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Prologue

Of late Aramithris, the self titled emperor of the Burning Lands, had apparently been going insane. It was rumoured that he thought himself a god personified. Edict after edict was sent out from his vast fortress in the valley of Oakdale, detailing his imperial will. Vast mighty armies of Copyright Lawyers vigorously sued all those who dared attempt thwarting his wrath.

But Aramithris had not counted on organized opposition, so when the GRAND Duchy of Barad-Duin decided to brave the armies of lawyers, he was as surprised as everyone. At this time, a bloody war of secession erupted. Thanks to the awesome military genius of Ahrmaand and Tholden, the distances involved, and the reluctance on the part of the armies of the Burning Lands to fight, they had managed to hold their own so far, though badly outnumbered. Sometimes so badly supplied that they fought hand to hand, still they had outmaneuvered and outfought everything Aramithris had thrown at them. Maybe they weren't always textbook perfect and less than awesome in their strategy, but they still got an impossible job done.

All information indicated that Aramithris's power base was too secure, and his resources too vast, for them to hope to fend off his armies and lawsuits forever, let alone stop them. Even the citizens of the burning lands hated the way that Aramithris had taken all power unto himself, but what could they do? At least that is what they had told themselves, up till now. Rarely had so many felt so helpless before the might of one man.

For unbeknownst to all, Pebyr discovered the impossible. For in the ways of the world everything is a possibility. And no one is so mighty that they can never fall...

By David S.

Knock, Knock, Knock!! Viscount Ahrmaand, irritatedly looked up from his battle plans and shouted, "Who is it? I distinctly left instructions not to be disturbed!". "Boss, it's me, Sinjen, your loyal squire". "Very well, if you must, then come in. What is the rush.", Ahrmaand said. It seemed there was always a rush where his squire was concerned. How so much energy could be in one person, he would never guess.

"Pebyr is back from the burning lands, and brings important news.", Sinjen said. "How that crazy bard, could know anything important would be a wonder?", Ahrmaand thought, but, knowing Pebyr to be his squire's friend, he said nothing. "He has found evidence of an underground organization dedicated to bringing about a coup, and removing Aramithrises' tyrannical organization from power.", Sinjen said, without breathing even once, thus proving his ability to make use his mouth and tongue for long periods of time, without breathing.

"Anybody ever tell you, that you sound like a recruiting poster, Sinjen? This does change things dramatically. Who would ever thought that Pebyr of all people would give us this information. I thought he was on nobody's side. Are you sure that this information is good?", Ahrmaand said, "Do you think that this could be a lure?" "Boss, who knows? I know Pebyr. He wouldn't lie to save his life, but he could have been fed bad information. But where his heart isn't involved he can be very perceptive. Also I know the people that he claims are involved. They have both the personal power and the desire to use it. I think that this information can be trusted. I would be willing to stake my life on it Boss!", Sinjen spoke, hitting the table with his fist.

"Myself, I'm not so sure, but I do admire your loyalty. Still I think this is what we need to win this bloody war. I just don't think we can afford to pass it up. A raid in strength would be necessary, and it would be a gamble, but there is a slim chance of it's success, if we can get local support. Sit down, because I think I will let you stake your life on it, so you had best help plan it. Send for Pebyr too, we will need his input, since he should be allowed to stake his life on it too. Besides it is too easy to forget that he is an Archmage. That is too much power to allow to go unused for so long.

"I thought you might say that boss, so I asked him to join us. He's outside, awaiting your noble largesse.", Sinjen said. "Very well, send him in", Arhmaand sighed. Pebyr walked in looking drawn and tired. "Now this is an unusual sight.", Ahrmaand thought, "usually he is making non stop bad jokes or singing songs.". "What is the matter, Pebyr? Someone making obscene comments about your playing again?", Ahrmaand said. "No, Tiberius is too busy with the war to pay attention to my music. It's just that I have had too many personal betrayals in recent months, Ahrmaand. So much has happened to me that it is tearing me to pieces. I feel fractured. I don't know how to describe it. I just want this war to end. I am tired of seeing friend against friend, and I am afraid that the only way to end the war, is to remove the sources of the strife. Otherwise, whether you or they win, there will always be another war.", Pebyr said.

