

The Tomb of Sargeras

By Robert Brooks

Part One: The Fate of Another

Almost all of the ship was gone. Burned to nothing.

The metal ribs of the hull, forged in Lordaeron long ago, rested on the ocean floor. So did the remains of the ship's passengers and crew. Only small pieces of scorched wood and cloth drifted on the surface, still glowing, their green embers sizzling beneath the swells.

They would smolder for hours. Fel fire could not be extinguished by mere water.

The debris washed up on a shore of black rocks. A lone figure stumbled along, his skin dry and pale and weeping with sores. He lurched toward the water and picked at the wreckage.

He lifted a charred plank. Sniffed it. His tongue flicked out, licking one of the embers. It sparked and winked out with a hiss. His eyes pulsed green. He smiled.

"More... I need... more..."

He had never tasted fel before. A larger nugget of it called to him from the south. He staggered onward, staying close to the shore. He knew better than to stray into Watcher territory.

It was hard to remember a day without his need. He tried to think back. Surely there had never been a time when he had wanted for nothing. No. It was impossible. Those memories of standing tall in Suramar and consuming his fill of energy...

... those days before exile...

... they were just fantasies, fading quickly. That was good. It would be easier once they were gone.

He did not need Suramar. Power—that was what he needed. He had consumed none for days, nothing but that single ember, and there was little left to scavenge here. There were too many others like him. But there was more of the shipwreck offshore, and it would bring a new bounty. He felt it. It was not far. So he continued forward, ignoring his exhaustion, pushing toward whatever was scratching at his mind.

He knew others would be drawn to it, too.

"But it is mine mine mine mine mine..."

It was so close now, calling to him from the waterline.

There.

A dead body lay facedown on the rocks, nudged gently by the waves. Whoever this had been, he had been astonishingly powerful. Even after death, his magical energy shone like a second sun.

It would be a pleasure to devour every fragment of it.

He fell over in his haste, then scrambled on hands and knees. He heard cries of outrage from farther away. More had arrived. They would eat well, too. There was enough for all. But first, *him*.

He pulled the black cloak away from the corpse. An orc. Green skin. Pulsing with dark magic and strange markings. He had never seen such a strong aura. It would sustain him for...

Days? Weeks? Years?

His fingers curled above the body, drawing a taste of the potent radiance. It was vile. And it was beautiful. He drank deeply.

He felt power. He felt fire. He felt might.

He felt pain. He felt the corpse's green hand close around his throat, squeezing hard.

He felt fear. The orc was standing. Not a corpse at all. Never had been. Glowing red eyes looked into his. "You have not paid the price for that power, not as I have," the orc said. The eyes narrowed, and the lips twisted into a smile. "But please, have more."

The exile shrieked. Torrents of corrupted fel surged into his mind. He lived on magic. Now he drowned in it, suffocating beneath an endless ocean of green fire. He was filled to the brim, and yet more flooded in.

Then, in an instant, it was all gone. All of the orc's magic. All of his own. Drained to the last drop. Nothing remained but emptiness and agony.

Yet as his heart went still, he realized he would do anything to wield such might again...

With a casual gesture, Gul'dan ended the wretch's existence, leaving him as wet streaks on the rocks. He had looked like an elf to Gul'dan's eyes, though not like any of the ones who had invaded Draenor. Those hadn't seemed so sickly. "What was he?" Gul'dan asked his master.

—NIGHTFALLEN. AN EXILE FROM SURAMAR.—

More were nearby, running away. They did not get far. Gul'dan lifted his hands, and a few moments later, the Nightfallen all fell to the ground, dead, nothing left of them but withered husks. Green funnels of mist swirled from their bodies and toward Gul'dan's palms, then disappeared into his skin.

Gul'dan closed his eyes and slowly exhaled. The weight of his exhaustion had lifted just a hair, but his satisfaction went far deeper than that. It was good to be the predator again. If only it would last.

He shuffled away from the exposed shore. There was no need to make things easy for his pursuer. He didn't stop moving until he was far inland, hidden amid boulders and dead, barren trees.

He sat down to rest. "Is this the place? The Broken Isles?" Gul'dan asked.

—YES. KEEP MOVING.—

Gul'dan hated the way Kil'jaeden's voice rattled his skull. It had filled his mind the instant he had entered this world, and it hadn't allowed him a moment's relief. "I need time," he muttered.

—YOU HAVE NONE TO SPARE.—

Gul'dan leaned back against a boulder. His pact with the Burning Legion had given him power, but his posture was as gnarled and twisted as it had ever been. His mortal body was still weak. "I need *time*. The archmage is more powerful than you know." Gul'dan had nearly died swimming to shore, using only his physical strength. If Khadgar had detected even a scrap of fel energy moving away from the burning merchant ship... Well, he hadn't, but now Gul'dan could barely stand. "All I need is a moment."

—No.—

Gul'dan remained motionless, catching his breath.

—YOU DISOBEY ME?—

The orc hissed. He had crossed into a new world, stolen a ship, and sailed over an unfamiliar ocean, all while a relentless pursuer snapped at his heels. Gul'dan could not keep the rage out of his words. "I have proved my loyalty a thousand times over."

—YOU HAVE FAILED AGAIN AND AGAIN. YOU'VE PROVED NOTHING.—

Gul'dan stood up, ignoring his fatigue. *I failed? Me?* He kept that thought hidden. He had held up his end of the bargain. The *Legion* had failed. Every single one of its plans had come to nothing. Mannoroth, the flayer of a thousand worlds, had died in an ambush. Auchindoun and its substantial power had been claimed for only a few heartbeats.

Even Archimonde had fallen.

A dangerous thought surfaced. *Why should I expect things to go differently this time?* Gul'dan buried that question deep. Very deep indeed.

"Where, then, should I go?" he asked, his voice as cold as death.

—*RETRACE YOUR STEPS.*—

Gul'dan looked back toward the ocean. "I don't understand."

—*YOU HAVE VISITED THESE ISLANDS BEFORE. DECADES AGO. DO YOU NOT SENSE IT?*—

"That was not me," Gul'dan said. An icy chunk of uneasiness settled in his middle. Knowing there was already a Gul'dan who had lived and died on this world—this other timeline—made his skin crawl. "We are not the same."

—*IF YOU ARE NOT, YOU ARE NO USE. GO NORTH.*—

Disobedience was not an option. Not yet. Gul'dan started walking again, slowly, feeling for any sign of scrying. He had no doubt that the archmage Khadgar had already begun searching these islands. Nightfallen scavengers scurried about, but they were sent fleeing once they sensed the warlock's menace. Many hid within the decades-old shipwrecks that dotted the shoreline. Gul'dan was pleased; it would be frustrating for Khadgar to inspect them all. There was not a raven in sight, though some vultures soared high above. They kept their distance.

"What happened here? With... the other one?" The questions tasted sour, but he needed to know. All he had heard—among the screams of the unfortunate Alliance and Horde soldiers who had fallen into his care on Draenor—was that the Gul'dan from this timeline had accompanied the first Horde to war. He had been defeated and killed. Eventually. Details were harder to come by. Perhaps that meant Gul'dan had met an unremarkable end, a death not worth retelling. That was not a satisfying thought.

—*YOU RAISED AN ISLAND, THAL'DRANATH, FROM THE WATERS.*—

"At your command?" Gul'dan asked.

