'm next." Franz retrieved the dice and invoked a blessing as he unleashed the dice. A safe roll and Franz breathed a sigh of relief allowing the elf at the table to claim the dice.

"No cursed dice tonight."

"I am a leaf on the wind." Leaf rolled the clay warhorses across the wood only to watch the second pair of 'ones' appear for the evening. "And a dead leaf it is."

"Dead-eyed molly." Farmer Miklos rolled his turn and smiled at having remained in the game. "Cheer up, I hear Elves live forever."

"Not so Farmer." Tomin rolled safe. "That would be dragons."

"You are both wrong." Eben Rhily rolled safe. "Only the Immortals live forever."

"Wrong on all counts." Franz reached across the table for the dice and dropped them again for a safe roll. "Anyone hear of the Rain of Fire?"

"I heard a Story written by a dragon." Miklos rolled safe. "It ended with...and the sky burned with infernal rain and all the kingdoms fell."

"I heard a kobold rhyme. There was a Dragon Egg so dark and evil, he ruled the world without hatching." Tomin rolled safe. "and something...I forget the rest...but it mentions a bad rain."

"Pity." Eben Rhily rolled safe. "It sounded interesting."

"Hah!" Franz rolled a one and four. "Not as interesting as me winning."

"T'is interesting though." Miklos a one and five. "these different tales of a rain of fire."

"Not relevant at the moment though." Tomin rolled a six and two and smiled at his fortune. "I hear Bargle was seen near Threshold."

"Lets not curse the dice with talk of that villain shall we." Eben rolled two and two and looked at Tomin. "The last thing we need is to start rolling pairs."

"Indeed." Franz winced at the rather close call of a two and a one. "They punched through into a forgotten dungeon beneath the Tarnskeep."

"Bloody dungeons are everywhere." Miklos rolled a four and three. "Can hardly dig in a field without falling through into one."

"So," A one and two tumbled from Tomin's hand. "what did they find under Tarnskeep?"

"Probably undead." The group looked at Eben as though he had spat on lady Aleena as his five and three settled on the table. "What?"

"They found a stairs going down." a pair of ones appeared from Franz's roll. "Bugbear shit!"

"That's dead-eyed molly to you." Miklos fetched up the dice and released them on the table for a pair of sixes. "shit."

"Nasty." Tomin rolled a pair of two. "looks like its catching."

"Lets hope not." Eben rolled a four and three. "You were saying you cant dig a field without finding a dungeon."

"Aye. Vigo across the river broke through into one just this morning." Two and two. "Got him self a nice stone cellar now."

"Any doors or stairs?" Tomin dropped a four and six. "Might be worth a look in the morning."

"Beware!" Eben said the word in a scary voice rolling a four and one, drawing the gaze of every superstitious man in the room. "Sorry."

"Didn't have any doors." A pair of ones reduced the number of players to two. "Bitch."

"Dead-eyed molly," A five and three granted Tomin another chance. "That's her name."

"I might be up for exploring a dungeon." a one and four spared Eben from poverty. "How about you?"

"Pass me the damn dice!" Tomin Creary eyed the pot filled with the wages of several men who had gone home penniless this evening as his hand closed around the dice dropped into his palm. "If you think I am going home penniless like those poor sods you are in for a rude surprise."

"Come on my lovely!" Tomin unleashed the contents of his hand and the ceramic dice tumbled across the heavy timber table jarring and flipping against the edges of its uneven timbers until they halted, each a single upward facing mark.

"Dead-eyed molly!" The voice of his sole remaining opponent exploded with joy at the victory. Eben Rhily smiled and reached out across the table for his winnings.

"Thank you gentlemen for a lovely evening."

"Not quite yet Rhily." Tomin reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled a piece of paper from the hidden pocket that had kept it safe tossing it on the winnings. "One more hand."

"What might that be when its not being a scrap of paper then?" Eben considered the scrap of paper. It was old. Thats all he could tell as he reached out to examine it.

"Its a title deed to some land." Tomin grabbed Eben's hand preventing him from touching the document. "The dice."

Tomin pulled his hand free and considered the man. He could very well be bluffing. That sort of thing had happened before and it always ended in violence when the bluff was exposed.

"All right." Eben picked up the dice and allowed them to tumble from the palm of his hand across the table, his eyes fixed on the man across from him until they no longer made the characteristic sound of dice on wood. His opponent gritted his teeth indicating Eben's winnings were safe. "Your roll I believe."

"Best not get too settled Rhily," Tomin retrieved the dice and with a spill of his hand dropped the dice getting a good roll.

"I never loose my land."

