The Tomb of Sargeras
By Robert Brooks

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 If Gul'dan *had* been nearby, he had probably withdrawn.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 Sargeras'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 Sargeras 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.