—*YOU ARE NOT HERE TO ASK QUESTIONS. YOU ARE HERE TO VISIT THAT ISLAND AGAIN. IT IS A LONG WALK. MOVE.*—

Gul'dan's thoughts continued to swirl in treacherous waters. *There must be something powerful here.* Why else would Kil'jaeden want him to remain ignorant of it? *I may have to obey him, but I do not need to trust him,* Gul'dan decided. Kil'jaeden was known as "the Deceiver" for very good reasons, after all.

"May I at least ask what is on that island?"

—*THE TOMB OF SARGERAS.*—

At that moment, dead silence fell over the land. The vultures veered away. Rodents vanished into their warrens.

Someone was coming. Gul'dan stopped. He listened. He waited. Carefully, very carefully, he wreathed himself in fel power, a simple trick but a useful one. To anyone farther than two paces, Gul'dan would be invisible. Anyone who stepped closer would soon see nothing at all.

He kept his eyes open, but his mind raced. "Sarger's tomb? He's dead?" he whispered.

—*YOU UNDERSTAND NOTHING.*—

Kil'jaeden had given that answer to many of Gul'dan's questions. The orc's patience was strained each time he heard it.

Someone was moving among the rocks. Gul'dan sensed it before he saw it.

A flash of motion caught his eye. Not a single pebble rustled as a cloaked figure glided on silent footsteps. She emerged into a patch of light, curved blades and emerald armor glittering, each movement taken with confidence and purpose. Not an inch of skin was visible beneath her helmet, yet it seemed she had no trouble surveying everything around her.

Gul'dan smiled. Cordana Felsong had worn something similar. *A Watcher? Here? Very interesting.*

He was tempted to ambush this one, but she was angling north. He followed. Where there was one, there would likely be more. Those Nightfallen had been weak, and their life essences had granted Gul'dan little power. The souls of Watchers would be worth the time to collect.

Kil'jaeden said nothing to stop him. And it burned, oh yes, it *seared* Gul'dan's pride to wonder whether his master would *allow* him this small bit of freedom.

Gul'dan's magic kept him hidden as he hurried after the Watcher. Twice he had to halt as she changed course, veering in irregular patterns before looping around to her original bearing. She

was searching for something. Him? Unlikely. It would take a great fool to hunt Gul'dan alone. Even Khadgar had sought the aid of allies first.

Soon the Watcher rounded the edge of a cliff and emerged onto a flat plateau. A half-dozen others were already there.

Yes...

Gul'dan waited in the shade, gathering power as the Watcher he had followed joined them. He could hear only snatches of their conversation.

"... dead Nightfallen..."

"... sunken ship on the horizon..."

"... as you command, Warden Shadowsong."

Gul'dan peered at them. That name was familiar. Where had he...? Ah yes. Maiev Shadowsong. She was Cordana's leader, spoken of in fear. *If she ever learns of my betrayal, Cordana had said, I will have to beg for an end as easy as Illidan's.*

If Gul'dan could kill Maiev right now, that would be one fewer threat to worry about.

He prepared his ambush, a blistering whirlwind of death. They had no chance. They did not even suspect he was here. He raised his hands and—

—*HIDE.*—

Kil'jaeden's voice thundered through his mind. Gul'dan nearly collapsed from the sheer force of it. He dropped his hands, his ambush forgotten. "What...?"

Then he heard it.

Cutting across the plateau was a raven's cry.

Gul'dan dispelled his attack in an instant, hoping desperately it hadn't been sensed. He looked up. The raven swooped downward. For a moment, Gul'dan thought he had been spotted.

But the raven merely circled the plateau twice and then dived down to the Watchers. They watched it approach. In the blink of an eye, the raven transformed. The man who remained walked with a confident stride.

Gul'dan's eyes blazed. His jaw clenched hard enough to cause pain.

"Hello, Maiev," Khadgar said, brushing a feather off of his shoulder.

"I do not remember sending for you, Archmage," the leader said coldly.

"Your legendary charm hasn't faded a bit," Khadgar replied. Then he was next to her, speaking too quietly to be overheard.

Gul'dan silently cursed. "I should end this fool now," he said.

—*THEY ARE IRRELEVANT. LEAVE.*—

"I can kill them all."

—*YOU ARE NOT HERE FOR THEM. OBEY, GUL'DAN.*—

Khadgar was right there. Vulnerable.

In that moment, Gul'dan considered treason. He had known that binding himself to the Burning Legion would require service. He had accepted it. And in return, he had received tremendous power.

But he had not made a pact to be a puppet.

He had delivered *others* into mindless obedience—and if Grommash Hellscream's idiot son had not interfered, he would have delivered many more—but that was not to be Gul'dan's fate. No. His destiny was to rule worlds for the Legion. Service, not slavery. *If the Legion disagrees, the pact is already broken*, Gul'dan thought.

But in this moment, treason meant death. Enemies were everywhere. This world was strange and set against him. Gul'dan didn't even know what power the Legion wanted him to claim. Kil'jaeden had kept him on a short leash. Too short to rebel.

For the moment, Gul'dan would play the obedient pet. "I serve, Kil'jaeden." He slowly retreated.

—*YOUR DESTINATION IS TO THE EAST. FIND A WAY TO TRAVERSE THE BAY. YOU NO LONGER HAVE TIME TO WALK AROUND SURAMAR.*—

Gul'dan had an idea about that. He left Khadgar and the Watchers behind and returned to the eastern shoreline. There, atop a shipwreck with Alliance markings, was a small rowboat. It was lashed to the ship by a single rotting rope. One firm tug brought the boat down into the gentle surf. He had never rowed before, but it was simple to learn, and he didn't need to go far. Soon he had put enough distance between himself and the shore—and Khadgar—that he set down the oars and used more pleasing means to move forward. The boat's wake shimmered dark green. On occasion, a fish would surface belly-up.

Kil'jaeden kept him pointed in the correct direction, and within the hour, Gul'dan's destination rose above the horizon. The island was flat, but a strange structure on it stabbed at the sky. Up close, it loomed above Gul'dan. A monument. A promise. Spires and jagged bulwarks stood as testaments to its importance. Whatever it was now, it had once been a true fortress. To crack it open, it would have taken an invasion beyond even what the Iron Horde had planned for this world.

Why would such a place be abandoned? Perhaps its time had passed. Yet Kil'jaeden had reasons to bring him here. It infuriated Gul'dan that he didn't know what they were.

As he drew closer, he felt uneasy. The island *was* familiar. Not the sight of it. Something resonated from this place, some trace of his own power—the *other* Gul'dan's power—that remained from decades ago. Gul'dan no longer doubted he had been here before.

The rowboat's rotten hull broke apart as Gul'dan beached it on the forbidding shore. He walked the rest of the way to that mysterious tomb, where he sensed the unfamiliar magic of whoever had sealed the entrance. There were physical barriers of stone and enchanted metal, as well as an array of hidden arcane locks and gates. This was a simple problem to solve. Gul'dan began spinning fel magic in complex patterns, dismantling each obstacle with ease.

"What is inside? Guards? Traps?" Gul'dan asked.

—*YOUR PURPOSE.*—

Gul'dan paused. That wasn't an answer he had expected. "What will you have me do?"

—*YOU WILL OPEN THE WAY FOR US.*—

Gul'dan didn't understand. "We tried that on Draenor." It had taken a considerable amount of effort, too. All for nothing.

—*THERE, YOU SOUGHT TO CLEAR THE PATH YOURSELF. HERE, YOU NEED MERELY TURN THE KEY. THEN YOU WILL KNOW OUR TRUE POWER.*—

Another barrier fell. This one came with a trap. Dozens of spears wrought from fire and arcane power sprang toward Gul'dan. He absently waved a hand, and they vanished. His thoughts were focused elsewhere. "This is what the other Gul'dan was meant to do. What happened?"