"I have enjoyed a winning streak all night." Safe. "You on the other hand have lost once already."

"The only way is up." Tomin rolled a five and four. "and you are due a comeuppance."

"Perhaps," Eben rolled a three and a one. "but not tonight."

"I know so." Tomin rolled a one and two. "Your roll."

"Matter of time." Eben rolled a four and two. "just a matter of time."

"Still," a pair of fives tumbled from Tomin's hand. "Vigo's cellar is a thought."

"Agreed." three and one landed on the table. "We can take a look after I win."

"You mean after I win." A pair of ones and the game was over. "Damn."

"Dead-eyed molly." Eben snatched up the land title and unfolded it. The Seal of Baron Sherlane declared the holder of the paper owner of fifty acres north of Lake Windrush including an old stone barn. "Bloody Hel, that's a good piece of land."

"Aye." Tomin already felt the loss. "It is."

"Drinks to my good fortune Tavern Master!" Eben dumped a handful of his winnings in front of Rikard and began dumping the remaining coins in an empty pouch. "Drinks all round it is." The crowded tavern cheered at the prospect of a free drink as Rikard got to his feet and headed for the bar.

"Well then gentlemen." Eben leaned forward across the table. "It seems we can investigate this doorless stone cellar of Farmer Miklos's acquaintance at sunrise, move on to exploring these stairs discovered below Tarnskeep if the Baron is of a mind to allow us after lunch, and retire for the evening to my fine stone barn north of Windrush with a mind to camp out under the stars and cook some fish."

Eben looked across their faces. "What say you?"

"Aye!" They nodded in unison rapping the table top, and Franz smiled as the singing mood washed over him. "I knew a lass named molly."

Leaf next. "but she had naught but eyes for you."
Miklos took the third line. "A cruel love if ever there was,"
Tomin took the fourth line. "as she took your gold and flew."
A thunderous applause rose from the patrons drowning the
tavern.
"Now," Rikard dropped drinks on the table as Eben noticed
a problem. "How do we get across the river?"

A Gruel Dog Day

“Dead Eyed Molly!” Kaiya Sulanov contemplated her warm bowl of gruel and milk to the sound of the gamblers at the next table. “Thank you gentlemen for a lovely evening.”

“Not quite yet Rhily.” The voice had the sound of one intending violence, enough to cause Kaiya to pause in her evening meal and look in their direction. “One more hand.”

“What might that be when its not being a scrap of paper then?” Kaiya noticed what looked like the seal of the Baron. It was something official. “Its the title deed to some land.”

“The Dice.” The tenseness vanished and Kaiya returned her attention to her meal. No murders tonight. “All right.”

“Master Rikard,” Kaiya pushed back her empty bowl and waved to get the Tavern master’s attention. “Could I get a Honeyed Butter-milk?”

“Aye lass,” Master Rikard was watching the gamblers with one eye. “I do believe I have some honey.”

“Dead Eyed Molly!” Cried the voice... and the game was over.

“Drinks to My good fortune Tavern-master!”

“I knew a lass named Molly!” Kaiya loved listening to the Song. “But she had naught but eyes for you.”

“A cruel love if ever there was,” Kaiya smiled at the singing voices. It was the only beautiful thing about the game. “As she took your gold and flew.”

“Here you go lass.” Master Rikard placed the wooden mug in front of Kaiya. “Thank you.”

Kaiya watched as the Tavern-master returned to the ale barrels to make good on the gamblers drinks before tasting her honeyed Buttermilk.

Kaiya watched the gamblers finish their drinks and slowly slip out of the back of the tavern together. They had obviously come to some agreement to travel together during the game and she had missed out on an adventure.

“Row that lot across the river,” Tavern-master Rikard sat opposite Kaiya, his weariness apparent. “And I’ll throw in Breakfast.”

Alright Master Rikard.” Kaiya smiled at the prospect of a quick adventure for the evening and grabbing her backpack kicked under the table, “I will be back for breakfast.”

On the landing, Kaiya found the gamblers discussing the size of the boat. It would definitely be one passenger at a time. The Elf in the group of Humans decided to catch the first journey and had positioned himself in the vessel. They turned to stare at the waif of a girl who joined them on the dock.

“Excuse me.” Kaiya slipped past the gathered group and stepped down into the small boat and nodded as the elf passenger smiled at her. “I’m Leaf.”

“Ilawesti Kaiya.” Kaiya replied with a Callari elven accent and smiled back pushing the boat out from the dock. “Tsha Urat?”

“Your elven is very good.” Leaf Nodded at her question. “Ilawe kri fa na Tsha.”

