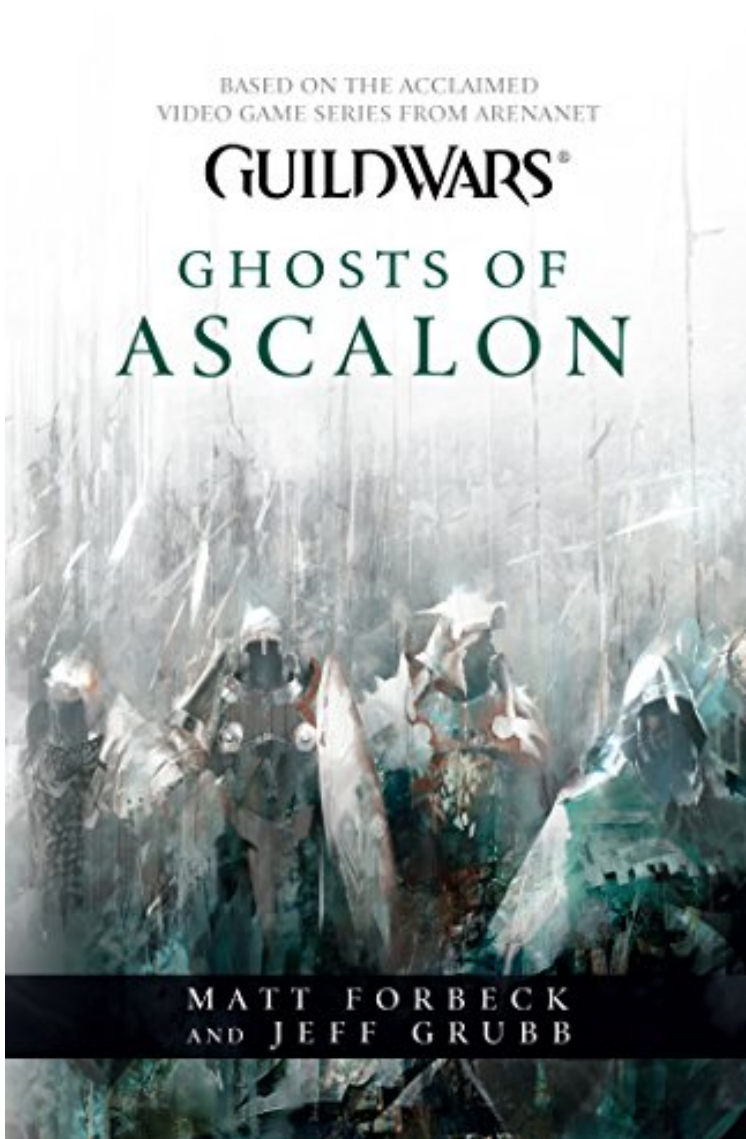


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Ghosts of Ascalon



Par Matt Forbeck, Jeff Grubb
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur250 years ago, Ascalon burned . . . Desperate to defend his land from advancing hordes of bestial charr, King Adelbern summoned the all-powerful Foefire to repel the invaders. But magic can be a double-edged swordthe Foefire burned both charr and human alike. While the charr corpses smoldered, the slain Ascalonians arose again, transformed by their king's rage into ghostly protectors and charged with guarding the realm . . . forever. The once mighty kingdom became a haunted shadow of its former glory. Centuries later, the descendants of Ascalon, exiled to the nation of Kryta, are besieged on all sides. To save humankind, Queen Jennah seeks to negotiate a treaty with the hated charr. But one obstacle remains. The charr legions won't sign the truce until their most prized possession, the Claw of the Khan-Ur,

is returned from the ruins of fallen Ascalon. Now a mismatched band of adventurers, each plagued by ghosts of their own, sets forth into a haunted, war-torn land to retrieve the Claw. Without the artifact, there is no hope for peace between human and charr but the undead king who rules Ascalon won't give it up easily, and not everyone wants peace! 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 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 grounds cliffside entrances might carry the stench of the warm, dry rot away from the city, but inside the crypts twisting passages, Dougal had no means of escaping it. People had been bringing their dead here since before the founding of Krytas 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 sylvari, 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 warriors 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. Its

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 humans 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-heads 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 ... Presentation de l'diteur 250 years ago, Ascalon burned . . . Desperate to defend his land from advancing hordes of bestial charr, King Adelbern summoned the all-powerful Foefire to repel the invaders. But magic can be a double-edged sword the Foefire burned both charr and human alike. While the charr corpses smoldered, the slain Ascalonians arose again, transformed by their king's rage into ghostly protectors and charged with guarding the realm . . . forever. 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