"So tell me about this underground group, and do you really think they can help us?", Ahrmaand said, "We would be taking a big risk here if it fails". Pebyr said, "Well, unbeknownst to Aramithris, a rather large percentage of the burning lands are a part of this household. They have never banded together until now, but when they found out that he was the majority of reason behind our secession, they decided to finally do something about a very bad situation. So they banded together and spread the truth. To this end, they have established an underground free press, and soon will be strong enough to try and end Aramithris's reign of tyranny for good. But of course with outside help, they would be able to challenge his wrath much sooner. So maybe this damn war will be for some purpose after all and there won't be another one. We can only hope.".

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Pebyr had indeed found an underground in the Burning Lands which was organized by hardy souls, desiring to bring the world of Amtgard, back to it's former greatness. The war of secession, as it was called in the Burning Lands, had awakened them to the need. Their name was the Household of the Burning Lands, and they were dedicated to a new order and a cessation of hostilities with Barad-Duin. Thereafter, if Barad-Duin still wanted to secede, then so be it. They would not interfere.

However they were indeed mistaken if they truly believed that Aramithris knew nothing. His sources of information were indeed as vast as his other resources. But in his arrogance he assumed that they could not assail his position. For how could the world of Amtgard function without him. It was indeed he that was there in the beginning. So would he be there through all the ages.

His genius was politics, and he was adept at keeping his enemies divided, by playing them off of each other. It is too damn easy to convince yourself that nothing can be done. Therefore his job was made all the more simpler by the lack of widespread as well as organized opposition. Also, though he was an altogether lousy diplomat, giving credit where credit was due, he was indeed a damn good king.

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Planning was difficult, involving as it did, the logistical considerations of supplying a sizable force in the desolate lands between Barad-Duin and the Kingdom of the Burning Lands. It would be virtually impossible to live off the land since even dirt had trouble surviving out there. There was no way they were going to be forced to fight badly supplied and armed. Not this time! The services of Sparhawk the honorable, the only vegetarian barbarian known to exist, were therefore sought after and obtained. Though his views were thought odd, no one doubted his honor or his abilities. It was said that he could track his way through the most desolate of wilderness country, and survive where any other could starve. Other than Pebyr, no one knew the desolate areas to the west as well as he.

Arhmaand and Sinjen were extremely careful in choosing the rest of the raiding party. They could not choose anyone too highly placed in the Barad-Duin hierarchy. The participants in the raid were only too aware that there would be no rescue if the raid failed. Chancellor Sparhawk was enough of a risk. But his was a purely civilian office in a nation engaged in total war. No nobility or highly placed military official could be chosen.

Tiberius and Romerion were in charge of the hospital administration for the war effort and were too badly needed elsewhere. So with Guildmistress Alloran in charge, a small troop of healers, including DOA and Dargoth were sent on the raid.

Master Wizard Aurendir of the Scout's guild was sent as well as Pebyr. Of late the wizards guild found many of it's members gaining experience in other disciplines. This enabled both Pebyr and Aurendir to be of increased value in this raid, as they were both Archmages and highly experienced in other disciplines. Nobody even dreamed of daring to forget Arthon, since it was assumed that he would simply ride after them if they dared leave him behind.

Mandrac, Pebyr and Amber Lee represented the Bard's guild and were responsible for keeping up the morale of the company. Or at least they were supposed to try. Dracnar, Matthieu and Deja Vu would simply kill a lot of people, which was something these individuals were depressingly good at. These were only a few of the many people sent on this raid.

Despite what Ahrmaand said publicly, privately he believed that entirely too much rested on this raid. For a continued war would so deplete Barad-Duin resources, that even an eventual victory would be disastrous to the duchy. Besides there would indeed simply be another war, as Pebyr had said. As they rode away from the city walls, he thought, "Fortune go with you, my friends. As do all our hopes for peace".