“No flirting with the lass Beaten-bow,” Kaiya looked to see which of the impolite wretches had interrupted their conversation. The rough looking man chuckled at her angry glare. “She has to row the rest of us as well.”

Kaiya continued rowing in silence out into the mist of the river.

The silence had been agony. Kaiya had so wanted to spend the minutes speaking elven. Within minutes they were across.

“Kiseri Motal.” Leaf scrambled out of the boat and Kaiya grimly rowed back out across the Misty River.

The next passenger smelled of Turnips.

“Would you like me to do the rowing?” Kaiya focused on a lantern where Leaf awaited her passenger’s arrival. “Are you sure you don’t want me to do the rowing?”

“I am fine.” Kaiya smiled at the Farmer Miklos’s generosity. “Thank you for your offer.”

Kaiya returned through the mist for the third passenger.

“Have you been to the Church of Karameikos before?” Kaiya cringed at being converted. She didn’t even attend services at the Church of Traladara. “It’s not like the Church of Karameikos with its three Immortals.”

“How many do you have?” Kaiya’s attention focused on the sight of the elf Leaf Beaten-bow on the bank coming into view. “Immortal-wise?”

“As many as needed.” Franz felt about for a spare holy symbol and placed it in her hands. “We would always welcome the Traladaran Immortals into the unifying church.”

“Stop trying to convert the girl Franz.” Leaf’s voice made her smile and he winked at her. “Elves have way more immortals anyway.”

“Yes. Yes.” Franz climbed out of the boat onto the bank happy he had at least got her interested. “An elf can’t fall out of a tree without earning immortality.”

Kaiya rowed back out into the mist leaving the two on the bank in conversation, her new holy symbol pocketed for safety.

“So...” Kaiya ignored the obvious advances Eben Rhily. “You are as yet unmarried I take it?”

“Perhaps Now that I own some nice land north of Lake Windrush...” Rhily slumped sideways over the edge of the boat as the Ghoul in the water behind him was revealed.

<Magic-Missile> Kaiya unleashed the spell and the arrow of energy lanced at the undead horror causing it to fall back into the water. Kaiya pulled the paralysed form of Eben Rhily back onto the boat and continued rowing, watching the corpse of the ghoul drifting on down the river a ways before vanishing below the water.

Leaf seemed concerned as Kaiya rowed from the mist with the unconscious Eben Rhily and touched the river bank.

“I saw the Missile!” Leaf and Franz grabbed the Unconscious Rhily and dragged him up the bank. “What was that?”

“It was Ghoul I think.” Kaiya struggled out of the boat after the companions. “I think I killed it.”

“It drifted off down river and sank.” Kaiya was shaking with fear. “I used my only spell.”

“Rest a while.” The Elf embraced Kaiya. “I’ll row the next two.”

Tomin Creary held a Sword in his hands and watched the river water warily for any signs of a Ghoul as Leaf rowed the little boat out of the Mist and touched land.

“A Ghoul?” Tomin nodded and smiled at Kaiya. “Rhily is a bit of an arse but you saved him this night.”

“If you wish,” Tomin Creary Considered the young girl who had saved the life of another. “you can join us.”

Hero of the People

Little more than human ghouls, they emerged from their nest on dark of night, moving silently through the alleys and over rooftops and walls, content to feed on the populace.

Zweis Radu watched the predators from the safety of his pleasure barge in Specularum Harbour, staring at the scrying mirror.

"Zweis," her whining voice drew him back from the darker entertainments he had discovered to ones that fed her needs. "I want more dates."

Zweis dropped a cloth over the mirror and turned his attention to his lover for the evening.

"What happened to the dates?" Esmarelda Tiza held the large empty bowl out before Zweis with a pout until he relented and tugged twice at the bell-pull summoning a servant. "Another bowl of Ylari dates."

Zweis watched the servant depart and snatched up a Candied fruit.

"While we wait on the dates," Zweis slid between her thighs intent on tasting her forbidden fruits. "Perhaps we can discuss what your Uncle Tiza is doing for the King these days."

The predator grabbed her from behind, dragging her back into the dark alley with a squeal of distress that ended with her throat ripped out, its teeth locking around her jugular and crushing and tearing until her distress became silence. It

dragged the food across its shoulders and retreated further into the darkness.

Zweis Radu looked at his naked paramour and considered her prospects. She was Lord Valdo Tiza's niece. He could and would use her to loiter around her Uncle's office making herself increasingly useful to the old fellow and ply her with candied fruit, Ylari dates, and the more pleasant aspects of his personality. As to the darker aspects of his personality. His manly appendage hard, Zweis smiled and returned to his mirror of Scrying to search for the nest.

