

Zoldexius: City of Evil

By Paul Conley

18 years old

He was a ghost in the crowd, his footsteps no more than echoes, a low susurrus beneath the antiseptic quiet of the street. A light touch was needed here, no more than a gentle caress to accomplish the task. That was why he was chosen. Through a thin, opaque black hood, the Watcher observed everything, though his eyes were never his own. They belonged, like the rest of his body, to someone else.

It would be quick. Nothing special at all. Just a swift but kind snap on the back of the head, and the mark would be gone, dead. A ghost, just like the Watcher. No one would mourn the victim's loss, and no one would even realize who among them had been taken away. To do so was heresy.

Above the Watcher, the great iron visage of the leader, Zoldex, glared down at his civilians from a large propaganda poster, almost as if to challenge them, incite them into a foolhardy rebellion. The thin lines creasing across Zoldex's face seemed to purse in an eternal grin, as if the thought of such an insurgence were amusing. Which, to Zoldex, it was.

It was time. No more idling around. The Watcher picked up the pace, on his ever-crucial flight to the mark. He moved with such speed and calculated agility that he flew, barely a foot above the cobblestone, through the semi-crowded street without ever even touching a single passerby. If, by some strange turn of events he did happen to come far too close to any one plebeian, the person would only feel a strange updraft of fell wind, a gust, and nothing more. A whisper, like the Watcher.

Moonlight. Its beams stung the thin outer membrane of the Watcher's silver eyes as he glanced skyward from a domed rooftop. He was a sentry of the night, a stalker moving in for the kill, and his senses were attuned for specifically that purpose. As such, he was not used to daylight, moonlight, or any light therein. It did not much matter, for in Zoldexius, the capital of the realm, buildings and structures were so tall and massive they provided decent shade for those of owl's sight; the obstruction of sun or moonlight was so profound that only at noon each day was it possible for all portions of the city to see light at the same time.

He could hear them laughing, drinking. The mead stunk even from here. As the Watcher caught a whiff of it, he cringed. At least the mark might not suspect anything, senses completely addled from the drink's slow-acting venom.

Zoldex, my lord, the Watcher Thought, shall I proceed?

No. Not yet.

I await your command as always, my lord.

As you should.

The whisper in the Watcher's mind reminded him of his place. Without a sound, the Watcher did as his instincts bid and leaped to a rooftop near him, concealed in shadow. It was a much better vantage point, and as the Watcher settled back against the slatted rooftop, he narrowed his eyes, allowing his vision to focus. Now it was possible for him to see everything, right down to the crumbs of apple pie flecked in the dwarf's thick beard. The dilated, foolishly giddy look in the human's eyes that accompanied the

drink. Apprehension and nausea in the elf woman's curling lips and fluttering eyelids. It was all far too easy.

Watcher, came the Thought.

My lord.

Go now. Be as the night, and kill all you find, without a sound.

Understood.

The Watcher rose on his perch and prepared. A crooked blade was drawn from its sheath, glimmering in the candlelight from the window across from the Watcher. This was his sword, a scimitar that had gutted many creatures and slain many powerful foes. Its hilt was fashioned of reinforced steel and the thin, wire-sharp edge was of clear crystal, shaped and forged, polished and pummeled until it had become nearly unbreakable.

He did not need it, but with this blade, none would escape him. This night, the air would no longer stink of mead. It would reek of blood.

"Tonight is a night to celebrate," announced Gabryn, a human with broad shoulders and feathery brown hair, his bosom wide and expansive as he took in a gulp of oxygen after flogging down no less than half a bottle of wine, "We overtook them. The sewers are free of them now!"

"I am not certain we should celebrate just yet," said his companion, an elf named Salyl. For an elf, Salyl was even more attractive than those of her kind, with golden locks as bright as the morning star and eyes that shimmered and haunted a man for days after looking into them. She was truly a beauty all her own, comparable to none, and she knew it. It was her job never to allow this to befuddle those she worked with.

"Why not?" boomed the mighty-hearted, dark-bearded dwarf Fenard, whose potbelly was so massive it jutted ever so slightly over his belt, snapping the lower buttons off, and revealing some unsightly black chest hair. "We now have run of the undercurrents of trade out of the city! Why shouldn't we party a little?"

"I don't like it, that's all," Salyl defended herself, never liking to be right in these situations, but knowing that it was to everyone's benefit, drunk or sober, to hear her position. "It was way too easy. And we still don't know where Dalys, the mystral disappeared to."

"We'll worry about that another day," Gabryn said, slumping down into a chair beside Salyl. "Here, have some leaf, Salyl, you look like you could use it."

He pulled out a pipe and began puffing in smoke languidly. Though Gabryn offered it to Salyl, she pushed it away delicately and shifted in her seat. How she wished she had remembered to bring her bow and quiver to this affair. Both Gabryn and Fenard had told her not to, that for the first time in months, years even, they could finally not have a need for it. But Salyl knew better. As long as Zoldex remained in power, there would *always* be a need for weapons. Why had she ignored her better judgment on this?

"Come on, Sal," Fenard chuckled through a flagon of drink, "Loosen up. There's nothing about to attack us now, is there?"

"There could be," Salyl said defiantly. "You don't know. Remember, no one can sense the Watchers, not even elves, much less dwarves. There could be one upon us right now and you'd never know."

“There isn’t, Salyl,” Gabryn cajoled lightly. “Trust me. No one, not even Zoldex, can place us in those sewers tonight. It was dark and the soldiers never saw us coming.”

“I know but I can’t shake this feeling,” Salyl pleaded with her companions. “We should not have gotten out of those sewers alive. This doesn’t feel right.”

“Look, just have a drink and everything will be all right, Salyl,” Fenard coaxed, thrusting the flagon just under her long slender nose. “Just take a swig. For my sake?”

She shook her head at the dwarf, batting the flagon away. Fenard returned to his slovenly ritual of drinking while downing several pastries at once. Gabryn shot Salyl a disappointed look and shrugged. Before the elf knew it, both her companions had resumed their barbaric drinking games.

