

GHOSTS OF
ASCALON

GUILDWARS®

GHOSTS OF ASCALON

MATT FORBECK
AND
JEFF GRUBB

Based on the Acclaimed Video Game Series
from ArenaNet



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*Dedicated to the millions of gamers everywhere who breathe
life into the worlds the designers create.*

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From Matt:

*As always, the greatest thanks go to my wife, Ann, and my
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Hope you like what we've done with the world.*

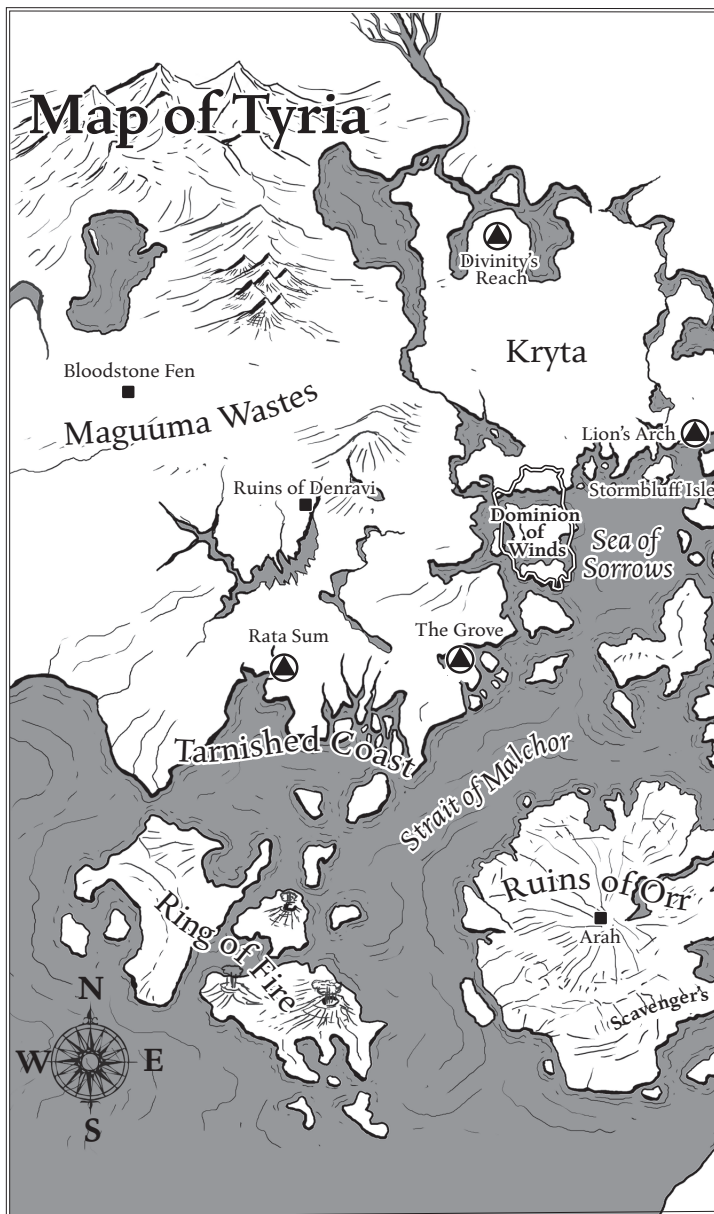
Timeline

- 10,000 BE: Last of the Giganticus Lupicus, the Great Giants, disappear from the Tyrian continent.
- 205 BE: Humans appear on the Tyrian continent.
- 100 BE: Humans drive the charr out of Ascalon.
- 1 BE: The Human Gods give magic to the races of Tyria.
- 0 AE: The Exodus of the Human Gods.
- 2 AE: Orr becomes an independent nation.
- 300 AE: Kryta established as a colony of Elona.
- 358 AE: Kryta becomes an independent nation.
- 898 AE: The Great Northern Wall is erected.
- 1070 AE: The Charr Invasion of Ascalon. The Searing.
- 1071 AE: The Sinking of Orr.
- 1072 AE: Ascalonian refugees flee to Kryta.
- 1075 AE: Kormir ascends into godhood.
- 1078 AE: Primordus, the Elder Fire Dragon, stirs but does not awaken. The asura appear on the surface. The Transformation of the Dwarves.
- 1080 AE: King Adelbern of Ascalon recalls the Ebon Vanguard; Ebonhawke is established.
- 1088 AE: Kryta unifies behind Queen Salma.
- 1090 AE: The charr legions take Ascalon City. The Foefire.