They took turns brutalising the living and then fed upon the dead.

Zweis covered the mirror, and sampling the Shire Brandy, returned to bed. The one thing Zweis knew was he was not so far gone as to indulge in that kind of insanity. They did however pose a threat. And their destruction would be good for the Radu family name.

"Good morning my flower." Zweis smacked the pale buttock attached to a naked body asleep on his bed leaving a hand print and eliciting a painful groan. "Time to go visit your Uncle Tiza and make yourself useful."

"But first," Zweis pulled the bell and a servant appeared.

"Breakfast for two."

"One." It was Cartha. "Anton wants a word."

"Nothing?" The old man looked about his progeny until it became uncomfortable. "The Duke infiltrates the Veiled Society...and you have nothing."

"Perhaps if we took..." Anton cut Antonio Radu off. "Were you going to suggest that we could find the Duke's operative if we took the masks off?"

"This is the Veiled Society," Antonio looked down. "This is not a Masked Ball hosted by the fucking Torenescu!"

"Now..." Anton leaned back in his seat. "Rumor has it that last night the Iron Ring snatched half a handful of Traladarans from the Nest."

"Zweis!" Zweis Radu looked up. "I put you in charge of investigating the Iron Ring. Have you learned anything useful?"

"They were not taken by the Iron Ring," Zweis cleared his throat. "They were snatched by Ghouls."

"Undead?" Cartha choked on the chicken he was eating. "In Specularum?"

"No...not undead," Zweis waved his hands in the air.

"People...Idiots...living like animals and snatching people as food...or worse."

"Idiots like the Miller's boy we killed?" Zweis mouthed the word 'worse!' to Cartha. "Fuck me!"

"I've identified the nest." Anton nodded. "Its in the old cellars of the Blue Water Mead-hall."

"All right." Anton had decided. "We will buy up the Blue Water Mead-hall and eliminate the Problem."

"Actually," Zweis Radu stared at Cartha who was nodding in agreement with the old man. "I was thinking we should

inform Minister Valdo Tiza that we tracked them to their nest."

"No," Anton crushed Zweis' plan to ingratiate himself with Minister Tiza. "You, Cartha, and Antonio will personally eliminate the nest."

"We go in through the front doors." Zweis watched Cartha force the doors with his boot while smiling at Antonio. "This is how real men do it."

"Now," Cartha stepped into the dark hall and pulled his sword. "Which of you has the torches?"

<light> Cartha's sword became a burning torch lighting the room. "That's how smart men do it."

"Cartha," Zweis surveyed the web filled room as he struck up a fire and lit an actual torch. "Spider."

"Where?" Cartha drove his sword upward without even bothering to look and stabbed a giant spider in the web above him. "Oops."

"There is a door at the back." Zweis lifted his burning torch higher igniting the web before Cartha could move. No more spiders. "Alright we're clear."

"Previous meal?" Antonio kicked a pile of bones and rags revealing a leather bound book which he bent to pick up.

"What have we here?"

"Examine it later Antonio," Zweis followed Cartha toward the back as Antonio stuffed his prize into his backpack. "We still have predators in the cellar to deal with."

"Stairs down!" Cartha examined the stone stairs. It was much older than the plaster walled Mead hall. "Interesting."
"Stay close with the torch Zweis." Cartha descended slowly taking his magical light with him. "When this spell fails we will be in the dark."

"Cartha!" Cartha swung the sword through the man-sized creature that seemed to come from nowhere slicing it from groin to head with terrible efficiency. "Thats one."

"Zweis," Cartha rolled the naked corpse revealing what had once been a man. "How many ghouls did you say there were?"

"About a Thyatian handful." Zweis had reached the bottom of the stairs. "...so five remaining."

"Antonio!" Antonio appeared at the top of the Stairs. "Stay close. This is going to get ugly real quick."

"Zweis!" Zweis turned to watch as two ghouls tackled Cartha, the large warrior impaling one on his sword only to be crushed under the weight as the second bit down on his ear. "My bloody ear!"

"I'm coming." Zweis Radu pulled his dagger and drove the blade through the Ghoul's spine until it died. "Antonio!"

"Cartha," Zweis dragged the corpses off the warrior to reveal a man who had gone down hard. "Are you alive?"

"Yes," Cartha struggled to his feet and placed a rag against the wound. "My ear is killing me."

"Thats because this bastard..." Zweis pried the prize from between the ghoul's teeth and held it up to Cartha. "...had in his teeth."

"Is that your ear?" Antonio had caught up. "What in Halav's name happened?"

"Tell you later." Zweis listened. There was something ahead.