Salyl shook her head and rose from her chair.

“Where are you going now?” Gabryn asked.

“I’m leaving.” Salyl stated adamantly. “I’m sorry, you two, but I can’t sit back and relax right now. I have a bad feeling about those sewers. I’m going to check on them.”

“Let her go,” Fenard said, drooling on his mantle a little. “If she can’t accept a good time when she sees one, that’s her business.”

The elf, her ears reddening in frustration and embarrassment, faced the door out of the dingy apartment. A light, deceptively playful breeze flicked her hair, and without warning, her heart quickened its pace. Her battle senses clicked on, and just in time. A second later and she would have died with her companions.

Leaping through the air, as quick as an arrow from her infamous bow, Salyl flipped and crashed onto her haunches a little too hard. She gaped at what awaited her eyes as she tensed up her muscles. Gabryn was completely silent, his eyes vacant and impassive. At first she thought this to be a side-effect of the mead, but her heart told her differently. Her friend, the one whom she had entrusted with her life and everything she held dear lay dead, slumped against the back of his chair, his thick tongue lolling out of his mouth. Blood trickled through Fenard’s thick beard, and the flagon dropped from his thick fingers with a hard thud onto the carpet. All of those times he had protected her and now...

No, Salyl thought. The Watchers!

“Indeed,” said a hollow, ethereal, barely audible voice behind her. “The Watchers.”

Salyl whipped around. Facing her was a wraith, a black cloak draped across his thin form. The elf could not see his face, for it, like the body, was hooded in deep shadows as dense as fog. Yet she *could* see the Watcher’s thin sword, a testament to Zoldex’s power, might and craftsmanship. Rumor had it these blades were forged by the ruler himself, infused with his power and magic in the fires of Hell itself. A Watcher... but how had she avoided his attack? She should not have been able to sense it...

“Yes, you are right to wonder that,” the Watcher whispered through the veil. “I too find it curious. No matter. Goodbye, elf.”

With a flash of liquid silver the scimitar whipped through the air, straight at Salyl’s face. The blade moved almost too fast to see. A single tear had barely enough time to form in Salyl’s eye.

Salyl had been ready for death for the longest time, had been taught that it was but another part of life, and yet she cursed herself for being afraid. It was all too soon, she thought she would have more time than this...

In that moment several things happened at once. Salyl was knocked to the ground, away from the horrible blade of the Watcher and the darkness that enshrouded him. The sword flung to the other side of the room, slamming into a doorframe and tearing it to splinters. Salyl rolled onto her side just in time to see the Watcher cowering in the corners, shielding himself from a blinding, ferocious light. A tornado of wind, sound and color was blasting forth into the room, growing exponentially by the second. What sort of new power was this? Salyl had never seen its equal before. The candles had already blown out from the roaring wind but there was luminescence enough for a whole street to see by. Salyl could sense the power bubbling in the air, the rippling currents of white-hot energy undulating in a fierce vortex. She scrambled to her feet, giving the anomaly a wide berth.

The light was given form a moment later. With a howling screech, it coalesced into a blue-white orb, revolving at an alarming velocity. Salyl held her breath. Did she dare approach it?

Sparks of green brilliance shot from the sphere, shocking the table and chairs, setting them alight. Within moments the room was ablaze, the flame-dancers leaping from surface to surface with the dexterity of an alley cat. Salyl choked in the haze, but could not for one instant take her eyes off what she was seeing. Shadows grew along the walls as a figure formed out of the light in front of her. The elf could not see much of it, but she could tell it was male, for its muscles were thick and well-formed, not at all like an elf's, and much too tall for a dwarf. She could only conclude that it was human, and yet it looked like no human she had ever seen before. To describe it accurately, he appeared to her as a god, formed entirely of white light.

At long last, the light dissipated and as it faded, in its place sure enough was a human man, his shoulders large and menacing, his hair thick and well-groomed, yet it had a wild quality about it as well. He wore a set of armor the likes of which Salyl had never before seen but she did recognize it from old books she had glanced through in a forbidden library: these were dwarven-crafted, and among the best ever constructed. Where had this man acquired such incredible mail? No welder alive would dare construct in that method any longer, lest he or she incur the wrath of Zoldex himself.

The man turned, facing Salyl.

"Where am I?" he coughed through the smoke. "What is this place?"

Salyl barely had enough time to shout the message.

"Behind you!" she cried.

In a black blur of twirling armor and white silver, the man had swung his body around to face the Watcher as he charged at him. Salyl could not see the man's sword, but she knew it had been drawn because there was a cry that split the mind, echoing like a concussive blast through the night. The shriek was so piercing Salyl was certain she would go deaf by the end of it. The elf recognized the sound. It was the sound of a Watcher dying. She had heard it only once before, when Zoldex had held a public execution for one of his soldiers to serve as an example for all those who would defy him. The soldier had failed in his mission to assassinate the former leader of the resistance,

and his scream of terror had reverberated through the ears of all who'd heard it for days later.

This man... had killed a Watcher? This was a feat unheard of. Only Zoldex was powerful enough to end his minions' lives. For a single man to defeat a Watcher was... hopeful. A hope that had never existed until now in Salyl's heart. A hope that might end Zoldex's reign of terror.

Her ears stung with the sound of the Watcher's death cry and began to bleed. Make it all stop... make it end...

Flames reached the kitchen and found the supply of liquor. An explosion tore the room apart. Giant blocks of stone and mortar flew like meteorites throughout the room and Salyl dodged a large one aiming right for her. She rolled away just before it slammed down where she had been, crashing into the lower apartments, creating a gaping hole in the woodwork of the floor.

Stay low, she remembered. Stay low and breathe.

Crawling on her hands and knees, Salyl made her way through the crumbling remnants of what had once been a sanctuary for her and her friends. A crash sounded and before she knew it, she had fallen over, a beam from the ceiling overhead pinning her down. Realizing the irony of the situation, she would much rather have died at the hands of the Watcher than in the fire that ensued. The former allowed her a certain modicum of dignity she would rather not be without. The last thing she saw before she lost herself to unconsciousness was the mysterious stranger, leaning over her, his eyes glimmering like the sun the citizens of Zoldexius rarely saw.

