

The Tomb of Sargeris

By Robert Brooks

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 clasp 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."

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