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- 1105 AE: Durmand Priory is established in the Shiverpeaks.
- 1112 AE: The charr erect the Black Citadel over the ruins of the city of Rin in Ascalon.
- 1116 AE: Kalla Scorchrazor leads the rebellion against the Flame Legion's shaman caste.
- 1120 AE: Primordus awakens.
- 1165 AE: Jormag, the Elder Ice Dragon, awakens. The norn flee south into the Shiverpeaks.
- 1180 AE: The centaur prophet Ventari dies by the Pale Tree, leaving behind the Ventari Tablet.
- 1219 AE: Zhaitan, the Elder Undead Dragon, awakens. Orr rises from the sea. Lion's Arch floods.
- 1220 AE: Divinity's Reach is founded in the Krytan province of Shaemoor.
- 1230 AE: Corsairs and other pirates occupy the slowly drying ruins of Lion's Arch.
- 1302 AE: The sylvari first appear along the Tarnished Coast, sprouting from the Pale Tree.
- 1320 AE: Kralkatorrik, the Elder Crystal Dragon, awakens. Creation of the Dragonbrand. Breaking of Destiny's Edge. Founding of the Vigil.
- 1324 AE: Dougal Keane enters the crypts beneath Divinity's Reach.

GHOSTS OF
ASCALON







Over the years, Dougal Keane developed a personal rule: Never adventure with people you like. If pressed, he might modify it to: Don't adventure with people you'd hate to see die. Now, in the depths of the crypts beneath Divinity's Reach, he was getting his wish. Dougal disliked his comrades intensely. He also hated his task. Most of all, at the moment, he hated the stifling heat of the crypts themselves.

The sweltering summer heat that enveloped Divinity's Reach above had stolen deep into the bowels of these hidden burial grounds, where it festered like a hidden wound. The prevailing winds that caressed the burial ground's cliffside entrances might carry the stench of the warm, dry rot away from the city, but inside the crypt's twisting passages, Dougal had no means of escaping it. People had been bringing their dead here since before the founding of Kryta's new capital, and Dougal swore he could smell the dust of every last one of them.

Their explorations had taken them into parts of the

crypts that even Dougal was unaware existed. At each branching of the path, Clagg had consulted his glowing map, then indicated they take the less-traveled option. The smooth, polished flagstones of the Skull Gate in Divinity's Reach gave way to less-used paths, and finally to rooms and corridors that had been untouched since the dead were left here to desiccate centuries before the founding of the city above.

Still, as he stalked forward, brittle skull fragments of all shapes and sizes crunching beneath his feet, Dougal reminded himself that these crypts weren't as bad as some places he had been. The ruined temples of the Caledon Forest, or the Bloodtide Coast, its beaches awash with twitching, malevolent corpses.

Or Ascalon. Never as bad as Ascalon.

Dougal stopped and rubbed the stubble on his chin as he scanned the bone-covered passage before him. It opened into a wide chamber that stretched far beyond the reach of his torch's light. It was clear of bones.

He didn't like that.

He signaled for a stop, and his companions—the sylvani, the norn, and the asura riding his golem, the one who'd hired the rest of them for this expedition—pulled up short behind him.

"What is it?" snarled Clagg. The asura was irritable when they first met, and the closed, stuffy air of the tomb had done nothing to improve his disposition.

Clagg's people had bubbled up from the depths of the world over two centuries ago, harbingers of the fact that the nature of Tyria was about to change. They were a small people with oversized, flat-faced, ellipsoid heads,

the width of which were made more pronounced by long ears, drooping in Clagg's case. Their skin came in varying shades of gray, their large eyes a product of lives spent in magic-lit caves. The asura arrived on the surface world not so much as refugees as settlers confident in their intellectual and magical superiority over every race they encountered.

And, Dougal had to admit to himself, they were often right in that assumption.

Clagg was seated comfortably in a harness fixed to the front of his golem, the creature a masterpiece of polished and painted stone and fitted bands of bronze. Its articulated limbs hinged on glowing blue magical jewels that held the independent parts of the angular, headless creature together without actually touching them. Magical force, magic beyond that which Dougal was comfortable with, held the creature together. A single large crystal housed between its carved shoulders served as both its eyes and ears. The sharp-faceted gem constantly swiveled around in its socket, scouring its environment for more input.

Clagg called it Breaker, and seemed more concerned about its well-being than that of the other members of the party.

"I said, 'What is it?'" snarled the asura, its shark-like teeth flashing with irritation. Dougal rarely saw an asura smile, and was never reassured when he did.

"Something's wrong," Dougal said, keeping his voice low.

"Humans," Gyda Oddsdottir muttered, shaking her head. The silver sleigh bells woven into her long,

yellow warrior's braid jangling loudly. "Always taking stock instead of taking action." She set her huge hammer before her with a resounding thud, crushing a dry skull to dust.

Dougal winced, not at the norn's words, but at the racket she made. At nine feet tall and bristling with weapons, she thundered down the halls, making more noise than the asura's golem. This daughter of the distant snowcapped Shiverpeaks didn't care who heard her coming: she wanted to warn them of her approach. In the heat of the depths of the crypt, her heavily tattooed flesh dripped with a sheen of sweat.