"Hey," a firm and comforting voice called to Salyl across the dark void. "Wake up. You have to wake up."

She felt someone pressing a cold compress to her forehead. Salyl was being tended to—but why would anyone do that? She was beginning to doubt whether everything that had happened before the darkness had been real. It was every man, elf or dwarf for him or herself in Zoldexius. Unless, of course, this man were a part of the resistance. If that was so, she would have to warn him to help her check the sewers...

Salyl's eyes fluttered open.

"Good," said a deep, flowing masculine sound above her. "You're awake. I was afraid I'd lost you back there."

As the elf's eyes focused, she realized that they were in an alley just outside the apartment complex. It was a dark, dank, and, as her senses returned to her, she realized quite an odorous place, but at least she was alive and breathing. A welcome change from the apartment, which was no doubt disappearing into flames even as they spoke. She could see that her new companion had feathery black hair, which formed into two separate bangs across his forehead, a shade of which that matched his goatee. His rigid face was godly, almost glowing; Salyl knew that this man could romance any maiden he so desired without even the thought of it. Love was a battlefield which this warrior of justice had conquered without any troops.

"Where did you come from?" was all Salyl could think to ask.

"I'm from a place called The Imperium," said the man, reclining and allowing her to sit up. "Have you heard of it?"

Salyl's first impulse was to laugh. The Imperium, that mystical place that had existed before Zoldex? That was all it was—a myth. There was no way to prove it had once existed, since Zoldex had had all records of it burned or destroyed, stating that his history was all that should matter to the public. Those from the older generations were silenced, disappearing into thin air, no doubt the victims of similar house calls from the Watchers.

“What’s funny?” asked the man, resting his hand on his knee. “You... you don’t laugh at The Imperium, do you?”

“No,” Salyl said quickly, realizing that she might have offended him. “It just sounded ridiculous, is all.”

“Ridiculous?” the handsome individual remarked incredulously. “I fail to see how.”

“The Imperium? The world that once existed?” Salyl realized as she spoke that the man truly had no idea of to what she was referring. “It... it’s gone. It’s a myth now. It’s been gone for a long time. Almost a hundred years.”

“A hundred years?” the man asked, his voice shaking. “That is impossible.”

“I assure you, it is not,” Salyl replied. “The lore of the Imperium lives on, but that is all.”

The man before her rose to his feet. She stood as well, locking eyes with the gorgeous human. Salyl noticed him fingering the pommel of a jeweled blade at his hip. It glimmered in the moonlight and almost instantly she grew intrigued at the weapon. Deciding she would inquire about it later, Salyl asked the one question she had been longing to ask since she met the man.

“Who are you?” she asked.

There was a pregnant pause.

“My name is Braksis,” said the other, stroking his goatee and gazing about. “I don’t think this is my world at all. I think I may be in the future.”

“The future?” Salyl repeated, astounded. “But... how?”

“I don’t have the faintest idea,” Braksis admitted. “Before I was in that apartment I was engaged in a battle with Zoldex’s armies.”

“Zoldex?” Salyl inquired. “You mean the ruler?”

“Ruler?” Braksis wondered aloud.

She had peaked the warrior’s interest. He took a step closer toward her, his eyes alight with curiosity. That glimmer in his pupils was enough to intrigue her as well. It was not every day that she met someone from a different time era, after all.

“Yes,” Salyl explained. “This is Zoldexius, the capital of Zoldon, at the heart of the country. Zoldex rules this city with an iron grip. We are but slaves to him.”

“Tell me more,” Braksis begged her. She found it increasingly hard to resist him.

“He allowed the dwarves and the elves to live as the underclass in this city,” Salyl went on. “We are not typically allowed in this sector. This is where the humans live. They make up the middle and upper classes.”

Braksis nodded once.

“What is your name?” he asked her.

“Salyl,” she said after a few moments. “My name is Salyl.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful maiden,” Braksis remarked, charming as always. “It is only fitting I suppose. What’s that sound?”

Salyl had only just noticed it as well. Normally the siren calling for more of Zoldex's troops would have been easy enough for her elf ears to hear, but she was nevertheless distracted. The events of the night were catching up to her—barraging her mind until she was left defenseless against her own anguish.

"Zoldex," Salyl explained quickly, gulping as she felt a wave of tears approaching her eyes. "His troops are on the move. There will be more Watchers arriving soon, to find out what happened here."

"Watchers?" Braksis questioned. "You mean that thing I killed in the apartment?"

"Yes," Salyl told him, nodding. "They are Zoldex's personal guard. We were the victims of an assassination attempt tonight. I was the only one who survived..."

Her voice trailed off, and she wiped her eyes quickly.

"No matter," she said briskly, looking beyond Braksis to the end of the alleyway. "We have to leave. They will find us if we stay."

She brushed past him, heading toward their only exit. Braksis hesitated behind her.

"Aren't you coming?" Salyl asked.

"Yes," Braksis replied. "I'm just a little disoriented, that's all."

The two of them made their way out of the alley quickly.

Half a mile away, a lowly peddler was just opening his shop. At least, to *everyone else* it was a shop, but that was a clever ruse. To those of the resistance, it served as an outpost, scouting the streets for news of future attacks by Zoldex's troops. During the day, the peddler operated a small vendor outside on the street in front of his apothecary, where he might glean knowledge from spies or soldiers. On a rare occasion he had even glimpsed a Watcher, but these visits were few and far between and (though he would never publicly admit it) were unwelcome. Saying the wrong thing to a Watcher could get you killed before you even had time to know how you had died.

At night, however, the simple peddler opened his shop to more clandestine clientele and activity, and surprisingly enough Zoldex never thought to search the place. Perhaps the overlord had a secret agenda that would only be known after his trap had closed on the unsuspecting peddler's neck. Or, (the likelier of the two possibilities, in the peddler's own opinion) what was the point in messing around with lowly hermits who sold wormsroot and ginger as healing herbs when other methods recently discovered were more effective?