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Squire Sinjen tried unsuccessfully to ease his sore back, trying to settle himself comfortably in a saddle stained from days of sweat and grime. This raid into enemy territory had so far gone very well. In fact too well for his tastes. They had encountered no one in the desolate territories between the Burning Lands and Barad-Duin. Since they were sneaking, this was good since it indicated that they hadn't been spotted yet. It could also mean that they were so hopelessly lost the gods were laughing hysterically at their plight. Sinjen had never been that good with maps so they were depending on the Bard Pebyr's knowledge of these trails, to guide them. As far as he was concerned, just point and get out of the way.

"Pebyr, are you dead or just hard of hearing? Come on up here.", Sinjen yelled. As Pebyr rode up, he said, "Are you sure this is the right road. It's so empty out here, I can't see any landmarks".

Pebyr replied, "Don't worry Sinjen, I have been this way so often I know it like the back of my hand. See over there is a landmark used by the

indians. I believe the name is Squaw's tit. The name is unusual, but it appears to be rather descriptive don't you think?".

Sinjen cut him off saying, "Should we expect an ambush. I know it's hard to believe anybody could live out here, but still anything could happen", Sinjen said. "I doubt it. I don't think anybody suspected me as being a spy, except for Sir Delphos. But you know him, he was born suspicious", Pebyr said, "Besides, like you said, how could anybody be able to sneak up on us here. Their wagon train alone would kick up a dust cloud visible for a hundred miles. No, even if they did attack us, it would be virtually impossible to surprise us". Sinjen replied, "Still a fast lightly equipped group could. But they couldn't carry the supplies necessary for survival that way.".

As the days went by, Sinjen and Pebyr traded stories of their past. Pebyr told of the horrible world he had lived in where magic didn't exist. There he taught something called a Kom-pu-tar to do tricks, and tried to write what music he could. "It was a relief to find this world. I have seen many strange things here, but without a doubt, the strangest person I ever came across was my doppelganger or twin, as you would say.", Pebyr said. "You mean there's another of you out there?", laughed Sinjen, "I thought one was bad enough." "No seriously, listen closely for someday you might run into him and think it was me. He's alright, but considering who he is, he also might be a hell of a lot of trouble.", Pebyr said. "So who is he and where does he come from.", sinjen said.

"His name is Fahrinaie, and he is the chief torturer and lieutenant of Mephistopheles, the prince of lies. In some realms he has been called the Prince of Lies himself. Only Mephistopheles has a greater reputation for betrayal. So you might see why he could be a problem. One night as I was eating at my campfire, a cloaked figure dressed all in black and red rode up out of the darkness. I knew something was wrong, because his mount was a black stallion with strange eyes that fluctuated colors throughout the spectrum, including I would assume the infrared and ultraviolet, since they would go blank at times, indicating a nonvisible color. I thought that it could be a Nightmare, but decided to say nothing.", Pebyr said ...

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"Well hello there sir and what can I do for you? Could I offer you the hospitality of my camp?", Pebyr said. "Thank you, good Bard.", spoke the cloaked figure, "I think I'll do just that, since you are the person I was looking for. You are Pebyr ap Cucorin of Barad-Duin, are you not?". "That I am, though you have the advantage of me, since I know not of you.", Pebyr replied. "My name is Fahrinaie and I will refrain from telling of my origin for now. Rest assured that I bear no personal animosity towards you or anyone else in Barad-Duin, though I don't expect Ahrmaand to have much love for me, if he remembers me at all. Pray tell me of Barad-Duin. Is it as powerful as I have heard?".

"Well to be honest, we do not field the most powerful military force, but what we lack in ferocity and numbers, we more than make up for in

the science of war. We are skilled in the sciences and in the magical arts. In fact our artisans are even now developing new weapons. And due to our many battles with magical beings, we can be said to have developed considerable skills in combating such. Our most noted adversary now is Mephistopheles. Perhaps you might know of him?", Pebyr spoke suspecting the worst. "Know of him? Pebyr I work for the bastard.", Fahrinaie said. With that he pulled the hood of his cloak down and revealed his face. Pebyr was so stunned that he spilled his drink, committing grave alcohol abuse, for Fahrinaie was his exact double. Except for his preference for red and black, he was literally Pebyr's twin in all respects.