Gyda's grandsires were refugees as well, fleeing from the power of one of the great Elder Dragons to the north. The norn were a healthy, hearty, proud people, quick to anger and equally quick to forgive. In his time since leaving Ebonhawke, Dougal had met good norn and bad norn. The good ones treated every day as an adventure, every problem as a challenge, and every foe as a chance for personal glory. Most people didn't understand how dangerous the dark places of the world could be; the norn actually relished exploring them.

Gyda, though, was definitely in the latter category of norn: boastful, judgmental, and unpleasant to those around her. She was both bullying and insulting, as if any achievement by others diminished her own. Dougal didn't like it when she smiled, either.

"The floor. It's too clear," said Dougal, talking to Clagg but meaning it for Gyda. "No bones. No one was buried here."

"And that means a trap," said Killeen, the last member

of the party, the sylvari, in her soft, melodious voice.

Dougal nodded. The sylvari necromancer was probably the most pleasant individual of their motley krewe, himself included. Shorter than a human but not as diminutive as the asura, her skin was a verdant green, her hair more similar to the leaves of a succulent plant than that of a human woman. When she moved, golden pollen drifted off her.

The humanoid appearance, Dougal knew, was a lie. Killeen and the others of her race were born fully formed from the fruit of a great white-barked tree far to the south. There was no animal warmth to her flesh. The sylvari were a recent addition to the world, their entire race only a little older than Dougal himself, but they had already spread far and wide, like an invading weed. Killeen had all the traits attributed to her race: she was honest, direct, and focused. In many ways she was better than most humans he knew.

That may have been what made Dougal most uncomfortable of all.

Killeen took Dougal's statement at face value, but Gyda instead snorted, "I think you are just trying to delay us from our goal."

The sylvari ignored Gyda but said, "What do you think would set it off?"

Dougal looked at the norn. "Not noise. Maybe vibration, or maybe weight."

"The human's probably right," Clagg said, sitting in the relative safety of his armored harness. "I guess even a blind dredge finds a diamond some days."

The asura fiddled with a row of crystals set into his

harness's front rim, then nodded to himself. "Ah, yes. There it is. Crude, but effective."

"What is it?" Dougal hated asking the question. He knew the asura was fishing for yet another reason to explain how brilliant he was. To an asura, the other races of the world existed primarily for heavy lifting, taking risks, and asking stupid questions.

"If one of us were foolish enough to walk into that room," Clagg said, enunciating every syllable, "it would trigger a lethal blast that could kill those present."

Gyda harrumphed as if no explosives could slow her down, magical or otherwise. Still, Dougal noticed, the norn's feet stayed rooted where they were.

"If it is a trap, can't Dougal disable it?" Killeen asked. "Isn't that what you hired him for?"

From any of the others, such a statement would have come laden with sarcasm and bile. The sylvari, though, meant every word in earnest. It was, indeed, why he was part of this expedition: his knowledge. Of traps. Of history. Of the way the world used to be.

"He hired me for my experience in recovering powerful artifacts," said Dougal.

Gyda let out a deep chuckle. "Robbing tombs, you mean."

Dougal ignored her. "Does anyone have something helpful to add?" Dougal asked.

"The petal-head's comment stands," said Clagg, prim as a schoolmaster, "That is why we brought you along, human. We know the trap is there. Now take care of it."

Dougal reached down and picked up a skull, trying not to think about if this was an ancestor. He aimed for

a spot about in the middle of the room and touched the locket beneath his shirt for luck. Then he pitched the skull underhand into the room.

Nothing. He pitched another skull to a different area. Nothing again. He pitched a third.

Gyda rolled her eyes at his uselessness and folded her thick arms with impatience. Clagg shook his head at him as if Dougal were an addled child.

“Not set off by noise,” said Dougal. “Not vibration or motion, either. That leaves weight. We should send in something heavy.” He looked at Gyda.

“I will not be an experiment for you,” said the norn quietly, her face clouded.

“Well, then, the golem,” said Dougal.

“Strike that suggestion,” snapped Clagg, “I did not craft Breaker from scratch just to see it blown to smithereens. This is your problem, human.”

“You care more for that walking statue than you do for the rest of us,” said Gyda.

“Untrue,” said the asura. “I just have less invested in you than in it.”

Killeen brightened, her eyes glowing a faint green. “Perhaps I can help.”

The sylvari set her chin and concentrated on a patch of the bones lining the left side of the passage. She swung her arms and fingers in a complex pattern and spoke words that made Dougal’s head ache slightly. A greenish glow formed in the wall of bones and coalesced around a human-sized set of remains.

