

WAR OF THE BURNING SKY
ADVENTURE TWELVE

The Beating of the Aquiline Heart

AN ADVENTURE FOR 29TH- TO
30TH-LEVEL CHARACTERS

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Special Thanks to all the gamers who took a chance with this campaign saga, including Russell Morrissey, who deserves a mountain of gold for putting his faith in me. —Ryan

* Special Thanks to Johnathan Jacobs, Michael Brewer, and Quinn Murphy for their "Skill Challenges of War" series. See <http://www.thecoremechanic.com> for more information

EN PUBLISHING

7 Rutland Court, Balaclava Road
Southampton, Hampshire
England SO18 6RX



EN Publishing is an
imprint of EN World.

Please visit

<http://www.enworld.org>

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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS 4th Edition PLAYER'S HANDBOOK, written by Rob Heinsoo, Andy Collins, and James Wyatt; DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE, written by James Wyatt; and MONSTER MANUAL, written by Mike Mearls,

Stephen Schubert and James Wyatt; PLAYER'S HANDBOOK 2, written by Jeremy Crawford, Mike Mearls, and James Wyatt; MONSTER MANUAL 2, written by Rob Heinsoo, and Chris Sims; ADVENTURER'S VAULT, written by Logan Bonner, Eytan Bernstein, and Chris Sims. © 2008, 2009 Wizards of the Coast. All rights reserved.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1	Imperial Court.....	11	APPENDIX ONE: ENCOUNTERS	35
Background	1	Ritual Chamber.....	12	Breaking and Entering	35
Adventure Overview	1	Final Preparations	12	Forbidding Barrier.....	36
Requirements.....	1	Forces and Commanders	12	Minions in the Halls	36
Adapting the Adventure.....	2	Council of War	13	Column Lurkers	36
The Burning Sky	2	Divinations and Intelligence.....	13	Ambush Squad.....	37
The Clash of Armies	2	Battle Plans.....	15	Imperial Court.....	38
Gallery of Allies.....	4	Destroying the Torch, Killing Leska	15	Roav, Consultant of the Damned	39
The Dungeon Master's Toolkit.....	4	Defeating Leska with the Torch of the		Wave One	42
The Epic Tier.....	4	Burning Sky?.....	15	Missing Maps?	42
Experience Tracking and Treasure	4	The Nature of the Heart.....	15	Wave Two	43
Key to the Table	4	An Immortal Soldier?.....	15	Missing Maps?	43
A Word about Skill Challenges	5	After the War.....	16	Battle Against the General	44
Other Resources	5	ACT TWO: THE BATTLE OF OPALINE		Missing Maps?	44
Following the Script?	5	WASTES	17	General Titus's Unique Item.....	44
Wherein the Heroes Face the Consequences		Lighting the Torch.....	17	Army of Darkness.....	45
of Their Actions.....	5	The Ragesian Armies	17	Missing Maps?	45
Enemies on the Fly	5	Stages of Battle.....	17	Golem Battle	46
ACT ONE: THE MARCH TO WAR	6	New Item - Grand Shalasha	17	Missing Maps?	46
The Heart of the Matter	6	Allies in Battle	18	Chase the Necromancer	47
Objectives.....	6	Encounters	19	Missing Maps?	47
Pecking Order.....	6	Day One Arrival	19	The Flayed Druid	48
Allies	6	Day One Afternoon	20	Missing Maps?	48
Researching Leska	6	Day One Evening/Night	23	Assassins in the Command Tent.....	49
The Opaline Wastes	6	Day Two and Beyond	25	Missing Maps?	49
The Last Embers of the Burning Sky.....	7	Pharaoh's Ghast	27	The Devil and the Nightmare	50
Two Dragons Canyon and the Heart of		Into the Heart of History.....	28	Missing Maps?	50
History.....	7	Leska's Ritual.....	29	The Coup	51
Elder Elemental Spirits	7	Time, the Heart, and Immortality	30	Missing Maps?	51
Storming the Palace.....	7	ACT THREE: THE HEART OF HISTORY ...	30	Time Trial	52
Palace Overview.....	7	This Thing All Things Devours	30	The Supreme Inquisitor	53
Exterior Defenses.....	7	The Trials of the Heart of History.....	30	Shalasha as an Enemy	54
Roav.....	7	The Great Rift	30	APPENDIX TWO: ALLIES.....	57
Kicking Ass	8	The Sunless River	31	Katrina as an Enemy	57
Interior Defenses	8	Epoch Cliffs.....	31	Shaaladel as an Enemy	58
Monument Island	8	Dragon's Teeth.....	32	Shalasha as an Enemy	58
Palace Halls	8	The Aquiline Heart	32	APPENDIX THREE:	
A Bit of Legerdemain.....	9	Destroying the Heart	33	CHARACTER OPTIONS.....	59
Encounters in the Palace	10	Aftermath and Denouement.....	34	New Feats	59
				New Powers.....	59
				New Items	60
				Last Days of the Burning Sky Summary	
				Checklist.....	60
				APPENDIX FOUR:	
				TORCH OF THE BURNING SKY	61
				APPENDIX FIVE:	
				RAGOS, CAPITAL OF RAGESIA	63