—*YOU FAILED YOUR PURPOSE.*—

"That was not me," he growled.

—*WE WILL SEE.*—

"How did he fail?"

—DISLOYALTY.—

Gul'dan could trust nothing the Deceiver was saying. Perhaps here, as on Draenor, it was the Legion that had failed.

But they brought me here twice for a reason. Something inside was so powerful that even death could not divert Gul'dan's destiny. Perhaps that destiny was aligned with his masters' plans. Perhaps not.

That thought made Gul'dan smile.

The final defense on the tomb's entrance shattered. Gul'dan blasted the door apart with a thundering boom. Now he needed to move fast; that sound would draw attention.

"Guide me, Kil'jaeden," Gul'dan said. "I will succeed."

He entered the darkness of the Tomb of Sargeras. It was clear the place was massive, with countless corridors descending deep underground. The weight of magics from millennia past and the destinies of this world's souls pressed upon him. He quickly shuffled forward. Kil'jaeden no longer needed to urge him on. Gul'dan was eager to unearth this tomb's secrets, for whatever power lay inside would soon rest in his hands.

Not the Legion's. His.

Part Two: Old Friends

Maiev Shadowsong's voice was cold. "Are you done, Archmage?" she asked.

"Almost." Time was short. Khadgar sent out the last elemental with simple instructions. "Find Gul'dan." The creature, shaped like a teardrop and made entirely of arcane energy, floated away. More constructs just like it were already looping across this island, shoreline to shoreline, checking the shadows. A shame they weren't strong enough for a real fight, but Khadgar would know the instant any of them was destroyed.

A few minutes ago, Khadgar had felt a hint of corruption, but it had passed. If Gul'dan *had* been nearby, he had probably withdrawn. Pity. "There we go. My apologies, Warden. Now, let's talk about our search."

"Your search, not ours," she said.

"Ah, so the Watchers don't bother with trespassers any longer? Good to know." Khadgar kept his tone light. "If Gul'dan is welcome here, then surely I have nothing to worry about."

Maiev was not amused. "If Gul'dan truly is here—"

"He is," Khadgar said.

"If he is," Maiev repeated, "we will deal with him. After we discuss your failures on Draenor."

"Pardon me?"

"We lent you a Watcher. A loyal, stalwart sister who had distinguished herself time and time again," she began.

"Maiev—"

"Yet after only a few months at your side, she turned traitor. Why is that, Khadgar? What is it about you that drove her straight to the Burning Legion?"

"Ask Cordana when you next see her," Khadgar said as calmly as he could. Maiev might as well have plunged a knife into his chest. "I have no doubt you can coax an answer out of her. That is not why I am here."

"She sent us reports, Khadgar," Maiev said. "Cordana had concerns about your judgment. Serious concerns."

"There is no time—"

"Reckless. Arrogant. Imprecise. Headstrong. Slow to accept advice.' And those were just her first impressions." Maiev and her Watchers stood motionless, severe, a wall of disapproval behind which no other emotion could be seen. "You may have changed over the years, Khadgar, but that seemed all too familiar."

"If you want to talk about past mistakes, we can," Khadgar said. "It should only take a few months to go over mine. And a few more to go over yours." Maiev's eyes narrowed, but Khadgar pushed forward. "We can do that later. For now, look to the south." He pointed toward the ocean. "I'm sure your Watchers have seen smoke over the water. That is what's left of the ship Gul'dan stole. He burned it. Along with everyone on it." The last scraps of humor had vanished from his voice. "Gul'dan *is* here. You will start finding bodies very soon." Khadgar saw the way the Watchers glanced at one another. "Ah. You already have. Anyone important?"

The warden's eyes bored into his. "A few Nightfallen. We sent Cordana with you to prevent this sort of disaster."

"The true disaster can still be stopped. History is *not* repeating itself," Khadgar said. "*This* Gul'dan didn't know how to get here. It wasn't even his choice to come through the Black Gate. *Someone is guiding him every step of the way.*"

"Why? To where? The Tomb of Sargeras? It is empty," Maiev said. "Ner'zhul took some of its power. Illidan took the rest."

Khadgar shook his head. "Maiev. You know what his masters want: an open door to Azeroth. They tried to create one there before. Perhaps they want to try again."

"That is not possible."

"Not for you or me," Khadgar said. "There is no chance that the Legion is expending this much effort for a fool's errand. Gul'dan is here to claim the tomb in their name. Help me, Maiev. You and your Watchers. Together we can stop him. Isn't this exactly what your duty demands?"

Maiev regarded Khadgar without blinking. A few moments passed.

Then she made her decision.

"To me," she commanded. Her Watchers gathered around in an instant. Orders came rapidly. "Rally everyone to the Vault of the Betrayer. We may have to relocate all that is inside."

Khadgar was speechless.

Maiev's troops saluted and responded in unison. "Yes, Warden Shadowsong!" Without hesitation, they sprinted away, disappearing to the south. Not toward the tomb. Away from it.

Khadgar said nothing. He couldn't. Maiev had just instructed her Watchers to leave. They would not help. "Maiev, what are you doing?" he finally asked.

Maiev faced him. With her subordinates gone, her words fell like a hammer on an anvil. "You failed to stop Gul'dan on Draenor. You failed to stop him here. He stole a ship, did he? Is it so difficult for a raven to track a slow, wind-driven vessel? An ocean's worth of failures."

Khadgar couldn't believe what he was hearing. "The Burning Legion itself opposes us. You know nothing of what we faced on Draenor," he said.

But Maiev wasn't finished. "Gul'dan sailed to the Broken Isles before you caught up with him. And then—what? A little fire allowed him to escape and swim the rest of the way?"

A little fire.

It had been a merchant vessel. Many passengers aboard. When Khadgar first spotted the ship, Gul'dan had stacked the shriveled, desiccated corpses of the adults on the deck and had lined up all the children as living shields against him.

And then, with a single spark of fel fire...

The memory filled Khadgar with anger, and he spoke without thinking. "I forgot. You never suffer such setbacks. Remind me: how many of your sisters did you leave to die during your hunt for Illidan?"

There was absolute silence in the meadow. Each passing second widened the gulf between them.

When Maiev responded, she spoke with finality.

"Any help I would give you would be wasted. Moreover, you are wrong. There is nothing left in the tomb. Every remnant of power once stored there is now contained in Illidan's remains. *Those* are in the vault. *That* would be the Legion's true prize. *That* is where Gul'dan would go. So my duty compels me there, to stop him," she said.

Khadgar bit down on a harsh response. He truly needed her help. "Warden Shadowsong," he said, close to pleading, "you know the tomb. I don't. That may be a *critical* advantage."

Maiev turned away. "Good luck, Archmage. When you realize your error, you can find me at the vault. We have much more to discuss." She ran after her Watchers.

Khadgar didn't call out to her. "So be it," he said softly. In moments, Maiev was gone, and Khadgar was soaring through the sky as a raven. He circled around the shipwrecks, trying to

sense Gul'dan. He couldn't. He felt no presences other than hiding Nightfallen. Either Gul'dan had found a way across the bay, to Thal'dranath, or he had fled north, toward Suramar and Highmountain. One of those possibilities was exceedingly more dangerous. Khadgar veered across the open water, winging toward the dark island with the ancient abandoned structure rising above it.