As Dougal watched, the bones detached from the surrounding patch and assembled themselves into a

coherent skeleton. The deep-green glow, rather than sinew and tendons, held it together. The right side of its skull had been bashed in, and its jaw was missing, as was the lower part of its right arm, which terminated in a pair of jagged breaks. It stood before them like a servant presenting itself to its betters.

Dougal shuddered as Killeen gave the creature a satisfied smile. She gestured again, and the skeleton tottered around and stumbled off down the passage toward the room beyond.

Dougal glanced up at the bone-covered ceiling and reminded himself there had to be some stone and earth up there somewhere behind the remains—that they weren't just moving through a tunnel carved out of a mountain of bones. "Hold on," he said, reaching toward Killeen as she smiled at the way her creation shambled away. "We should back up and take—"

The explosion cut him off. The animated skeleton disappeared in a cloud of flame and smoke.

Dougal ducked down and wrapped his arms over his head as a cascade of bone fragments rained down on him, bouncing and clattering on the floor. One flying shard of their animated helper shot into Dougal's heavy leather shirt and stuck there like a revenant's fang.

Dougal stood up and saw Clagg gazing into the cavern, pursing his lips. "Crude," the asura said. "But effective."

Gyda shouldered past Dougal and laughed. As she strode into the chamber beyond, she grinned at the scorch mark where the skeleton once stood. "Well done, sapling," she said to Killeen. "At least *you* are earning your pay."

Dougal winced at the implicit insult. To the group at

large he said, "We need to press on. It may take minutes or days for this trap to reset. It may just be a single use, but we have no way of knowing."

Now Gyda laughed. "He means to say, 'Thank you, sylvari, for doing my job.'"

Killeen's cheeks blushed a deeper green. "My apologies," she said to Dougal. "I did not mean to upstage you. I did remove the trap without hurting anyone."

Dougal grimaced. He didn't doubt that her apology was heartfelt, but that made it feel even worse. He said, perhaps not as kindly as he could, "You could have given us more fair warning, or time to back out of the explosion. As it was, you could have brought the ceiling down on top of us."

"I see," Killeen said, thoughtful for a moment. "I did not intend to endanger our quest."

"Of course not," Dougal said, feeling bad for upbraiding her. Despite himself, he couldn't help but enjoy her sincerity.

"Perhaps it's the wonder of this place," the sylvari said, raising her chin once again. "It's fascinating. To my people, death is an integral part of life. We revere it wholly, even the darkest parts of it. But we don't quite understand it—yet." She gazed around the chamber, her eyes wide with wonder. "And even so, we would never build a monument like this to it."

"It is not a monument to the dead but rather a testament to those who lived," Dougal said gently. He felt his irritation ebbing away—toward her, at least. "Let's go." Then, raising his voice to the others: "Let's be careful moving forward. We should see more traps like this."

“You are such an old woman, human,” Gyda snorted. “My great-granddame Ulrica would not hesitate as much as you do, and she’s been dead for seven years.” She kicked aside a pile of bones and held aloft a torch. “You worry too much. What’s life without danger?”

“Longer,” Dougal said.

He followed the norn as she strode through the exploded room and into the chambers beyond. He’d worked with other norn before. They were larger than life in many ways, but norn bullies were just like everyone else’s. Gyda’s bluster was meant to cover some other deficiency. Dougal didn’t mention the norn’s own reluctance to enter the trapped room, despite her bragging.

“Bah. Such a life only seems longer, like a tasteless meal,” concluded Gyda. As Dougal followed her, he noticed that the air had grown slightly cooler. Once they were all inside the next chamber, both he and the norn held their torches aloft. The light found something thick and gray hanging among the bones at the apex of the room’s high-arched ceiling.

Dougal held up a hand to shade his eyes against the torch and peered at the substance. At first he thought it hanging moss, but suddenly it was clear what it was.

Webbing.

Dougal cursed. He shouted out a warning, but Killeen’s high-pitched scream behind him cut him off. He spun about just in time to see the sylvari disappear into a hole in the ground.



In an instant Dougal knew what had happened. Killeen's assailant had waited as the larger forms of Dougal and the norn had passed over its concealed hiding place, and sprung its trap on the lighter footfalls of the sylvari. And in that moment Killeen was gone, pulled into a hollowed-out space beneath the ancient flagstones, a trapdoor made of webs and bones slamming down after her, blending once more into the bone-littered floor.

Gyda spun around, too, and scanned the room for any sign of Killeen behind her. "The necromancer! Where is she?"

"Down there!" Clagg shouted, pointing at the trapdoor. "Spider!"

Dougal raced toward the trapdoor, dropping his torch and drawing his sword as he went. He smashed at the disguised covering with his blade, and the trapdoor shattered as if he'd struck a dinner plate.