"Are you ready for round three?"

"Lets get it done." Cartha entered the chamber to discover a pit of chewed-on corpses in the midst of which a pair of large ghouls were feeding. "Looks like this is it."

"Come and get some you bastards!" Cartha gripped his sword leaving an opening large enough to be filled by a ghou. "Come on!"

Cartha smiled as the ghouls snarled like savage animals and rushed him, his sword dancing in the open chamber beheading both.

"That it?"

"Another door." Zweis looked around. It had been an old temple. "Room's empty but there is a tunnel."

"Where does it go?" Zweis followed it. "Zweis?"

"I'm here." Zweis returned. "It exits into an alley way fifty feet up disguised as a postern."

"What now?" Antonio was feeling ill at the sight of corpses. Zweis looked at Cartha holding a cloth to his ear. "We visit Patriarch Alexi and get Cartha's ear healed."

"All right," Cartha slipped past Zweis and headed for the postern. "Lets see this alley of yours."

She lay curled against Zweis Radu, and placed another Ylari date in his mouth.

"Its all over the city," Zweis Radu chewed slowly pausing to kiss the small of her neck. "How Zweis and Cartha Radu put down a nest of Ghouls that had been preying on the populace."

"Uncle Tiza was shocked when they came into his office talking about it." She passed him another date. "My Zweis, a hero of the people."

"Hero of the people?" Zweis licked her neck. "Why...that's terrible."

"Everyone will expect me to marry." She looked at him as though he were about to propose. "They'll find me some well-to-do spinster from a fine rich family and I'll have to settle down and I'll never get to see you again."

"You could marry me." Zweis smiled at her suggestion. It could never happen. "Zweis...?"

"I'll think about it." Zweis searched the bowl for a date and found it empty. "Fetch some more dates will you my Lady Esmarelda Radu?"

"Lady Radu?" Esmarelda Tiza smiled as she got to her feet and walked naked out to the kitchen to fetch her lord his dates. "Lady Radu."

It was quick. The powerful muscles of the unseen ghoul grabbed her from behind snapping her neck as she retrieved a handful of dates for the bowl but they dropped from her hand, scattering across the floor. The monster slung her naked form over its shoulder and moved carefully out onto the deck of the Pleasure Barge.

"Lady Radu?" Cartha dropped her body over the side. "I think not."

The Death of Tomv

"You want into the dungeons beneath my Bakery," Stavros picked up the wood pie crust roller. "Its a hundred gold royals."

"A hun..." Tomv gawked at the steep entry fee. "A hundred?"

"You are a Baker." Tomv didnt even have ten gold royals.

"What would you want with a hundred gold royals?"

"I want to open my own dungeon." Stavros smiled. "And the entry fee is a hundred gold royals."

"Fine." Tomv grimaced at giving away that much gold. "but I dont have that much on me."

"Let me in to the dungeon," Tomv offered his hand in oath.

"and I'll pay double that from the first gold I find."

"Say it in Dwarf," Stavros held out his hand. "So I know you mean it."

"Yoch Kahar." Tomv took Stavros's hand in oath. "Skerv meru Yoch Kahar."

"Was that so hard?" Stavros pulled two loaves from a bowl and stuffed them in a large flower sack he had altered with a leather carry-strap and retrieved the oil lantern. "ready to go."

"ready to go..." Tomv considered the would-be adventurer in front of him. "Are you mad?"

"Certainly not." Stavros pulled aside a large barrel in the centre of the room revealing a concealed door in the floor.

"I'm simply coming with you because gold is heavy."

"It can weigh on a man heavily." Stavros lifted the heavy timber trapdoor to reveal a Well shaft. "And being weighed

down can get you killed." They contemplated the dark Well until Tomv pulled a rope and a steel grapel from his pack followed by block and tackle. "I'll lower you down." Tomv nodded at Stavros's suggestion. "Agreed."

"I will anchor it to this." Tomv hammered the grapel into a heavy timber post and looped it up over a beam before hoisting the block off the ground until it hung above the hole and tied it off. "It should hold a goodly weight coming and going."

"If you care to do the honors." Tomv slipped a boot into a loop of rope and pulled rope until it was strained tightly passing it to Stavros. "Here we go."

"We do indeed." Stavros pulled enough so the Dwarf swung out over the Well-shaft before deliberately releasing his hands letting the Dwarf plunge to his death. "Oops."

"You goblin ruttling!" Tomv snarled the dwarven curse as he fell impacting on ancient stones fifty feet below. He let out all the scream he could muster at an impact that had almost killed him coughing up blood. "Gaaahh!"