For the first time in years, perhaps decades, he felt despair. Even charging through the Dark Portal on a suicide mission had not filled him with such dread. Then, the Iron Horde's aim had been clear: conquest. Khadgar's failure would have meant his death. Even success might have required the ultimate sacrifice. There was a certain peace in facing that. But the Burning Legion... Khadgar had studied it for so long, yet he had not uncovered its true goals. For the Legion, subjugating Azeroth was only a means to an end. What came after enslaving or incinerating every living creature? He didn't know. And he feared the answer.

That was one of the reasons why he had focused on Gul'dan when he was on Draenor. You could learn much by how your opponents moved their pawns.

And the Legion has likely flung its pawn straight at the Tomb of Sargeras, Khadgar thought. Maiev was partially correct: the place had been stripped of anything useful long ago. The lingering naga had been cleared out by the Kirin Tor, and the remaining artifacts of power, meager as they were, had been delivered into the Watchers' custody. Intricate arcane locks and wards had been laid across the entire structure, strong enough to keep thieves, adventurers, and sinister agents out for good.

It would take a highly motivated, highly *powerful* individual to break in. That meant Gul'dan should have little trouble. It was just a matter of finding out how he planned to enter—

BOOM.

Well. One mystery solved, Khadgar thought. The muffled, distant noise reached his ears an instant before a powerful shockwave rattled the air. His raven eyes snapped downward, toward the island of Thal'dranath, as the wind seemed to tremble around his wings. A dust cloud was rising above the Tomb of Sargeras. He dived toward it.

The entrance lay in ruins, completely destroyed. Khadgar spiraled to the ground, feathers shifting into flesh and silver hair, his flexible, perching toes filling out into feet clad in soft-soled boots. It happened in a flash, as always. Among the tricks he had learned from his mentor, that was still his personal favorite. As his feet touched down, he spread his arms wide, sweeping away the lingering fog of dust and pulverized stone. All of the barriers—magical and physical—sealing the tomb away from the world were gone. Only fel residues remained. This was Gul'dan's doing.

Khadgar stood still. Listening. Sensing. He could feel the distant tingling of fel magic. Gul'dan was already inside. Already working.

It would be extremely risky to charge in alone, and it would take too long to search the tomb corridor by corridor. The interior was like a maze. There would be no easy way to follow Gul'dan's footsteps.

Unless...

No. That was a stupid idea.

Khadgar took a deep breath. Exhaled. It was still a stupid idea. But nothing better came to mind.

"Well, then," he said bleakly. *Might as well commit.*

Khadgar sprinted inside and was immediately rewarded with pain. A dark pool opened up beneath his feet. Moaning voidwalkers reached through it from another plane of existence, clutching at his legs, their touch burning like frostbite, their grip strong enough to crush bone into powder. Khadgar slammed an arcane blast into their formless faces and stumbled free.

Gul'dan's trap had failed. His first trap. There would be many others, of course. "And that's good," Khadgar murmured. When he found a room with branching corridors, he pushed energy down each tunnel.

Fire exploded in the tunnel to the left. Perfect.

Khadgar veered left and rushed through the flames. About a hundred yards ahead, there was another crossing. This time the north tunnel shimmered. Khadgar didn't even slow while slicing open that trap.

Gul'dan was being led on a leash. That much was clear. He would not have time to lay false trails. Khadgar kept running. He could follow Gul'dan's traps. This plan wasn't so bad after all.

Hallway by hallway, passage by passage, Khadgar continued to run. Gul'dan's traps were flimsy, hastily created things. Khadgar refused to break stride. That saved his life when a giant bolt came from an unexpected direction. Had Khadgar been one step behind, the lance of whirling green fire would have pierced his heart instead of ripping the back of his cloak.

As he ran deeper into the tomb, Khadgar noticed the elegant lines inscribed on the walls. Arcane runes? It was a very odd place for them. They were unfamiliar, more advanced than anything Khadgar had ever seen. That was troubling. Some of them were glowing. That was *far* more troubling. Gul'dan had no experience with the arcane.

Does he? Khadgar's thoughts raced. *What is happening?* This place had been fortified centuries ago by Aegwynn, the most powerful Guardian to walk this world. Whatever she had done here was far beyond Khadgar's own skills.

And she was under Sarger's influence when she did it.

That thought brought Khadgar to a dead stop. Another trap, only inches away, quivered and exploded. He shielded himself with an annoyed grunt and didn't feel a thing. One of the runes was carved into the hallway's ceiling. He studied it carefully. Yes, he had never seen its like, but the way its angles were curved, the way it channeled energy—it had a familiar purpose.

A rune like this could be used as part of a lock.

Not a lock, Khadgar realized with horror. This rune was one small part of a *key*. A massive, hidden key, layered into the structure of the tomb itself. The complexity of it was... cosmic. Khadgar could think of no other word. Trying to comprehend it from a single rune was like trying to study an ocean from a single drop of water.

"Light help us all," Khadgar breathed. There was no mystery as to what the key would open. The Burning Legion had tried to create a portal here long, long ago. It had failed. The Legion's power had been rendered inert. Every Kirin Tor scholar would agree on that.

The Burning Legion knows something you do not, or else its puppet would not be here, Khadgar reminded himself.

Had Aegwynn built this key intentionally? Or had Sarger worked through her, twisting her actions so subtly that she hadn't noticed? Khadgar didn't know. All he could glean was that this rune had a deliberate purpose. If he were to tamper with it, it would probably block his power. Or it might throw it back at him. That sort of thing tended to be slightly fatal.

He began running again. Gul'dan was close. If Khadgar took out the Legion's only pawn on the island, the demons' plans would be dust.

The hallways soon curved in the same direction. Khadgar let them funnel him inward, toward the pulsing blasts of fel. There were no more traps.

A narrow, ornate doorway led Khadgar into a towering chamber, its ceiling lost in the shadows above. And there, in the center, was his prey.

Gul'dan was crouched, making small gestures over a glowing tile on the floor. His head turned, and Khadgar saw his red eyes go wide with surprise.

Khadgar stepped forward without hesitation. "It's been too long, old friend." Lethal energy erupted from the archmage's hands. "I've been looking forward to this."

Gul'dan snarled. "Have you, now?"

Green fire met violet power.

The Tomb of Sargeras trembled. The fight had begun.

Part Three: The Tomb's Fury

Colossal waves of energy crashed together, spinning into a bulging vortex of arcane and fel power. The massive chamber pitched and heaved, torrents of fire billowing through it, yet Khadgar and Gul'dan did not waver, did not flinch, did not even blink.

Instead, Khadgar smiled, showing teeth. His arms were thrust forward; his chin was raised. There was no trickery here. Just an endless rush of pure, raw power.

Where their fury collided, fire erupted. The air itself threatened to ignite. If it did, everything inside the tomb would be destroyed. Including Khadgar. Including Gul'dan.

And neither one was backing down.

—*GUL'DAN, STOP THIS.*—

That hated voice again. Kil'jaeden. Gul'dan bellowed, "Stay out of this!"

—*OBEY ME. WITHDRAW.*—

"I can kill him!" Gul'dan raged.

Khadgar grinned, sweat beginning to shine on his forehead. "Who is that, Gul'dan? Who holds your leash?" Gul'dan responded with a wordless roar, hurling even more power at the archmage. Sparks flew, but Khadgar deflected the energy with a hoarse laugh. "Which of your masters have we not slain yet?"

Kil'jaeden's voice gripped Gul'dan's mind.

—*END THIS! NEITHER OF YOU CAN DIE THIS DAY.*—

"What?!"

—*DO IT NOW!*—

It was not simply an order; it was an ultimatum. Gul'dan would obey, or he would find himself cut off from the Legion. Immediately.