"People my age," the peddler would often say in private, "Are never seen anyway. What better person to serve the resistance than I?"

Tonight, however, felt different to the balding store owner, different in a way that chilled him to the bone. He had heard the resistance intended to move against the soldiers earlier and he had been the sole individual who spoke out against such a rash action. Sectors of the sewers were left unguarded, and some were not. Better to leave the troops that guarded the sewers well enough alone and not attack them. A wiser course of action would have been to wait until they had left and then sealed their entrances so they would not be able to use them in the future. Then, if ever those particular openings were needed later, they could unseal them from within and attack then, using the sewers as a cover.

Heading into a foolish and needless battle, the peddler realized, was just asking for trouble and unneeded exposure. Zoldex was already onto them enough as it was.

Everyone in Zoldon knew of the guile of the ruler. If they could have a chance to outsmart him, why should they not?

Yet, he often reminded himself, the resistance was led by young, hotheaded men, determined to slice off an arm or a head, or anything else they could get their hands on. The peddler remembered what it was like to be that young, though he had traded many injuries and emotional wounds for the wisdom to know when not to fight a senseless battle.

His first customer of the evening strolled in, taking care to act as casual as possible. If any of Zoldex's spies were nearby, it was imperative that they understood that this meeting of two suspicious-looking men was strictly for business purposes only. There were code words to speak from here on, and if procedure were not followed, the patron would be asked to leave the shop.

"State your business." The peddler grunted, laying both hands across the tabletop and cracking his neck.

"I'm looking for the head of a rat," said the customer, leaning forward ever so slightly. "Got any?"

"Why would you need the head of a rat?" the peddler asked, taking care to put emphasis into the question to make it sound genuine. "Will you eat it?"

"There is a place full of those rats," said the customer. "They eat flesh of any kind, even of their own. I will lure them away and be on my way again."

The peddler shifted his eyes surreptitiously. Not a sound from the street. Quiet. He did not like it. But the patron had indeed said the words.

"What can I do for you?" the peddler whispered in a low voice.

"I have urgent news for the resistance," said the man before the peddler, narrowing his eyes. "There has been an attack. An apartment in the human districts. I was lucky enough to get here without being killed myself."

"Lucky indeed," the peddler grumbled. "Fine. Up the alleyway. On your left. They'll show you in."

"Thanks," the other said softly and turned to go.

As the patron neared the door, the peddler called to him.

"You must be new," said the peddler. "You seemed to barely remember what to say."

"Just started last week," said the other, then put a finger to his lips. "I shall return."

The peddler nodded and grabbed a broom. As the customer left the shop, the peddler began to sweep. He did not like that one. The patron did not seem like the others. He was different, like this night.

"Where are we going?" Braksis asked as Salyl led him along, cutting through the streets, dodging through alleys and shops on a trail only she knew.

"I am taking us to people who will be able to explain everything that has happened tonight," Salyl explained while they ran. "We are in great danger, you and I. Keep your wits about you, Braksis."

"It's not my wits I'm necessarily worried about," Braksis countered under his breath. "Who are these people?"

“People like you,” Salyl told him. “People like me. Those who oppose Zoldex’s rule.”

Braksis said nothing for a long while. Their flight through the city took them through different environs, and Braksis felt that he could actually see the world changing before his very eyes. In the human district, the streets were cleaner, the apartments and streets well-kempt and organized, almost as if the city were a stack of domino chips carefully set up so as not to fall. That tenuous stillness and quiet slowly ebbed away as Salyl led him through the lower parts of the metropolis, to the grungy, abysmal sectors of town. Places where homes had caved in and elves and dwarves lay starving in the street, banging cups against a long broken well, trying to eke the last few drops of water from it. When a dwarf mother called her children to supper, other children tagged along with them and the woman had to shoo them away like degenerates.

“You live like this?” Braksis asked Salyl.

“Yes,” Salyl replied, her voice empty and hopeless. “This is all that Zoldex has offered us, since he took command over a century ago.”

“This is horrible,” Braksis remarked, looking away as two elf children fought over a single bite of bread. “Absolutely horrible.”

His odium of Zoldex increased then, to a degree he found almost frightening. How could any ruler expect his people to live in this squalor? It was beneath even the basest of creatures. Braksis’s fingers quivered as he reached for his sword, without even knowing quite why. Then he understood. The thought that his blade might be the one thing he had strong enough to kill the Zoldex of this time was the only comfort he could take now. If he ever returned to his era, he would vanquish Zoldex and his armies before they had the time to garner the power and forces they had evidently amassed in this future.

Salyl slowed her pace and trotted over to the two children fighting. Kneeling down, she pushed her locks behind her ears and laid her hands on both boys’ shoulders.

“Come now,” she said softly, her voice sweet and maternal, almost lyrical. “We must not fight now. To give into the hatred and the greed will make us weak. Here.”

She reached into her satchel, and withdrew two biscuits.

“I was saving these for a celebration,” Salyl explained to them. “But I can see there is no cause to celebrate now. You boys need this more than I do, anyway.”

Salyl handed them the food, smiling warmly at them.

“Work together to make a better world,” she instructed them. “Together the two of you can help one another find food from now on, rather than fight over it.”

The boys looked guiltily at one another and nodded silently. Salyl turned and walked back over to Braksis. She offered him a kind look, barely a gleam in the eyes that told him she still had hope for this city, yet Braksis knew that such a hope was rapidly dwindling.

The pair of them continued on through the city, approaching a street corner marked by a single street candle. Within the halo of light emitted from the lamp, Braksis saw a simple shop, an apothecary from the looks of it. In Braksis’s era, such medicine shops were valuable and consulted quite often, but this one looked as if it had not seen business in an age. The sign over the door had long since faded and neighborhood punks had painted over it with obscenities. The windows had been patched up with paper after being smashed by what looked like large rocks. Such a dingy little shop would not even

register on the radar of anyone seeking anything of consequence. Perhaps this was on purpose, Braksis realized. He knew a good strategy when he saw one. Salyl walked purposefully up to the door and eased it open, motioning for him to follow her. The two of them entered into a small room that smelled of pungent spices, foreign chemicals and the like.