"Are you alive down there?" Stavros began to cut the rope.

"Well dwarf?" "Go," Tomv considered what to do about the bastard above him as he choked on his own blood. "to Hel."

"Go to Hel?" The block dropped the distance just missing the dying dwarf. "That is just upsetting."

"Bastard..." Tomv struggled against the pain of death to search his person for the flask, smiling through bloody teeth at its discovery. "...doughboy."

Stavros poured a flask of oil down into the dark and having struck up another lighted torch, dropped the fire down the hole.

"You will need to come down here and get me yourself," Tomv walked slowly into the dark beyond the reach of the light of the oil fire behind him, his hammer heavy in his hand. "I'll wait."

Skree. The sound of a large rat in the dark drew Tomv's attention. There were several of the giant rodents rushing at him as he struggled to swing his hammer in the rather ancient hallway.

Tomv threw the dead rats into a sack and struggled into the dark until the oil fire no longer burned behind him.

The corridor continued another two hundred feet into a vast chamber held aloft by a hundred heavy square cut timber columns, each carved with an ancient and unfamiliar script. Though his infravision could not see them, Tomv could feel the perfection of an ancient artisan's hand in every symbol. The wood of the columns seemed to have been hewn from great and ancient trees and squared back to ten feet a side. A light and he might have examined the script better.

Slowly Tomv crossed the ancient gallery wary of heat or cold that might reveal some aberration set on making a meal of him. The gallery had to sit somewhere under the nest. Surely someone had sunk a well? Those Rats had to have come down here somehow.

"Unless," Tomv considered the long distance he had come speaking an obvious answer to himself. "They were headed toward an entrance by the river."

Tomv's hammer glowed driving back the shadow that had come upon its unsuspecting prey.

"It hasn't done that before." Tomv swung the hammer hard, decimating the shadow further. "Rest in peace!"

Tomv coughed in a fit of pain unleashing blood. His injuries were significant and they would not heal wandering a dungeon hammering down shadows.

The pair of bear-like statues seemed out of place. The great stone beasts guarded a staircase down.

"Any thoughts..." Tom touched his hammer to the nearest of the old bears and looked up at its mighty face. "...my friend?"

The layout of the place was becoming apparent. Down would be further into what was now obviously a temple. There would be some degree of safety and refuge found in this gallery but further in would likely prove unhealthy to those desecrating its hallowed halls.

Tomv wiped a bloody hand through his beard contemplating his options.

"And..." If there was healing magic it would be found further in. "...down we go."

Tomv burned with pain at every step, his injuries slowing his descent.

Left or right. It wasn't much of a choice and Tomv examined the wall opposite the stairs. If this were a temple the stairs should have continued down into a prayer hall.

"Left or right?" Tomv gripped the haft of shadowbane and turned right. "Right it is."

"How I long to see," Tomv whispered the words walking along the corridor. "a distant Summer meadow."

"Where she waits for me," The Dwarf paused his forward movement at an odd sound in the distance. "high..."

"...up in..." Tomv dropped his sack of rats and lifted his glowing hammer as the giant snake of bones shifted side to side down the corridor to attack. "...the Stahl."

The snake evaded the brightly burning hammer striking easily at Tomv, the hammer's glow fading as it dropped to the ground plunging the corridor into darkness.

The Elven Lady

Captain Lhars looked at the soldiers crowded on the deck of his Transport ship. The Elven Lady sailed past Razaks Rock, her sails swallowing the good wind as she made the turn. "So many young faces." He could see in them the same look of destiny he had chosen as a young man. "By the Immortals when will we stop sending children to die on battlefields?"

"Perhaps when the old stop looking for a fight that devours the young." Thomic Ironhammer straightened the tiller. "The Rock is clear."

The forces of the Desert Nomads had pulled out of Darokin and would be pulling back to Akesoli. These young men would land on the docks in old harbour and cut off their retreat. The Elven Lady had sat, an invisibility spell concealing the vessel, anchored off the northern shore of Lake Amsorak for much of the War in view of fair Bronsdale. Even as the community was sacked and burned by an army of humanoid raiders that had pushed around the north side of the lake raiding deep into Darokin's Agricultural heartland. Lhars hated to keep her out of the war but many ships had been seized or burned to the waterline to stop one side or the other from getting them. Now she was one of the few not in the hands of the Desert Nomads or sunk. Now she could make a difference. Now she could carry these young men to their destinies.

"Next up," Thomic Ironhammer lowered the tiller into its well worn notch in the wood and tied it securely into place.

"the Navigation turn at the Island." No need to speak its name now and invite doom.