So he obeyed. Gul'dan flung his arms wide, spreading his power into a thin sheet of pure fel fire. Khadgar's attack smashed through it, but as the sheet collapsed, it unleashed a blinding explosion of light. Khadgar shielded his eyes. When the glare faded, Gul'dan was gone.

Khadgar straightened and brushed off his shoulders. Threads on his robe had begun to smolder. "I know you're still here, Gul'dan," he said. "You have nowhere else to go."

Gul'dan skulked in the shadows. The little trick he had used against the Watchers would keep Khadgar from physically seeing him, but Gul'dan knew the archmage had other ways to find him. "I cannot finish your task without his sensing it," Gul'dan quietly said to Kil'jaeden. "Let me kill him."

—*HE WILL DO ANYTHING TO CLAIM VICTORY. THAT WILL BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR US. LATER.*—

Gul'dan had no idea what that meant. But now he knew the Burning Legion had plans for Khadgar as well.

And that led to interesting questions. *Do they truly believe they can turn him? If they succeed, will they have any need of me?* Treason once again sounded quite appealing.

Gul'dan kept moving through the darkness. Khadgar was beginning to cast out glowing arcane orbs, banishing the shadows bit by bit.

He was also filling the chamber with words. "How important are you, Gul'dan? Is it Kil'jaeden who commands you? Or just one of his lapdogs?"

His voice seemed to come from every stone at once. A clever idea. It disguised his location. Gul'dan quickly worked out how to imitate that. A small touch of fel, and his own voice boomed throughout the chamber. "Khadgar, I never thanked you for your help. The Iron Horde would have been difficult to cut down on my own. You and your friends were most useful," he said.

Khadgar laughed. "Yes, and it all ended so well for you. I'll provide you with that sort of help anytime." He spun, and a blast of fire zeroed in on Gul'dan. Stone pillars evaporated, and rocks tumbled from the ceiling, rumbling down like an avalanche.

Gul'dan did not move, letting the chaos settle. The attack had missed only by a few paces. Maybe he hadn't cloaked himself as well as he had hoped... But after a moment, Khadgar turned away. A lucky guess, nothing more.

Gul'dan had a clear shot at Khadgar's back, yet he was forbidden to take it. This was absurd. Perhaps he would be allowed to make a mistake in the heat of battle. *Kil'jaeden might be furious, but he still needs me*, he thought. When the moment was right, Gul'dan would test his theory.

Until then, he needed to hurry along this task. No more fumbling around with each step. "Kil'jaeden, tell me what's in this tomb and how to unleash it," Gul'dan whispered.

There was silence. And then, finally, Kil'jaeden relented.

—LISTEN CAREFULLY.—

He did. As Kil'jaeden spoke, Gul'dan couldn't stop a smile from twisting his lips.

Khadgar slowly walked around the center of the chamber, making no effort to mask his footsteps. This area was massive. Rows of pillars stretched into the darkness, faintly glowing from half-awakened runes. There was no end to the places where Gul'dan could hide. It would be easier to draw him out than to hunt him among the shadows.

"Are you frightened, Gul'dan?" There was no response. Khadgar hoped each word, each step, was like a dagger piercing the warlock's pride; Gul'dan had not seemed pleased by the order to retreat. *Is the Burning Legion guiding him that closely?* Khadgar kept his voice light. "Have you ever had to personally defeat a prepared adversary? Someone who knows exactly what you are? Your other self certainly never did. He campaigned from Draenor to Azeroth and laid waste to entire cities, yet he always had others do that sort of dirty work for him. This must be so uncomfortable for you."

A faint rustling. Skin rubbing against cloth. That was all the warning Khadgar had. Gul'dan was raising his hands.

A roaring wall of green fire raced toward Khadgar's exposed back. He let it approach. Its heat was on his neck before he made a simple gesture. Arcane magic froze the air solid around him, surrounding him in a barrier of ice.

Gul'dan's fire barely melted a few drops of it. With a snarl, Gul'dan retreated into the shadows again. Khadgar smiled. Another gesture, and the barrier shattered into a thousand tiny shards, sprinkling to the ground with a musical sound. Khadgar shook off the sudden chill and resumed his pacing, his boots crushing ice into puddles. "Almost had me there," he said.

A muffled grunt of pain floated through the chamber.

Khadgar couldn't help but laugh. "Didn't have permission to strike at me? How does the Legion's discipline feel, Gul'dan? Are you ready to be a good pet now?"

The orc's voice was near to bursting with suppressed rage. "Do you believe in fate, human?" he asked.

An odd question. "I know *your* fate," Khadgar said.

"What about redemption?"

"Redemption? For you? No," Khadgar snorted.

"No, not for me," Gul'dan agreed. "Your kind of redemption bores me. It bored the son of Hellscream, too, from what I hear."

That was true enough. "What *do* you want? I can't imagine being a puppet appeals to you."

"I want my enemies to burn," Gul'dan said.

"Lovely," Khadgar said. No further attacks were coming from the shadows. Gul'dan was stalling.

Khadgar inspected the chamber. A nearby pedestal shimmered, drawing his eye. He *did* recognize the runes on it. They were ancient Highborne work. During the War of the Ancients, when the Legion had taken steps to open a portal here—which would have created a second front, of sorts—it had required a significant magical effort to seal it off. That was exactly what he was looking at: one of the five seals. He knew of them only through his studies. Khadgar leaned over to examine this one. It was fascinating work, so precise, even though it had been hastily wrought. It was still active, rippling with violet light as it—

There was a noise. The seal flashed green; then it went dark. Khadgar stared. After a moment, acrid smoke rose from it, but its light had faded permanently.

The seal was gone, broken before his very eyes. Khadgar felt an itch at the back of his mind. Gul'dan. Even though he was hidden, he was breaking the seals.

And when they were all gone? *The Legion wins*. Khadgar couldn't wait any longer. He formed energy into a shoulder-high teardrop shape, then filled it with power. Two arms appeared, and the arcane elemental opened its eyes. "I serve," it said.

Khadgar pointed toward the shadows. "Someone is hiding. Kick some rocks until you flush him out," he said.

"I obey," the elemental said. It couldn't actually kick anything—no legs—but it floated over to the eastern corner without asking questions. That was nice. Elementals could be terribly literal. It couldn't help but stumble over Gul'dan eventually. But why stop with one? Khadgar summoned more. It was time to put pressure on the warlock.

And on his masters, hopefully, Khadgar thought. He suddenly had a new idea. Distraction could take many forms, after all.

"So, Gul'dan," he said, "I have to ask—has the Legion told you how you died?"

That wasn't me, Gul'dan thought. But his annoyance battled with his curiosity. Did the archmage actually know the other Gul'dan's end?

Kil'jaeden seemed to read his mind.

—*IGNORE HIM.*—

"I am," he hissed, still in pain. After Gul'dan had attacked Khadgar, his disobedience had earned a swift response. That made him all the more furious. *Highmaul slaves were treated better than this*, he raged silently.

He glanced around the chamber. None of Khadgar's constructs were near him. Gul'dan was using only a trickle of fel power, far too slight for even Khadgar to locate.

But that was all the warlock needed.

Kil'jaeden had revealed the truth of this tomb. The original structure had been warded against demonic trespassers many thousands of years ago, but Gul'dan was no demon. Not quite. There was so much power here, not all of it Legion-derived. It had been layered and inverted and hidden away so skillfully that only one person had ever discovered it before. But after ten thousand years of inattention, these seals, wrought from titan power by imperfect mortals, had tiny weaknesses. Fatal weaknesses.

The Legion could not touch the seals, but the demons had studied them. The wards' ancient designers had crafted them so they would kill whoever tried to break them, but Gul'dan knew exactly how to crack open all five seals safely.