Killeen screamed again as she popped back up out of the hole, like a swimmer breaching the surface. She flung out her hands and scrabbled for a handhold

among the bones before her, but they pulled away loose in her hands.

A black-haired spider the size of a small wolf appeared on the sylvari's shoulders and reared back to strike her on the neck. Dougal made a desperate stab at it. His blade sliced through one of the creature's legs and lodged itself in its side. The beast hissed in pain, its twitching mandibles dripping with viscous venom.

Before Dougal could pull back his blade for another strike, though, he heard Clagg shout at him. "Stand back, you fool!"

Dougal turned in time to see Breaker's boulder of a fist coming down at him. He threw himself to the side, leaving his sword buried in the spider's abdomen. The golem's stone fist narrowly missed both the thrashing spider and the sylvari but smashed Dougal's blade to pieces.

Gyda stormed up then. She grabbed Killeen by her arms and hauled her out of the hole. The sylvari wailed in pain as the spider sank its fur-covered fangs into her back.

Swordless, Dougal snatched a knife from his belt. He wondered how much good it would do him. The spider's fangs were longer than his blade.

Gyda dropped Killeen to the ground, then snatched the spider from the sylvari's back with one hand. The black thing struggled in the norn's grasp, its legs twitching helplessly in the air. Ichor flowed around the shard of Dougal's broken blade, still stuck in the creature's side, and hot blue fluid trickled down Gyda's heavily tattooed arm.

With a flick of her wrist, the norn flung the beast

toward Breaker and Clagg. A moment later, the golem's heavy foot had smashed it into paste.

Clagg, from the safety of his harness, snapped, "Watch it! It has a brood in here!"

"Watch over the plant-girl," Gyda ordered Dougal. "I will take care of this beast's spawn." And the norn turned back to the web-filled room, not caring if Dougal followed her orders or not.

Dougal scrambled over to Killeen to examine her wounds. Her back was covered in a warm bluish blood, most of which he hoped had come from the spider. He'd never seen a sylvari hurt before, and had no idea what might leak out of one that had been injured.

Dougal wiped the liquid off of Killeen's shoulder with his sleeve, uncovering a pair of puncture wounds from which spilled a golden fluid that sparkled with life. Most of the mess had come from the spider, then. The holes in Killeen's shoulder hadn't bled much, but the skin around them had already started to swell a bright yellow. Her skin was firm, like the shell of a horse chestnut. She was cold but not clammy. Was that good or bad? Dougal didn't even know if she could sweat.

"It hurts a bit," Killeen said as she craned her neck around, the glow in her large eyes dimming. Then she noticed the grim look on Dougal's face, and she blinked and rallied herself enough to ask questions.

"Do you think I'm dying? How can you tell? Is there some special way to know?" She tried to ask more, but a coughing fit stopped her. Her skin was lightening to a pale yellow around the wound and spreading to the rest of her body.

While Dougal turned her over and held her, the norn and the golem began smashing a pack of spider-shaped shadows into a blue-black paste. Dougal hunkered down over the weakened sylvari to protect her from the flying bits of dried bone and arachnid with his body. He looked down at her face, golden and pale.

Dougal realized he had violated his first rule. He was going to feel horrible if she died.

He glanced back to see Gyda breathing hard and holding her hammer in a two-handed grip. Splats of spider corpses formed a ring around her. Clagg's golem had ground out a mushy blue mixture beneath its stone feet.

Once the slaughter ended, Dougal saw that the sylvari had passed out, and he beckoned the others to her side.

"Raven's wings," Gyda said, barely breathing hard from all the exertion. "She's getting paler than you, little man."

"It's the poison," Dougal said. "It's working fast."

Clagg climbed down from the harness on Breaker's front to get a better look at the sylvari. "I estimate she has only a few minutes remaining before the venom takes her. Do either of you have a potion, poultice, or spell that could aid her?"

Gyda shrugged. Dougal grimaced and said, "Do I look like an alchemist to you?"

"Given your background," Clagg said, "I thought you might have stolen one somewhere. No matter: I have something that should do the trick right here."

Clagg rummaged around in a pack he wore strapped diagonally over one shoulder and across his chest,

producing a clear vial filled with a viscous blue liquid. He dribbled the contents of the vial into Killeen's pale mouth, past lips that had gone dry as autumn leaves.

Clagg stood back up and recorked the vial. "That should be sufficient to prevent her expiration," he said, "at least in the short term." He bent over the sylvari and said loudly, "This will be coming out of your share." Clagg smacked the norn on her kneecap and added, "Strap her body to the back of my golem."

Gyda scooped up Killeen as if the sylvari were a limp doll.

"If we take her straight back up to Divinity's Reach, she should be fine," Dougal said.

"All too true," Clagg said, "but we've not made it this far to turn back now."