The Elven Lady slid past the deathly dark and crumbling keep that dominated the island and made the turn taking the vessel away from the grey and unseen horror that enveloped the ruins in its aura. Thomic Ironhammer roused captain Lhars from his thoughts.

"Copper for um." Lhars struggled to his feet from the old wooden throne he kept lashed to the railing.

"Ey? Just thinking of family."

"Ah...yes...family." It had been a while since Thomic had seen his family as well. Thomic thought of something from his past and wiped at his eyes. "arn't we all?"

"How I long to see," Thomic raised his voice. "a distant Summer meadow." Lhars placed a hand on the old Dwarf's shoulder.

"Where she waits for me," The old Dwarf's voice carried over the soldiers standing at ready. "high up in the Stahl."

"Oh my beautiful flower," Thomic straightened the tiller to end the turn. "how I long to hold you."

"A memory I will cherish," Lhars tied off the timber tiller. "more than any radiant Jewel."

"Oh my beloved elven lady," Lhars smiled at the dwarf's love of an elf in Rockhome that had enticed him to sign on as crew because of the ship's name. "with your lips of brandywine."

"Know that I dream of you," Lhars looked up as the odd glow growing in the northern sky drew his attention from

the dwarf's love song. "though you will never be mine." "What in the hel is that thing?" A burning pebble as large as any mountain, dropped behind the Silver Sierras and exploded in a fire ball that consumed the northern sky. The brightness of this new Sun became so painful that Lhars wanted to scream, the heat igniting the timbers and sails of the Elven Lady in a burning torrent that reached down the throats of every soldier stricken with terror as it cooked them in their armour.

Lhars didn't even speak as he dragged Thomic Ironhammer over the railing and into the water that was now boiling around them. The bodies of young men trapped in a scream sank through the water around them.

Lhars could see there was nothing to be done to save them. The cold and murky darkness of the deep of the lake became instantly bright and began to feel like a distinctly warm bath. Lhars dragged his dying friend further down until they hit mud. The Ring of water-breathing slipped off Lhars's finger and he slipped it over the smallest of Thomic's substantial sausages and held it on him until he opened his eyes and breathed. Deep breath and breathe out. Lhars swapped the ring to his own hand and took a deep breath in then out before swapping the ring back to Thomic's hand. They maintained the tactic for a while and then a large boulder perhaps fifty feet in diameter crashed through the burning ship above them and descended the lake bottom. Lhars looked up as large rocks continued to rain around

them striking the water only to sink and both could see there was nowhere they could go.

The wreckage of the elven lady seemed to vanish from overhead in less than a heart beat. Their panic settled back into a rhythm in the shadow of their new boulder. Deep breath in and out. And then the ring would swap fingers.

Thomic broke the rhythm when the water again grew murky and dark and he signalled to surface. Lhars followed the dwarf up the side of the boulder that sat high enough that even Thomic Ironhammer was a half dwarf above the waterline. Lhars could not even see the stars, the world now plunged into darkness.

"By the immortals I cannot even see the hand in front of my face." Lhars felt about for Thomic. "What of you Thomic?"

"I'm so sorry my friend." Lhars felt the Dwarf's calloused hand touch his face. "The fire in the sky has robbed you of your sight."

The Well

"You realize this war has cost us millions of daro in trade." Selm Boothby lowered the bucket over the edge of the Well.

"Damn Diplomatic Corps. dropped the ball if you ask me."

"No one was asking Selm," Tobin of Hinmeet scratched his teeth with a twig and leaned over the edge and looked down. The water level was pretty low down. "Not in the entire population of Hendry was anyone asking your opinion about 'the War'".

"Of course it cost us a lot," Tobin watched the bucket rise. "but with the desert nomads in retreat we will rebuild."

"I hear that they think lies are holy." Selm Boothby shook his head as he lifted the bucket to the well edge. "How can we have anything in common with that kind of dirt loving, nut-butter crazy?"

"I don't know," Tobin climbed up on the edge of the Well and adjusted his buttocks until he felt comfortable seated on the edge. "Maybe hold an annual lying competition and invite them to tea?"

"Hold a lying competition and invite..." Selm shook his head as he poured the cold water into the copper kettle. "Damn crazy halfling."

"That is officially the craziest idea to come out of your mouth." Selm clamped the lid down on the kettle and handed the empty bucket to Tobin. "You know what?"

"No," Tobin laughed into the bucket. "What?"

"I am going to write my brother in the diplomatic corp. and tell him that one." Selm picked up the kettle and walked over to Tobin. "Lets see how much of a laugh you get then."