One had already fallen, and Gul'dan still lived. The Legion was giving him true instructions. *Four left.*

Gul'dan strained and felt something give way. The entire tomb quivered. Another seal was gone. *Three left.* He looked up at Khadgar, who tilted his head but did not seem to understand the magnitude of what had happened. Breaking the seals was not as dramatic an event as Gul'dan would have guessed.

All of the power the Legion had prepared to open this portal seemed to call to Gul'dan from a distance. It had been dormant too long. It needed to be claimed.

Interestingly enough, Gul'dan was beginning to suspect that the Legion was unaware of the *other* source of power down here. But though he could sense it, he couldn't wield it. That made it irrelevant. For the moment.

Khadgar's voice intruded on his thoughts. "The Horde—the *first* Horde—had stormed across Lordaeron. You abandoned them to come here." One of Khadgar's elementals floated close to Gul'dan but didn't see him. "This island was beneath the ocean. You raised it up. Very impressive."

Gul'dan focused on his task, fingers twitching unconsciously. His fel power maneuvered deep within the tomb's runes, seeking the third seal. *There it is*. Gul'dan tried to grip it. He couldn't. It was slippery. Every time he attempted to pry open its weak point, he missed. It was like trying to untie a knot of spider's silk in the dark. With his toes.

"And as a reward for your loyalty, do you know what happened to you, Gul'dan?" Khadgar asked.

Suddenly, Gul'dan's magic slipped from his grasp. The third seal did not just break; it shattered.

A deep rattle sounded throughout the room, and then a crash followed on its heels. Gul'dan froze. Khadgar's constructs stopped moving. A low hum rose, and a dim hue, flashing between green and violet, began to shine from every stone in the chamber's floor and walls.

Not only had Gul'dan cracked open the third seal, but he had accidentally broken the fourth as well. It was likely a miracle it hadn't killed him.

There was only one seal left. Kil'jaeden's pleasure was unmistakable.

— *WELL DONE. DESTROY THE LAST.* —

Gul'dan hesitated. The final seal felt different. He probed it, but there was no weak point. It seemed unbelievably strong, and with each passing moment, it grew more powerful. The tomb itself was bolstering it. Arcane energy was surging into the seal.

This was too complex to be an accident. Someone had anticipated this moment and created a mechanism to stop it. Another source of power was involved; Gul'dan sensed it. It was that other mortal, the one who had claimed this place centuries ago. This was her work.

"Kil'jaeden, what is happening?" Gul'dan whispered.

There was no response.

More light filled the chamber. Gul'dan could feel that Khadgar was preparing an incredible amount of arcane power. The archmage was clearly aware that something massive was under way. "Now I know why this place feels so strange," Khadgar said. "I haven't felt anything like this since my apprenticeship. I don't know why I sense a Guardian's might, Gul'dan..."

Khadgar unleashed energy. Gul'dan braced himself, but the arcane magic did not wash outward. It manifested in midair. A glowing wedge, three times Khadgar's height, shimmered and sparked, its angles forming a fine edge. Khadgar rotated his hands, and the edge aimed straight at the floor.

The archmage's voice was strained but determined. "... but I see what it's trying to do." The arcane elementals raced to the wedge. Their arms became one with it. "And I think I'll help."

Gul'dan felt a wordless wave of alarm roll in from Kil'jaeden.

The elementals pulled downward. The wedge slammed into the ground, cracking the stone floor. The entire chamber heaved. Gul'dan fell over.

—*KILL HIM! KILL HIM NOW, GUL'DAN!*—

So much for Kil'jaeden's plans. Gul'dan rose to his feet, letting his black cloak fall from his shoulders. There was no need to hide any longer. He discarded all of his tricks. "I obey, Kil'jaeden," the orc said, raising his hands.

Khadgar saw him immediately. "So it *is* Kil'jaeden," he said, smiling. His own hands thrust forward.

Khadgar's and Gul'dan's powers met in the middle with a deafening thunderclap. The heat of their battle softened the stone beneath them. The arcane elementals lifted the wedge again. The chamber shook. Pillars collapsed. The elaborate mechanisms meant to open a portal were shivering and unraveling. The wedge went up and down. The swirling violet and green hues flickered.

The place was near to breaking. Khadgar might well bring down the entire chamber, and with it, the Legion's portal.

Gul'dan hurled attack after attack. Khadgar deflected them all. He had no need to risk a counterattack. He was winning.

"Kil'jaeden," Gul'dan whispered, "I need the tomb's power."

—*No.*—

"There is one seal left, and it is being protected! I cannot break it *and* kill him!" The words lashed Gul'dan's tongue. "He has had *decades* to study me. He can hold me off for too long."

—*YOU WILL BETRAY ME.*—

Gul'dan forced more power into his attacks. Khadgar wavered but held firm. Gul'dan growled in frustration. "Khadgar will destroy the tomb. The Legion will never have a chance to use this place again. Trust that I want to see this fool dead, or trust that all of your plans will burn."

Sweat dripped down Khadgar's face. "I forgot to finish my story," he said. "When you entered the Tomb of Sargeras, you died in an ambush."

Gul'dan could feel Kil'jaeden's indecision. *The Deceiver knows me too well*, he thought. But then, there was something new, a lake of fire in another realm, suddenly within reach...

"The other Gul'dan did not die by the Alliance's hands, nor by the Horde that he betrayed," Khadgar said. Gul'dan could not help but listen to him. "He entered the tomb and was torn limb from limb by demons. I suppose the Burning Legion had no more use for him."

The words struck Gul'dan numb.

Long ago, he had been an outcast on Draenor, with no ambition but to find his next meal. The Legion had opened his mind to a simple truth: strength could not be ignored. He never hungered again.

Khadgar had just shown him another truth: Gul'dan's strength would cease to be useful. It was not merely *possible* that the Legion would discard him. It was a certainty. It was fate.

And then power surged into him.

Khadgar was still talking. "I wonder what they will do to you, Gul'dan, when they are finished." He paused. The humor left his voice; he must have sensed the change. "What are you doing, warlock?"

Gul'dan stopped his attack on Khadgar and turned his might toward the final seal. All of his own strength. All of his lent power. Gul'dan snatched up the seal in a fel fist...

... and crushed it. Its lethal energy lashed out, fizzled against his own.

Just like that, the wards were gone. The Burning Legion's reservoir, enough strength to shatter the barriers between worlds, was free, rushing toward the portal buried deep within the island.

That strength never arrived. Gul'dan claimed it first.

Fire filled Gul'dan's mind. He cried out, his hands claspng his head, eyes squeezed shut. He forgot Khadgar. He forgot the tomb. His defenses fell, and Khadgar's arcane fury washed over him. Gul'dan didn't feel it. He was suffocating in power. Drowning in an endless ocean.

It was vile. And it was beautiful. He drank deeply.

He felt pain.

And then he found his balance. He felt control.

This... *this* was real power. *This* was what he had wanted all along. *This* was what the Burning Legion had promised him: strength that could not be ignored.

Yet all the demons had given him until now were *scraps*. Why give more to a disposable fool?

Gul'dan opened his eyes. "Goodbye, Archmage," he said, lifting only a finger.

Khadgar encased himself with ice.

Overwhelming fury erupted. The chamber pitched like a ship on a heavy sea. The arcane elementals and their wedge evaporated in a heartbeat.