“Leave your weapon at the door,” Salyl instructed him. “Terrest will not trust you if you are armed.”

“If it’s all the same to your Terrest,” Braksis said as he glanced over at the clerk’s counter, “I’d rather keep The Phoenix with me at all times, especially if we’re in danger from another Watcher attack.”

Salyl approached him and pulled him aside, speaking to him in an undertone.

“I understand your concern,” she said softly. “Truly I do. But I know the rules of this era. You do not. I want to return you to your original era and in order to do that I must speak with others of the resistance. We do not idly let outsiders in, but I am trusting to the fact that Terrest knows me quite well and will trust that I know who I am letting into our organization.”

Braksis shifted his eyes.

“Please,” Salyl said in a pleading voice. “It will only be for a few moments. The Phoenix will be safe here.”

After a few moments, Braksis nodded. He unclipped the scabbard from his belt and laid the sword across a table next to him. Salyl turned and led him further into the shop, right up to the counter. A human man in his forties, whose hair had long since fled from him, straightened up behind the table.

“Ah,” he said as he saw Salyl. “State your business.”

“I need the feather of an eagle,” Salyl said, trying as hard as she could not to let herself sound too desperate, even though the situation was dire.

“Why would you desire the feather of an eagle?” Terrest pressed her, and though both the peddler and Salyl did not think Braksis could understand what was going on, he could. He had seen the glint of fright shock across the whites of Terrest’s eyes. The eagle feather must be a code, and judging by the circumstances, it appeared this code was rarely used, which could mean only one thing: that something terrible had happened, far more terrible than an apartment catching fire.

“It appears I have a need to let my quill fly across the page,” Salyl recited as smoothly as she could. “And this man requires the ear of an owl, as well.”

“What happened, Sal?” Terrest asked, lowering his tone. “What has Zoldex done? What happened in the sewers tonight?”

Salyl, disoriented all of a sudden, shook her head, catching herself just in time. She could not risk revealing anything, even to Terrest. He was a very dear friend of hers, but her message was of gravest importance to the resistance and spoken in the open was likely to be overheard. Terrest had been trying to test her, to see if she would forget. All members of the resistance had to be trained to master their tongues before even being sent on their first mission, so as to not let anything slip.

“I must go,” Salyl told him. “Tell them I will be arriving.”

“Yes, Sal, I will,” Terrest replied briefly. “Go with the wind.”

She pulled Braksis along beside her and the warlord barely had the time to snatch The Phoenix from its spot by the door as they swept out into the night.

“I noticed you were speaking in code,” Braksis remarked as they continued along. “An intelligent system. I’m impressed.”

“Be quiet,” Salyl ordered. “Do not mention that until we are inside. Anyone could hear us out here.”

The two proceeded toward a wall at the end of the alleyway. Braksis glanced about but found them at a dead end. Then he looked below them and realized they were standing on a thin metal plate that blended almost perfectly with the color of the stone street. To the untrained eye, it was nearly invisible. This resistance did indeed know what it was doing.

Pressing a finger to her lips, the elf bent on her knees, tapping the plate once, then twice. After waiting a few moments she began rapping on the plate in quick succession, rattling out an indeterminable number of knocks onto the plate. At long last she stopped, squinting about in the near darkness for any sign of suspicious movement. The Watchers could be with them right now, and they would not even know it, but they had no reason to search here... unless Salyl’s worst fears had come true. And, though Salyl hated being right in these situations, she had been right more than once tonight already.

“Be ready to use your sword,” she told Braksis. “We may have need of it, and I am unarmed.”

“Right,” Braksis replied in a whisper.

The plate dislodged slightly. Waiting a few moments to be sure the two were truly alone, Salyl nodded once to Braksis before opening it completely. Beneath them was a gaping hole that led into well of darkness. A stench wafted upwards, reaching their nostrils and both elf and human cringed.

“It smells like death in there,” Braksis said.

“It probably is,” Salyl mumbled under her breath so that her companion could not hear her.

They descended into the opening, Braksis quickly finding the rungs of a ladder beneath his feet and climbing down at a steady rate. Salyl followed, closing the plate over the opening behind them. Within moments they reached soggy ground. Braksis felt his feet slosh across shallow pools of water. He was in the sewers of Zoldexius. A fitting ground for the resistance to fight. Any military man would pick the environ as the ideal place to fight. In the dank corridors of a sewer, the stench masked human scent well, so scouting dogs were nearly useless, and it was easy enough to hide among the many twisting passageways. An entire army could get lost for days within a sewer without a map or a guide, and this resistance knew it.

“Let’s move,” Salyl said into the dark. “I don’t like this. We should move quickly to the rendezvous point. They’ll be waiting for us.”

Braksis drew his sword, The Phoenix. It was a magnificent blade, and even by the tiny amount of light that came in through the twisting sewer corridors, Salyl could view every intricate detail, as if light were not needed to view such a masterpiece. It was more than a blade; it was a work of art, a testament to human (or in this case, dwarven) creations in general. Unfolding across the top of the hilt, where the blade met the handle, a golden set of wings spanned out, emphasizing the majestic phoenix from which the blade derived its name. The face of the broadsword’s blade bore the image of bright flames stretching from end to end. Salyl suddenly realized (wondering why she had not

seen it before) that Braksis's sword was not the only equipment he carried that resembled the creature. His black armor glinted across the front with the golden emblem of a brilliant bird stretching its neck toward the sky. She wondered at the strange motif, considering what connection the warrior could have to the legendary animal.

"Why is your sword called The Phoenix?" she asked, trying to make small talk with him as they moved down one corridor and then turned into another. "Did you find one?"