"Forget it," Dougal said. "We're down a member. This expedition is over." He reached to take Killeen from Gyda. The norn was a statue and wouldn't let go. Brushing Dougal aside, Gyda moved around the back of the golem and began to laboriously craft a suitable lashing from rope and the back of the harness.

Dougal glared at Gyda but spoke to Clagg. "We get back to the city and we get her taken care of. Then we come back later, when we're all healthy."

"We don't have time for that," Clagg said as he scrambled back up into the armored seat hanging from his golem's chest.

"This is a boneyard," said Dougal, exasperated, turning to glare at the asura. "They're all dead. I'm sure any other spiders will wait. What's the rush?"

Clagg, now looking down at Dougal, raised his

eyebrows and clicked his tongue. "If I figured out who is buried here, then others may have as well. Knowledge propagates. We press on. The Golem's Eye awaits."

Dougal had seen the greed that danced in Clagg's eyes before in others. It was a herald for disaster. Greed made people careless, and in tombs like this, being careless made you dead.

"That's insane. I'm heading back to the Skull Gate and Divinity's Reach. I know the way. I'll take Killeen with me." He moved toward the back of the golem, but Gyda's immense form loomed up before him.

Clagg cleared his throat. "I'm afraid we can't let you abandon us quite yet," the asura said. "Your presence raises our chances of success, even if only by a few percent. That's why I hired you in the first place. You stay with us."

Dougal snarled, more at himself than Clagg. "I don't have a sword."

Clagg gave Dougal a cold smile. "I didn't hire you for your sword. I hired you for your mind, such as it is."

Gyda let out a cruel chuckle.

Dougal looked at the other two tomb robbers. Without a blade, it wouldn't be a fair fight against either one, and even properly armed it would be a chancy encounter. Heading back alone would mean that Killeen would be left with them, and she would perish when their stupidity brought about their own demise.

For a long moment Dougal glared at them, then turned, picked up his guttering torch, and pressed deeper into the crypts beneath the city. Gyda marched along behind him, kicking up bone fragments that

bounced off Dougal's heels. Clagg guided Breaker after them from the rear, the golem showing no sign of noticing the unconscious Killeen's weight on its back. At each intersection, Clagg would check his glowing map and choose the most inconvenient route.

Dougal spotted several more traps as they grew closer to the tomb, and he made quick work of them, rendering them useless. Similarly, the few locks he encountered were easily sprung by the fistful of steel tools he kept in a moleskin pouch. They moved forward in silence now, except for the regular orders from Clagg and Killeen's occasional moan. And through it Dougal thought about the asura whose tomb they were going to rob.

Blimm.

When Clagg first hired him, Dougal rooted through ancient texts and tomes in the city's archives but learned damned little about Blimm. He had to hope it would be enough. Blimm, a genius even by asuran standards, had lived a couple centuries back. He served his apprenticeship as a golemancer, a maker of golems, with Oola, another legendary member of that diminutive race. After leaving her service, Blimm made his home in what would become Divinity's Reach, where he made (supposedly) some amazing advances in golem construction that were now lost to time.

Blimm's greatest triumph, according to Clagg, was the creation of a large mystic gemstone, infused with arcane energy. The stone was called the Golem's Eye, and apparently was lost along with Blimm's knowledge and the location of the asura's tomb.

Until now. Clagg had uncovered that knowledge,

and rounded up a krewe in the asura fashion: talents gathered together with a specific goal. For this goal, that meant spellcaster, muscle, trapspringer, and leadership, the leadership supposedly provided by Clagg and unquestioned by the rest, entered the crypts in search of the Golem's Eye.

"Why have we stopped?" Clagg shouted from the back of the marching order.

"We're stuck," said Dougal, trying to keep the relief out of his voice.

He was faced with a simple thing, a door bound in bands of iron. Clagg piloted his golem forward and shook his head at the human's reluctance.

"Open it," said Clagg.

"Can't," said Dougal. "It's not locked, it's stuck. Swollen in the frame. The lock doesn't matter. It might as well be a wall."

"I know how to handle walls," said Clagg. "Gyda?"

The norn stepped up and motioned for the human and asura to step aside. Dougal pulled back, half hoping for some trap he hadn't seen to suddenly reveal itself.

Gyda stood in front of the door, staring at it, and for a moment Dougal thought the norn was trying to wither the door with her glare. Then she growled a deep, feline growl. White fur began to sprout from her exposed flesh, and for a moment it was as if her armored form were overlaid with another, ghostly image of a great beast. Then the image solidified, and Gyda was transformed into a hulking two-legged feline, her pelt snow white with black spots, her armor and weapons subsumed into the new creation.

Gyda had summoned her totem, the snow leopard. She sprang forward, her heavy paws slamming into the door.

The door held, but the hinges did not, and the entire door flew off its frame and back into the room. Even Dougal was impressed with the norn's strength and prowess, and he started to say, "That was very . . ."