The block of ice, and the archmage within it, was but a pebble in a hurricane. Yet no matter how hard the warlock squeezed it, it did not shatter. That surprised Gul'dan. He felt as if he could crack open the entire world if he so desired. But it was a small shortcoming. Khadgar could die later. Gul'dan waved his hand, and the ice was hurled through the doorway, out of his sight. Then he collapsed the door's arch. Tons of rock crashed down, sealing the chamber shut. If Khadgar still lived, he was no longer a problem.

Gul'dan had won. The power within him was unimaginable. The possibilities, limitless.

Yet Kil'jaeden still thought he could issue the orders.

—*YOU MADE A PACT, GUL'DAN. FINISH YOUR TASK. OPEN THE WAY FOR US.*—

Gul'dan took a deep breath, savoring the moment.

"No, Kil'jaeden," he replied. "I will not."

Part Four: Standing Alone

Khadgar slowly climbed to his feet, shivering. Every inch of him ached. Shards of melting ice slid off of him and clattered to the ground. Was this what death felt like? The numbing cold, the misery of utter failure?

The hallway was dark. Khadgar absently conjured a ball of light, revealing the wall of collapsed rock where a doorway had once been.

Gul'dan was on the other side, wielding the means to drag Azeroth into an apocalypse.

Khadgar shoved away his horror. Gul'dan had not flung open the gates for the Legion yet. Perhaps the archmage's history lesson had worked.

He summoned another arcane wedge, then jammed it against the pile of stones, chipping it away. There was still hope. There would always be hope.

He had to believe that.

Kil'jaeden was quiet. Gul'dan was not.

"I don't believe Khadgar was lying," the orc said. He was calm. On Draenor, the garr were calm, too, just before they feasted. "The other one. The other Gul'dan. He died here at the Legion's hands, yes?"

— *YES, HE DID.* —

Gul'dan lowered his head. "So. The Burning Legion does not honor its pacts." With this power, he did not need the Legion. He could claim Azeroth alone and rain fire upon all who opposed him. The first victim would be Khadgar. But fire was too glorious an end for him. The other Gul'dan had raised this island; it might be fitting to sink it back to the deep. How long could an archmage survive underwater? It would be amusing to find out. "There was always a part of me that believed our arrangement would not last," he said.

— *THAT IS BECAUSE YOU ARE A FOOL. AS MUCH NOW AS THEN.* —

Kil'jaeden's words echoed with disapproval. Gul'dan laughed.

"A *forewarned* fool, at least," he said.

But Kil'jaeden was not done.

—*I WAS THERE WHEN YOU FIRST BOUND YOURSELF TO US. FALSE AMBITION HAS ALWAYS POISONED YOUR MIND, GUL'DAN.*—

Anger pierced Gul'dan's contentment. "False?" He used his new strength to reach through his link with Kil'jaeden. He saw the eredar's face. "You planned to discard me from the beginning." Kil'jaeden's blazing eyes met Gul'dan's without blinking.

—*NO, GUL'DAN. WE TEMPT THE WEAK WITH TRINKETS AND FLEETING REWARDS. WE PROMISED YOU MUCH, MUCH MORE.*—

Gul'dan sneered. "Bigger bait for a bigger fish. But you would have gutted me all the same."

—*YOU DIED BECAUSE YOU BETRAYED US. YOU WERE MEANT TO HELP **MY** HORDE EXTERMINATE ALL RESISTANCE ON THIS WORLD. YET AT THE MOMENT OF TRUTH, YOU ABANDONED THEM. YOU SPLIT THEIR ARMIES TO CLAIM THIS PLACE. OUR PLANS CAME TO NOTHING. YOU EARNED YOUR FATE.*—

"That was not me!" Gul'dan roared.

—*BETRAYAL IS IN YOUR NATURE. I DRAGGED YOU HERE BY THE SCRUFF OF YOUR NECK BECAUSE YOU ARE STILL TOO FOOLISH TO UNDERSTAND YOUR FULL POTENTIAL. EVEN NOW, YOU BELIEVE THE POWER YOU HOLD IS SIGNIFICANT. YOU LACK VISION.*—

Kil'jaeden had been sitting on a gigantic throne made of metal and polished crystals, strata of materials that Gul'dan had never seen. Now he stood up. Gul'dan's heightened senses were granting him a glimpse of another world. There was a smell to it. A *weight* to it. He wondered what this land was called. He wondered if he would ever visit it. What would it take to conquer such a place?

—*I HAD HOPED YOU WOULD HAVE GREATER VISION THAN YOUR OTHER SELF. PERHAPS YOU STILL WILL.*—

"I'm afraid you're about to be disappointed again, *master*," Gul'dan said. "I see no reason to overcome my *false ambition*."

This was hopeless. It would take Khadgar *days* to get back into the chamber with the wedge. He might have only *seconds* to stop Gul'dan. The pile of rocks looked endless.

Perhaps there was a better point of attack. A place where the walls weren't so thick. A place where the floor was thinner. Anything. Maybe he should conjure more arcane elementals? No. They were not strong enough.

Khadgar's thoughts would not let him focus on the here and now. *What will the end of Azeroth look like? How much of it will burn? How many of its people will be enslaved? How many of its champions will fall to corruption rather than die?*

How many more worlds will they conquer on the Legion's behalf?

Then a voice changed everything.

"You seem to be doing as well as I expected, Archmage."

Khadgar didn't turn around, not wanting his relief to show. "I'm glad we made enough noise to get your attention. Is there a place where we can break through? A spot with less rock between him and us?" he asked.

Maiev Shadowsong stepped next to him, studying the wall of debris. "We can find one. Is Gul'dan alone?"

That was a strangely difficult question to answer. "Let's say yes, for now. We don't have much time."

"Of course not," she said.

"Maiev." Khadgar was grim. She had come back; she deserved to be warned. "I have failed."

She gave him a flat look. "And?"

"You and I are not capable of stopping him now."

"I do not see you running."

Well, there was no arguing with that. "Then that's settled," Khadgar said.

"This way." She led him down the eastern tunnel.

Kil'jaeden leaned forward. The air seemed to quake.

—*FROM THE BEGINNING, YOU BELIEVED YOU WERE DESTINED FOR POWER. YOU ARE. YOU ALSO BELIEVED YOU WERE DESTINED TO BE YOUR OWN MASTER.*—

His next words thundered with finality.

—*THAT WILL NEVER HAPPEN.*—

"No?" Gul'dan said softly. "Given the circumstances—"

—EVERY CREATURE SERVES A MASTER. EVEN I. THAT IS THE CHOICE OF ALL: SERVE ANOTHER, OR DIE ALONE. —

Gul'dan was unmoved. "Perhaps you will bow to me one day, Deceiver," he said.

—HOW FAR CAN YOU GO? HOW MANY WORLDS CAN YOU RULE? THE POWER YOU HOLD WILL NOT LAST FOREVER. YOU ARE NOTHING BEFORE THE LEGION. —

"We shall see."

—SERVITUDE IS NOT IMPRISONMENT. YOU WILL SERVE ME. OTHERS WILL SERVE YOU. IMAGINE BEING THE MASTER OF SO MANY. IMAGINE THE RANKS OF THE LEGION AT YOUR COMMAND. IMAGINE WHAT YOU WILL **BURN** FOR US. —

Gul'dan regarded Kil'jaeden. *All his power. All his fury. Yet he cannot make me obey any longer,* he thought. *I do not need his empty promises.*

Kil'jaeden seemed to feel the distance growing between them.