"No," Braksis answered, grinning broadly. "My adoptive father made it for me. When my parents were killed by my cousin Rawthorne so that he could claim their throne for his own, I was taken in by a troll, who taught me to be a warrior. He made this armor and the sword I now carry. He said that I was like the phoenix, rising again from the ashes where I had died, that it was up to me to reclaim what was once mine."

"Did you say your cousin's name was Rawthorne?" Salyl asked, shocked.

"Yes, what of it?"

"I know the name Rawthorne," Salyl replied. "Everyone in the resistance does. He's the reason that Zoldex rose to power."

Braksis stopped dead in his tracks.

"What?" he asked, face as white as snow.

"He killed off potential threats," Salyl explained. "He went around killing all the leaders of each of the countries. He was like a personal hit man for Zoldex. When he died, Zoldex awarded him the honor of being remembered in his history."

"Which rulers did he kill?" Braksis asked, his voice taking on a tone Salyl had never heard there before. There was a biting edge to his voice now, a fierce sound that Salyl recognized as fear. "This is important, Salyl. Who did he kill?"

"Let me try to remember," Salyl replied. "Let's see... the king of Vorstad, obviously, though I can't remember his name. The Empress Karleena, and there was another big one that had to be eliminated right at the beginning... what was her name?"

She racked her brains, trying to recall the name of the queen.

"Was it Zerilla?" Braksis asked.

"Yes! That was it!" Salyl cried, then instantly realized that this was not welcome news.

"How long ago was it?" Braksis asked.

"At the beginning, a hundred years ago," Salyl told him instantly. "Did you know her?"

"We were attached," Braksis said shortly. "Come on. We have to get to the resistance."

Salyl looked deeply at her companion. The usually warm visage was darkened now by a cloud of deepest distress. She could only conclude that he had loved her—a love that was powerful enough for him to want to protect her, and since he had come to her world he had been unable to do so. The elf was unwilling to admit, even to herself, that she rather enjoyed the human's company. Her heart had always been her own, never allowed to wander. Yet she found herself on a line of thinking that told her that perhaps if Braksis never found his way back, it would not be so bad. The resistance, after all, could use a fighter like him. He had slain a Watcher, after all.

No, she told herself. You want that, but for all the wrong reasons. You're quite smitten with this human and you don't want to admit it to yourself. He does not belong in

this era or world, or whatever it is to him, in the same way you would not belong in his. He has friends there, a love there. You cannot allow yourself to want that, to interfere. It would go against everything you have been taught and it would go against what you believe in your heart.

Her heart, however, was just the problem. Try as she might, Salyl could not help herself. Braksis was there, in all his splendor and he had saved her life. By mystral standards, that meant she owed him a life debt, and he did mean something to her, but when she thought about what that truly meant, she was confused. Deciding she would dwell on that when she was in the company of her friends and allies, she continued through the tunnels with Braksis at her side.

They reached an iron grate at the end of a tunnel a little while later, and Salyl walked straight up to it, pressing her palms firmly against the bars.

“Let us past,” she spoke in an ancient tongue Braksis barely recognized. “We are friends of the resistance.”

The grate swung gently open. Braksis grinned.

“You use the old languages as a code as well,” he marveled aloud. “Very clever.”

“We take the necessary precautions,” Salyl explained. “Shall we?”

They continued forward for about forty more paces until Salyl heard something with her elf ears.

“Get down!” she said urgently, shoving her companion off to the side. Braksis perked up his ears as well. Sure enough, a few moments later he could hear the sounds of footsteps advancing along a corridor to their left. Braksis, at a signal from Salyl, crouched low and receded with her back along the way they had come, turning a different route to their right.

“We have to get as far away from them as possible,” Salyl hissed as they broke into a run. “Those are Zoldex’s soldiers. They will hound us for information about the resistance if they find us, information I’m not authorized to give.”

Racing with the wind in their steps, Braksis and Salyl sped through the sewers and with each step they took the sound of the soldiers receded into nothingness. Finally, Salyl led Braksis through a low tunnel and emerged into a well-lit chamber.

A voice called out.

“We welcome you back, Salyl. You have returned home.”

Braksis stared about, eyes still adjusting to the brilliant torches that spanned the room, a welcome change from the bleak, dull gloomy light that hung in the rest of the sewers. He could not believe what he saw. At least a hundred tall, domineering figures spanned the length of the walls. All were garbed in red cloaks, a contrast, Braksis realized, to the black veils of the Watchers. Salyl stepped forth to address the entourage.

“I accept your welcome and wish to allow welcome to be extended to my friend, Braksis,” she said, gesturing to the warlord behind her as she spoke. “He and I need an audience with the Chieftain.”

Braksis instantly realized what “needing an owl’s ear” had meant. Using tribal animals as a form of secret language had been done for centuries, and he was pleased to see such a stratagem being used against one as heinous as Zoldex. A single resistance member came forward in turn to address the both of them.

“I welcome you, guest Braksis, to the hallowed halls of the resistance,” said the hooded individual before him, whose voice was deep, rich and full, booming out like a bass drum. “Your presence here is much appreciated. From whence do you come?”

Braksis felt a natural desire to be honest.

“I come from The Imperium,” Braksis replied, standing tall.

The man before him chuckled a moment.

“As do we all, friend,” he replied. “As do we all.”

At that, all present threw off their hoods and revealed their faces. Braksis saw before him elves similar in appearance to Salyl beside him, though none quite matched her beauty. He could see dwarves and humans standing together in harmony, a sight that brought a single tear to his eye. Finally, the single shining light in this bleak world had chosen its moment to reveal itself. In this dark future, the races had overcome their differences and united together under one banner to at least try to vanquish evil. If only the people of his time had learned that lesson back then, maybe Zoldex would not have gained such a foothold in power...

“Come,” said the man before Braksis, who Braksis saw had billowing, flaming red hair that fell to his shoulders and crisp bright blue eyes of the fiercest sapphire, “I will show you to the Chieftain.”

He led them away from the meeting hall, down another corridor.

“I’m glad to see everyone made it here safely,” Salyl said, relief flooding her tone.