His praise died in his throat as Gyda snorted and said, "*That* is why your people are dying out and better races are taking your place."

Dougal reddened with anger but just pressed past Gyda, holding his torch high, into another passage with more bones lining the wall. Dougal was convinced that Divinity's Reach, the shining human city, was built on a mountain of bones.

"One thing I never understood about Blimm . . ." Dougal called back over his shoulder to Clagg.

Clagg cackled. "I would guess a bookah like you could fill Blimm's tomb with the things you don't understand," he said.

Dougal ignored the crack. "Bookah" was an asuran term for humans, and not a very complimentary one. "I always heard that asura traditionally burn their dead. But not Blimm. Why did he build a tomb in the first place?"

"At the end of his life, he didn't believe in the Eternal Alchemy: that we are all part of a greater equation," said Clagg. "Blimm considered himself a function apart. That's likely why he made so much progress with necromantic constructs, using bone and dead flesh in his golemtric creations. He was willing to test ideas no lesser asura would consider."

“And since he didn’t fit in with other asura, he didn’t want any of them to enjoy the results of his research,” said Dougal.

“Close, but that’s not quite all of it,” said Clagg. “He kept strange company in his later years. Humans. Necromancers. No offense, sapling,” he added over his shoulder. Killeen responded with a grunted moan.

“Sounds full of himself,” said Gyda. The norn’s interjection surprised Dougal, who had guessed she wouldn’t bother listening to Clagg and him blather on. “But then, what asura isn’t?”

Clagg barked a cold laugh at that. “Many of my fellows have outsized egos, I agree, but Blimm was a raving paranoiac on top of that. They say that some of the best minds were the most disturbed. And Blimm was definitely disturbed.”

The passage beyond opened into a wide hall lit by unnatural light. At the far end, a staircase made of polished green stone banded in bronze led up to a great brazen door flanked by great bowls of blue-green flame that flickered from unnatural sources. The gilded frame of the door was carved with the swooping rays and tangents of the asuran alphabet, which danced in the unearthly radiance. Dougal, despite himself, was speechless.

“Gentlefolk,” said Clagg smugly, tucking away his glowing map, “we have arrived. Welcome to Blimm’s tomb.”



They climbed the steps three abreast, Dougal flanked and overshadowed by the larger norn and asura-piloted golem. The stairs themselves were wide and flat, almost a ramp up to great double doors.

Dougal shot a glance at Killeen, slung to the golem's back like a child in a cradleboard. She managed a weak smile and tried to raise an arm. Perhaps Clagg's potion was having some effect, or the sylvari's own recuperative powers were kicking in.

They reached the top. Dougal feeling like a supplicant in the great temple. A large steel bas-relief image, as tall as Dougal himself, hung to one side, as if emerging from the wall itself. It portrayed the image of a golem of the ancient style staring back at all who approached. A bright red gem sat affixed in the carving's stubby head. Gyda gasped at the sight of it.

The norn reached out and pried the gem from the door. She considered it for a moment, then squeezed it in her bare hand as if it were an overripe nut. It crunched

between her fingers, and a moment later she opened her fist to let a handful of pink dust cascade from it.

“A fake,” she said with a dismissive sigh. “To have found such a grand treasure so easily would have shown a real lack of imagination on the part of your Blimm.”

Clagg scoffed. “You really think that an asura like Blimm would be foolish enough to leave the Golem’s Eye mounted on the outside of the door?”

Dougal barely stifled a laugh at the scorn dripping from Clagg’s lips. It was good to see someone else at the end of Clagg’s verbal lash.

“I have seen things far more foolish in my own lands,” Gyda said.

“Or in any mirror you passed,” Dougal muttered as he stepped forward to examine the writing scrawled over the door and frame.

“Hold! What did you—”

Dougal cut the norn off with a wave of his hand. “Shush. Reading.”

“You can read this?” said Clagg, with mild surprise.

“You did bring me here for my mind,” said Dougal, a little sharper than he had intended.

He stared for a moment at the words carved into the surface of the door. They were written in asuran script but used an archaic dialect popular before the subterranean asura had been forced to the surface more than 250 years earlier. It was a half-mathematical, half-structured sentence, and the syntax would make a human scribe take to the bottle. Many asura could no longer even read it. According to Dougal’s research, Blimm’s paranoia

had driven him to write his notes in this script for that exact reason.

Dougal ran his fingers along the text as if he could peel the meaning from it with his fingernails. "It's very old, but I think I can make it out." He cleared his throat and began to read aloud: " 'Here lies Blimm, the greatest of the golemancers, favored counselor of Livia, apprentice to Oola, whose brilliance he has surpassed, the finest mind to grace Tyria in his or any other generation—' "

"Yes, yes, yes," Clagg said impatiently. "Blah, blah, blah. Get on to the promises of curses on any who would disturb his rest. There may be something useful there."