—ENOUGH, GUL'DAN. MAKE YOUR CHOICE. YOU CAN PROVE YOURSELF LOYAL. RETURN YOUR POWER TO THE PORTAL, AND THE WAY WILL OPEN. OR YOU CAN BETRAY US YET AGAIN. YOUR ONLY SATISFACTION BEFORE WE DESTROY YOU WILL BE MEANINGLESS VENGEANCE ON INSIGNIFICANT MORTALS. —

The eredar offered a parting thought.

—KNOW THIS: YOU CAN CALL ME "DECEIVER," BUT I DID NOT LIE TO YOU. NOT ONCE. NOT IN THIS WORLD, AND NOT IN YOURS. —

With that, Kil'jaeden pushed Gul'dan's mind away.

The chamber was quiet, and Gul'dan was finally alone. Kil'jaeden was far away from this place.

The only disturbance was a slight tremor. Khadgar was trying to claw his way back in. A useless effort.

And as for the Burning Legion... It was not a difficult decision. Gul'dan's days of servitude were done. There was nothing that could stop him. He would have no master.

A speck of doubt crawled in his belly. He grimaced and waited for the power coursing through his veins to melt it away. It didn't happen.

Gul'dan was getting annoyed. Perhaps this was a mortal weakness that could never be overwhelmed: self-doubt. He examined his feelings. He was supremely confident in the strength he held. Where was this uncertainty coming from?

The floor quivered again. *Khadgar*. And he was no longer alone. Gul'dan could sense Maiev Shadowsong, too. She had come back. That was unexpected. When Gul'dan had observed them

earlier, he had noticed enmity between them. They had overcome it unsettlingly fast. Now they were working together.

They wanted to break in? Wonderful. Let them rush to their deaths. Killing them would clear Gul'dan's head nicely.

And then there would be nobody left on Azeroth to oppose Gul'dan.

Except...

There. That was the doubt.

Khadgar had been utterly defeated, and yet he wasn't giving up. Shadowsong objected to the archmage's very presence, and she was risking her life to aid him. They were just two. There were others.

Those others...

Together... they had faced the Iron Horde and won.

Together... they had *run* toward battle against the corrupted Horde. They had entered Gul'dan's citadel and torn it to pieces.

Together... they had opposed the Burning Legion. They had defeated Archimonde. If they would not flee from *him*, they would flee from *nothing*.

Genuine horror spread through Gul'dan's mind. He was standing on a unique world with creatures far more tenacious than even the archmage. Gul'dan would have to face *all* of them.

Alone.

Answering to no master.

But alone.

Gul'dan had no measure of his new power, but he had a measure of *theirs*. He stood in the tomb for a long time. Thinking. Calculating.

Rocks tumbled in the chamber. Khadgar shoved through the hole and pulled himself inside. Maiev followed, her umbra crescent poised to strike.

Together, they ran toward him. Gul'dan only watched. They struck. He brushed them away without lifting a finger, and they were hurled across the chamber. Maiev rotated in midair and gracefully hit the wall in a smooth crouch, and Khadgar simply blinked from the air back to the ground, landing easily. They tried again. This time Gul'dan actually had to move; Maiev's blade

missed his throat by a hair's-breadth. Khadgar rained down ice. Gul'dan clapped his hands. Walls of green fire slammed together. Khadgar should have been squashed like a bug. Instead he leaped free. And there was Warden Shadowsong, trying *again* to carve him up. He reached out, intending to rip the very soul from her body. But Khadgar's power was there, redirecting Gul'dan's strength until she could retreat.

"Help me understand." Gul'dan's voice was strangely calm, even to his own ears. "Why do you fight? You can do nothing here but die."

"Then kill us, if you can," Khadgar spat. Shadowsong set her feet and slammed her blade twice against a pillar, a wordless gesture of agreement.

Gul'dan had no doubt that he could kill them both. But they should have been dead already. Their stubborn resistance was exactly what he would face on this world, over and over again. Khadgar and Shadowsong were only the first of many.

I cannot defeat them all alone.

Gul'dan could kill these two. Or he could obey the Burning Legion.

He closed his eyes. With a groan, Gul'dan let his wondrous power slip from his grasp. Kil'jaeden seized it and sent it straight into the tomb. The walls glowed ever brighter, rivaling the midday sun.

Gul'dan felt a keen sense of loss. All that power gone. The tomb was not simply using it; it was consuming it. Terrible sounds, magnificent sounds, deafening sounds, they heralded the creation of a bridge that joined two worlds. Suddenly the way was open. Air rushed from another plane of existence, roaring through the chamber at hurricane speeds. Khadgar and Maiev dropped to the floor, holding on.

And then he heard that familiar voice.

— *WELL DONE, GUL'DAN. YOU DO INDEED HAVE THE VISION I HAD HOPED FOR.* —

Kil'jaeden's words no longer rattled in his head. They no longer needed to. Gul'dan felt something new from the Burning Legion: trust. It was a dizzying sensation.

"What do I do?" Gul'dan asked.

— *WATCH. SEE WHAT YOU WILL INHERIT.* —

Kil'jaeden pulled Gul'dan through to witness the Legion's glory.

Light spilled into the infinite shadow, illuminating the ranks of an army that stretched beyond sight. They were ready. They always had been. But they had never before had a clear path. Not like this. Whirling power beckoned them to another realm, and they gladly obeyed.

"It is more than I had dreamed," Gul'dan whispered.

—*IT IS THE BEGINNING OF AZEROTH'S END.*—

And there it was: Azeroth. Gul'dan stood aside as the Burning Legion's forces surged forward. Ever forward. Soon he would join them. Not as a servant.

As a leader.

Khadgar's heart was pounding in his ears, drowning out his nightmare that had come to life. "Keep going, Maiev!" he shouted, running.

She kept pace but didn't respond. There was nothing more to say.

The Burning Legion is here.

Gul'dan had vanished in front of their eyes, immediately replaced with others. So many others. There had been nothing that Khadgar and Maiev could do but flee. Already the Legion was pursuing them. Khadgar dared not look back. The walls around him were shimmering and crumbling.

Somehow Gul'dan had destroyed the five seals under Khadgar's nose, and the dormant portal was awake.

I can't rebuild the seals, Khadgar thought desperately. He couldn't even conceive of the power required to accomplish that. So he ran.

Sunlight poured through a doorway ahead. Maiev reached it first and wheeled north. "I am going back to the vault! You draw them away!"

Khadgar veered east. "Good luck, Warden!"

"Fight and die well, Archmage!"

He spread his arms wide and took to the sky as a raven, channeling magic into a dazzling display of light and sound.

It did the trick. A chorus of screeches erupted behind him. He risked a glance back. The ground was already writhing, swarming with the vanguard of an army that sought to conquer

everything. The sky was darkening, hidden behind a blooming tower of green smoke that rose from the island. He saw a familiar figure there. Gul'dan levitated in the midst of the inferno, his laughter serenading the horrors he had unleashed. He pointed at Khadgar. Flocks of winged demons rushed to obey. Khadgar strained to gain more speed. The Legion's forces would pursue him hard. That might give Maiev and her Watchers the time they needed.

Or it might not.

But she came back. It was a small victory amid such failure, but a victory nonetheless.

He caught a draft of air and let it propel him through the sky. This was no longer about Maiev. Or Khadgar. Or even Gul'dan.

There must be a way to stop the Legion.

Khadgar had failed. He needed answers. He needed help. If he stayed, he could do nothing but die.

So he kept flying. The demons showed no signs of slowing even as he soared across the open ocean, leaving the Broken Isles far behind. He would warn the Kirin Tor. The Alliance and the Horde. Everyone. They would answer the call as Maiev had.

He had to believe that.

The great nightmare was beginning, and no one on Azeroth would be able to wake from it alone.

END

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