“There were no casualties,” said their guide. “But it was a bit of a struggle transporting all of us, so we had to split up. The Chieftain was brought here first, of course.”

“Were we compromised?” Salyl asked, probing a region of conversation she was not entirely sure she wished to tread.

“The Chieftain will brief you on everything,” the redheaded guide explained to them, bringing them to a stop in front of a similar iron grate as the one they had traveled through before. “If anyone can tell the story well, it’s her.”

With that, their guide pushed the grate forward and gestured for them to go through.

The room they found themselves in moments later was small and cramped, though it was drier than the others surrounding it. In fact, a small fire was going in the center, and a large set of vents up above them served to direct the smoke. Beyond the flickering blaze, Braksis could view a tall woman of austere, commanding presence. She had hardened features that age had barely even touched (though her body was that of a frail old woman) and her hair was shock white, from the base of it at her skull right down to the tips at her ankles. Her eyes could bore holes through metal, so cold was her stare. Hands laid firmly across her lap, the woman appeared to be meditating. Something about this woman struck Braksis as familiar.

“*Solara?*” he breathed.

She opened her eyes.

“How do you know that name?” she asked.

“It’s me, Braksis!” he cried. “We are... or, wait... I suppose we *were* companions long ago. Don’t you remember me?”

The mystral considered the warlord a moment.

“I never forget a face,” she said. “I am certain I have never seen yours.”

“But you once owed me a life debt!” Braksis persisted. “You swore to protect me with your life after I protected you from Durgin! Don’t you remember?”

“I do not remember,” Solara replied. “You confuse me, guest. The memories you suggest are not mine own. I am the Chieftain of this resistance movement against Zoldex. I have never sworn a life debt to anyone thus far.”

Braksis looked long at the woman he had once traveled with as a friend. She did not even know who he was. He gave up.

“You are right,” he conceded quietly. “I am afraid I was mistaken.”

“We have not the time to worry about it now, anyway,” Solara said, suddenly businesslike. “We must discuss what happened tonight. Someone entered our hideout, while you were on the surface, Salyl. This someone knew the resistance was in this part of the sewers. He managed to get past Terrest. Which means our organization has indeed been compromised. Now, I wish to know what happened on your end. Tell your tale. Start to finish.”

Salyl cleared her throat.

“Earlier this evening,” she began, thinking back, “Gabryn led a squad of thirty through the sewer sectors guarded by Zoldex’s men. I was among them, as was Fenard. We attacked them, expecting more of a challenge, but we killed them all. The way through the sewers was clear and now we thought that trade with the outside would only help our cause.

“We left the sewers, and Gabryn and Fenard persuaded me to go back with Gabryn to his apartment in the human district. I was not planning on going until...”

She stopped speaking for a moment, her voice trailing off. A moment later, she took a deep breath and went on.

“Until Fenard convinced me that we deserved it,” Salyl continued, swallowing slightly. “He said that we had had little to celebrate for years now and that we should raise a glass of mead or two in honor of our achievement tonight. I was still suspicious of what achievement we had actually accomplished. I knew Zoldex would not allow us to escape that easily. That was when the Watcher attacked. He came in, tore the place apart.”

“And Gabryn and Fenard?” Solara asked gently.

“They... did not make it,” Salyl finished.

Solara nodded to her comfortingly.

“What happened then?” Solara pushed her. “Go on, child, you have to face this.”

“I was rescued, or else I would be dead right now with them,” Salyl said, turning her head to Braksis. “He came in a flash of light and saved me from the Watcher. He killed a Watcher!”

Salyl cried out the last sentence and could not help but let a tiny smile emerge onto her face. Solara returned it, focusing now on the human beside them. Clearly, as she glanced the man over with her laser eyes, she was sizing him up. A Watcher-slayer was an incredible asset to the resistance, no matter how he had arrived in their world.

“Indeed,” Solara responded with the utmost care and comfort to Salyl. “I must tell you something now, Salyl, and I must be entirely truthful. I cannot gloss it over so that you will not feel its full effect. I do not believe this to be at all helpful. I view it as a form of lying to withhold any truth from anyone, and I believe that, as strong as you are, you can take this news. Are you ready, child?”

Salyl nodded readily. Solara nodded.

“Very well,” Solara went on. “Child, of all those thirty who went and attacked the soldiers in the sewers tonight, you are the only one who remains, to the best of our knowledge, alive.”

Salyl gasped.

“I was not finished,” Solara cut Salyl off before she could speak. “The worst part of it all is that of all those who died, only one body was never recovered tonight by our scouts.”

“Whose?” Salyl was almost afraid to ask but it came out of her mouth anyway.

“A fellow clanswoman of mine, a mystral,” Solara told them. “Dalys has been missing for hours. She is a powerful warrior and has never been known to yield even under the worst pressures, but I will admit that I have fear of Zoldex. I don’t know what he would do to expose this resistance. I do not deny that it is certainly within his power to have broken Dalys’ nigh impenetrable shield.”

At this a wave of horror broke across both the elf and even the human. If Dalys had told them anything at all, they could be in danger even now...

“I see this has brought fear to your eyes,” Solara remarked. “That is good. It should. But your worries may be abated for now. I am certain that at the moment, at least, Zoldex does not know of this hideout. I know these tunnels by heart you see. It was always my plan to discuss a rendezvous point with my other delegates within the resistance. But there were at least one or two locations within this vast warren underneath Zoldexius that I kept to myself. This was one of them. You were lucky those soldiers came by when they did, or you would never have run and found this place entirely by accident.”

Salyl nodded. Truly, at that moment she had only been concerned with escaping from Zoldex’s troops. She had not been thinking about trying to find the hideout. An ironic twist of fate that at the precise moment she was not looking for that which she desired that she found it exactly where she never would have looked for it.

“Now, onto this warrior, Braksis,” said the mystral, reclining slightly on her futon, putting her hands behind her to keep her supported. “You say that he arrived here in a flash of light?”

“Yes, Chieftain,” Salyl answered. “Though he knows not how.”