Dougal shrugged and skipped over the next several words. "Here we go: 'Let those who would dare to disturb his rest be cursed for eternity by the bones that line these tombs. Let the earth rise up against them and their remains serve as a testament of his greatness. Let their remains join those that surround him.' It goes on like that for a while."

"How absolutely human of Blimm. He must have spent far too much time in the sun," said Clagg. "Sounds like standard-issue warnings, though. All those tomb-door epitaphs read the same. 'Look on me and know fear,' 'Leave me be lest I haunt your nights,' and so on and so on. Toothless."

"That doesn't mean they're not true." Dougal scowled.

"Please," said Clagg. "If these people had the power to do what they claimed, they'd still be wandering the world in one form or another. Those are just words."

Gyda laughed at this, a low rumbling under which lay

a note of malice. "If this Blimm of yours is beneath your notice, then why are we bothering to rob his grave?"

"Blimm was one of the most impressive golemancers ever," said Clagg. He patted Breaker's stone chest. "Most of the time, you need several arcanic motivators to move a golem's exo-frame about at a reasonable speed: at least one for each joint, plus another for the senses. And you need to arrange them in a very particular way or it all falls apart.

"Blimm, though, figured out a way to imbue a fist-sized ruby with the same amount of power as you see in Breaker here. His secret died with him, but legend has it that it was buried with him too. Once I get my hands on the Golem's Eye, I should be able to reverse engineer the process and establish myself as the greatest golemancer of *this* age."

Gyda held up a large hand, her brow furrowed in what Dougal thought was confusion. "For someone so small, you talk a great deal. Let's find this ruby of yours and be gone. I would like to quit this place." She stared hard at the double doors, and Dougal knew what she was considering.

"Hold on," he said, holding up his bag of tools. "Let's try this the easy way first."

Dougal stepped up to the hole left in the golem's forehead. The bas-relief was hollow, and beyond it was a maze of thin wires and interlocking gears, some of them glowing softly of their own light. Dougal opened his moleskin pouch, selected a thin flat tool with an end that looked like an asuran summation sign, and slipped it into the gap. He twisted it, and the great double doors

rumbled outward. Gyda and Clagg had to step back down the broad steps.

The room within was circular, its walls and domed ceiling jutting with the bones that adorned the rest of the crypt. The granite floor was set with a pattern like slices of a pie, forming a series of concentric circles centered on the bier in the middle of the room.

The bier at the center of the pattern was a pile of skulls, although from the doorway Dougal was hard-pressed to say if they were real skulls or just carved stonework. Probably the former, he decided, to instill fear into would-be robbers. Atop the bier squatted a large marble box, its sides etched with the swirling script of the asura. Dominating the lid of the sarcophagus was a larger-than-life effigy of the deceased, dressed in ornate stone robes gilded with precious metals, its arms crossed over its chest.

And hovering over the forehead of the reclining stone form floated a red gem the size of Clagg's fist. It turned and glimmered in the light from the door.

Clagg had Breaker nudge Dougal forward. "Do your job," said Clagg.

Dougal pushed back. "My job is to spring locks and locate traps."

Clagg sniffed. "You are guaranteeing that there are no further traps and that that gem floating there is free for the taking?"

Dougal did not respond, but Gyda clapped him on the back. "Get in there," she growled. "Get the ruby for us—or I'll toss you on top of the coffin from here."

She reached for him, intent on carrying out her

threat, and Dougal stepped into the room. Safe from his companions for the moment, he pulled a length of thin rope from his pack, uncoiled it, and tossed an end to Clagg. The asura made the rope fast around his golem's waist. Dougal held the rope with one hand, wrapping it over his wrist and letting it play out behind him as he advanced. The stonework felt spongy beneath his feet, like a road after a soaking spring rain. It looked solid enough, but Dougal chose his steps carefully as he moved toward the center of the room.

On nearing the coffin, Dougal could clearly make out the asuran script that he'd seen on the door. From what he could read, it repeated many of the same warnings found on the doorplate, only in more strident and emphatic tones.

Dougal dropped the remaining few loops of rope at his feet and stood on his toes, leaning over the sarcophagus perched atop its bier of bones. Above Blimm's forehead, the gem danced in the doorway's light, its facets catching and reflecting the glow. This was no paste-work fake.

"It's the real one," Dougal said.

"Bring it to me. Now." Clagg's voice betrayed a clear eagerness.

Dougal considered the gem for a moment. A faint glow swirled deep inside it, something that had lain dormant for untold years, hidden in this buried room.

"It's sure to be trapped," Dougal said.

"Do you *see* a trap?" Clagg asked.

Dougal scanned the gem from every angle. There were no wires, no gears, no hidden plates or moving