The sky lit as though the world had suddenly fallen into the Sun now burning just north of Darokin, the heat igniting the air in Selm's lungs as he knocked the burning Tobin backwards into the Well with the only hand not fusing to the instantly superheated copper kettle erupting steam. The water came as a slight relief the moment Tobin hit it but the feeling of relief didn't last long. The water raised in temperature quickly.

Tobin reached a hand above the surface of the water only to feel the sensation of having plunged his hand into a smithy's forge looking to snatch a red hot sword. He pulled it below the water but he could feel it. Tobin considered his situation. He needed air but the air would kill him with his first breath. The part of the bucket above water was burning so Tobin pulled it under extinguishing the fire. He then forced the bucket above the surface and scooped air pulling it again below the water. The superheated air took a while to cool even as Tobin splashed water up into the air pocket turning it to steam. Only when the steam stopped forming did Tobin chance to take a deep breath. The warm air felt uncomfortable as he breathed in and held his breath. There would be no telling how long it would be before the air could be breathed or before help would come.

Tobin relented and breathed out allowing the bubbles to surface before he again sampled his private supply of bucket air.

Tobin allowed the bucket to surface and scoop more air before dragging it below the surface and again splashing it with water.

Selm. Tobin thought of his friend. Selm had either saved him from certain death or condemned him to a slow and painful one. As Tobin took a breath of Air from his supply the wall of the Well shook and did so for a while. Whatever was happening to the world above was still going on. A stone brick loosed from the top of the Well and dropped down into the water landing on Tobin's bucket instantly pushing it against him and squeezing the air from his belly as it descended toward the Well bottom halfling first. This was it.

Tobin surrendered to death.

"An interesting result Sylistryi," Maybe he had been hasty. Tobin took a breath. "And he's Alive."

"'m live?" Laughter. It sounded oddly elvish. "Yes...you are among living."

Tobin laughed until he thought of Selm.

"The sky was bright and the air caught fire," Tobin cried and wiped at the tears. "Selm pushed me down the Well."

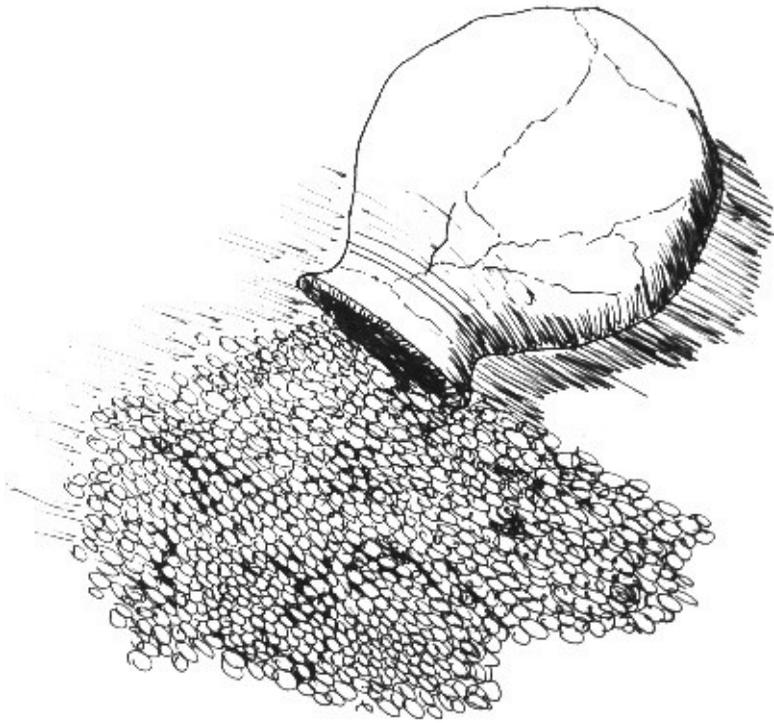
"Did anyone else make it?" Tobin opened his eyes to find an oddly pale and smiling elf leaning over him and another elf standing behind her with a look of concern. "Are you elfs?"

"Are we elves?" The elf burst into laughter and shook her head waking away revealing a large cave. "Are we elves!"

"Yes," The stern looking elf was speaking while the other rummaged through packs and pulled out an elf sized robe identical to the ones they were wearing. "We are elves."

"They might be too big." Tobin noticed his hand and arm were like the elves but before he could say anything the nearest elf took his hand and pulled him to his feet.

"Thanks to Sylistryi's magic," Tobin was now as tall as the elf. "We are all elves."



Art: 'The Spilled Urn' by Sean Robert Meaney

A Collection of Short Fiction set in the Mystaran World
which turned out to be far more inspirational than you
might imagine.