“I was under the impression that you could provide answers for me,” Braksis interjected. “I don’t know why I am here or who brought me here but I desperately need to return to my time.”

“You came from another time period, you say?” Solara appeared intrigued now.

“Yes.” Braksis felt his spirits drop slightly as he saw the look on Solara’s face.

“Well,” Solara mused, sitting up again. “I cannot offer you any factual information, unless I know more. Even if I were to know all about what had transpired before I could still only provide you with a logical guess at best, but I suppose it is better than nothing.”

“I was on a battlefield, preparing to fight the Zoldex of my time,” Braksis recanted. “His troops were amassing and I was ready to attack when suddenly I found myself in this future.”

There was a few moments’ pause. Solara curled her hair back behind her ears.

“I think I may know of your predicament,” she said slowly. “You see, it became clear to me when you entered this chamber that the name you mentioned, Braksis, was familiar. It is but an echo in this world, lost in time. I remember now where I heard it. I recovered several archives that Zoldex wished destroyed many years ago, and studied them before adding them to my collection.

“As I was perusing them, I remember coming across the name Braksis. He was a seven-year-old prince at the time, and the infamous Rawthorne slaughtered him as he fled with his butler from the castle.”

“But that did not happen!” Braksis protested. “A troll named Ferceng killed Rawthorne’s men and took me in as his own son!”

“In your world, perhaps,” Solara suggested. “But not in ours. I do not think what you have experienced was time travel, Braksis, or at least not entirely. There has long been a theory of multiple universes, universes in which other possibilities became realized. Your world represents the possibility that you were rescued by the troll and taken in, but this one does not. In our world, you were a threat to Zoldex’s rule and you were consequently murdered.”

“Which explains why you have no idea who I am,” Braksis concluded. “We met at least ten to twelve years *after* that in my world.”

“Then why would he be here, a hundred years after Rawthorne murdered him in our world?” Salyl wondered.

“Well that is why I said that he did not *entirely* experience time travel, child,” Solara explained. “It appears that our warlord friend here was hurled across a gap in not only space, or the fabric of two universes, but a time stream the two of them shared.”

“A time stream?” Braksis repeated slowly.

“Yes,” Solara continued. “A single era in your universe that has already happened in ours is connected to the future in this universe. The two act as corresponding points, mirroring each other in the differing dimensions.”

“That’s not complicated at all,” Braksis said sarcastically, getting to his feet and turning away. “Are you trying to tell me that I fell through some sort of gap in space and time altogether and ended up here?”

“Indeed you did,” Solara said. “Or at least that is my hypothesis, which are almost never proven wrong. Consider yourself a rather fortunate individual, Braksis. Most people get sent to *either* a new universe or a new time period, yet you managed to travel to both. A fortuitous little treat for you, I would say.”

Braksis swiveled around.

“How would it be fortuitous?” he asked. “I don’t understand this at all. My men need me where I come from. I have to make it back. There has to be a way.”

Solara shrugged lightly.

“Think about it logically,” she proposed. “No door leads to nothing. One side leads to one world, the other to another. The open door you must have fallen through to reach this world, however, has long since closed.”

“So there is no way back?”

“I did not say that,” Solara amended quickly. “All that will need to happen is for the door to be opened on *this* side. If the same circumstances as before occur in this world, you should be able to cross the divide, just as before, and return to your universe.”

“But that’s just it,” Braksis protested. “I don’t know what the circumstances were before. I have no idea why I was brought here.”

“I have a guess,” Salyl offered. “Zoldex.”

“Ah yes,” Solara turned to the elf and beamed in her direction. “A good deduction. Then my question would of course be why on any universe Zoldex would wish to rid himself of a lowly warlord?”

“Particularly since the elf, Kai, in my world is searching for the Chosen one,” Braksis added. “Supposedly, according to the Madrew, this child is the only one who can save us all. Kai was willing to sacrifice everything to find it... maybe Zoldex knew of it. He had to. Why bother with me?”

“Because you were a threat,” Salyl said. “That has to be it.”

“I do remember that the Madrew were barely mentioned in the ancient histories of The Imperium, in our world, at least,” Solara said. “It was probably through a combination of Zoldex’s determination to shield the past from view and the public’s apathy in not fighting to protect its ancestry.”

“So everything, my entire life,” Braksis surmised, “In this world is worth nothing?”

“Essentially,” Solara agreed. “Yes.”

“Well then what do you suggest for me to return to my world?” Braksis asked, rounding on the mystral.

“I suggest you think about what your options really are,” Solara said, truthfully enough. “You don’t have many. I urge you to consider the resistance as a way to uncover more about Zoldex and his insidious plans. Perhaps if you fight alongside us you might find a way home.”

“I had planned on fighting with you from the beginning,” Braksis assured her. “I just needed find you first.”

Salyl brightened at his response. Braksis shot her a grin, then returned to Solara.

“If I remain here, with you and fight,” he wondered. “Will time pass as normal in my world?”

“That I could not tell you,” Solara admitted with a sigh. “I can tell you that the universes are connected by a time stream, though I do not know what that means. You might return home to find that years have elapsed, or that everything was exactly the way that you left it.”

“Right,” Braksis grunted. “Well then how do I join the resistance?”

“You already have,” Solara told him. She raised her fist above her. “For The Imperium!”

“For The Imperium!” Salyl cried.

And for Gabryn and Fenard, companions I would gladly have given my life to save, had I been given the chance. I love you so much. Zoldex and his Watchers will taste their own blood when I am through with them.

Braksis hesitated for a moment. He had left an entire world of followers, friends, lovers and familiarity to enter a new world with new allies and challenges... old friends whom he had grown close to over the years and now either did not know him in the same

way or were dead... it would be up to him to forge new connections. It would be his job to help preserve this future, if only to make sure that the balance between both their universes was salvaged. To find his way home, and save the Seven Kingdoms of The Imperium... his destiny and his choice. He drew The Phoenix and raised it high above their heads. It flashed red-gold in the light of the fire.

“FOR THE IMPERIUM!” Braksis bellowed.