"Don't be afraid Pebyr, for we are indeed mirror images of each other and I would wound myself as soon as hurt you. I have been trying for some time to get out of Mephistopheles's employ, but I can't simply quit, since I know too much about him for him to just let me go. He has already sent Baesil to kill me, when he decided I was getting too powerful for his well being. After I killed Baesil, I ripped his heart out and used it for my staff.", Fahrinaie said, indicating his ebony staff. On top of the wood, was a Black stone, with silver wire running from the stone into the wood of the staff. The stone as well as the staff gave off an aura of intense evil, as did Fahrinaie, Pebyr suddenly realized. Though seemingly intent on defecting, it would do to remember that he was a devil of importance in Hell.

"The only thing that has kept me alive is that I'm too powerful for him to easily dispose of and I have been very careful not to give obvious offense. Now I want out, for soon it will be him or me, and I am not powerful enough to fight him yet. Also hell stinks and I am not as thrilled with the idea of ruling as I once was. Right now I need a safe haven, where I can increase my power and perhaps work with others of like temperament. I understand Thariand the blue-star mage and Qadaf the necromancer dwell there. They would be the most inclined and therefore the most capable of helping me.".

"I don't know about those things, but could the Duke trust such a powerful former enemy as yourself. You could do so much damage, if you were to betray us.", Pebyr said. "I don't know how he could trust me, since he would surely hear something about my past. I do not have a good history of such things. A long time ago, I betrayed someone very important and thus earned the title of Tizril, the Betrayer. Second only to Mephistopheles, I was considered the most treacherous being in the Nine Hells. My word is worthless, but I give it anyway. As long as I am in Barad-Duin and am treated honorably, I will respond in kind.", Fahrinaie replied, "I will try and think of something as proof, though it may be some time. This will be the last communication for awhile Pebyr. Take care, for we have much to discuss.", Fahrinaie said.

To Be
Continued //



DARKNESS

by
Dave Webb

How long had he been here? DeHugh felt the sting of the whip upon his back once again. Darkness surrounded him. He could hear the clicking laughter of the demons and the sound of their claws upon stone. DeHugh felt no pain in his eyes, so he was sure that the demons had not blinded him. He had seen his men die at the hands of the demons before. He knew that demons favored plucking out a humans eyes and remove it's victims brain through the empty socket with their long serpent-like tongue. All the while the poor soul would scream for mercy.

DeHugh felt another lash from the unseen whip strike him. "Your mine forever little warrior.", rasped a demon somewhere in the darkness. DeHugh knew that the speaker could only be a great demon. Members of the demonkind ruling class were the only ones capable of forming the low pitch and with the verbal skills needed to form human speech.

"I have your tower DeHugh, and the world above has nothing but obsidian stone to mark your passing.", the demon said and then laughed in a high pitched screech. The demon's minions joined him, their laughter was almost beyond his human hearing but indeed DeHugh knew that he was completely encircled by the evil demons that he hated so. He listened to their laughing, he could not block it out. The darkness gave him nothing to concentrate on. He wished that he could turn his mind to his inner self as he had seen Monks do. But he could not. The laughing of the demons continued, he could feel them peering at him with their reptilian eyes. He felt his soul beginning to weaken as if their laughter were a battering ram upon a keeps door.

DeHugh saw the face of his friends back in Barad-Duin in his mind. He saw the always cheerful face of Ahrmaand, the serious face of Sir Nithanalorn. He thought he could even hear the chant of a monk and the strumming of Pebyr's guitar. The images shattered as he felt the sting of the demons whip again.

"Surely they would be coming soon?", DeHugh thought to himself. He strained to listen for the approaching sounds of rescue. Perhaps the battle cry of Sinjen, the clicking of Ahrmaand and Nithanalorn's heels or the crackles of mystical energy from Wizard Black, Aurendeer or the great druid Aganar. Why were they taking so long to rescue him? Perhaps the mighty forces of Barad-Duin were at this moment battling their way through hordes of demons to save him. Possibly.

As the whip struck him again a horrible thought entered his mind, he tried to push it away but it only returned with every crack of the demons whip. Perhaps, they had forgotten him.

Ak'kelron struck into the globe of darkness again and again. Each time he waited and listened for a plea of mercy or a scream of pain and terror but he could only hear the human warrior sobbing quietly to himself.