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In primordial times, an ancient spirit of elemental fire known as the Flamebringer Dragon battled the spirit of air, the Stormchaser Eagle. The dragon tore out the eagle's heart and drank her blood, gaining immense power and ensuring the strength of his draconic progeny. But the spirits of sea and stone sensed the dragon's growing might, and the dragon knew that if he consumed the heart and slew the eagle fully, the other two spirits would unite to destroy him. So the dragon hid the still-beating heart in a place to which he could never return, preferring to live rather than risk death by seeking more power.

Buried beyond the sight of any creature, the heart's blood pulsed into the roots of the world, nourishing it and fostering life above and below the surface. Ages marked the world, and as civilization rose, rumors of this font of life spread throughout the lands that would become Ragesia and its neighbors. Spellcasters could sense its power, and the power-hungry and the desperate sought it out, but only the scantest clues hinted at its location, or at the dangers that awaited those who found it. The Aquiline Heart passed into legend, becoming a symbol of the unattainable.

Then two people found it. Where many had tried before, a young sorcerer named Leska and her lover, the fey Etinifi, discovered the path to the Heart in a desert of white stones called the Opaline Wastes. A lifeless land, where time flows like an erratic wind, the wastes long attracted seekers, but ancient shamans and warriors had devoted themselves to hiding the heart. The shamans erected colossal arcane totems to conceal the heart's resting place, and to ensure that only those who truly needed the Heart to avoid death could find it, while their warriors slew unworthy trespassers.

Leska and Etinifi, however, had been sentenced to death by the aging Ragesian emperor Drakus Coaltongue, who had offered them reprieve if they found him the secret of immortality. Of course others had found the trail to the Heart too, but only Leska had the strength to defeat the dangers on the path and claim the prize. She drank the Heart's blood, achieved immortality, and in a fit of patriotism she would later regret, brought back a vial of the Heart's blood for Coaltongue. But she could never again find the tunnels that led to the Heart, because she no longer had the need.

ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

Welcome to *The Beating of the Aquiline Heart*, the twelfth adventure and fiery conclusion of the War of the Burning Sky campaign saga.

Leska, the Supreme Inquisitor of Ragesia, slew her emperor, claimed his rule, and set the empire's armies on a war march to ensure her unchallenged dominion. Great legions scourged the lands around Ragesia, and power-hungry warlords battled Leska and each other, while heroes rose to challenge these tyrants. But deeper threats than tyranny and slaughter endanger the world.

Leska will not be satisfied until none can oppose her, and she knows that the heroes have learned the location of the Aquiline Heart, a legendary relic whose blood protects Leska and grants her immortality. The heart also nourishes the lands of Ragesia and its neighbors, balancing the elemental energies of creation, and if the heart were to die, the corporeal world would disintegrate into ethereal dreamstuff. It is this fate that the dreamborn tyrant desires. Nightmare creatures lacking bodies, they feel imprisoned by the corporeal world and seek its destruction.

Meanwhile, to protect the source of her eternal life, Leska has gathered her armies deep within the desolate badlands known as the Opaline Wastes. These legions guard the Heart of History, a practically bottomless rift that leads to the Aquiline Heart. Powerful rituals, performed by her loyal Inquisitors in the imperial capital of Ragos, shield these forces from divination and ward the area against teleportation. All this gives Leska time to complete a mighty ritual of her own.

The heroes learn that while Leska has moved the bulk of her forces to the white wasteland around the Heart of History, a contingent of Inquisitors in the Ragesian capital of Ragos maintain a ritual spell that wards the wastes against teleportation and divination. In order to use their greatest advantage in this battle, the Torch of the Burning Sky, the heroes must disrupt this ritual. After a quick assault on the Ragesian Imperial Palace, they will be able to freely teleport their armies to the final battle against Leska.

Spread throughout the white wasteland,

three divisions of Ragesian forces defend the path to the Aquiline Heart, where Leska is performing mighty magic. The heroes and their allies teleport in and engage the enemy, but great sorcery bolsters her forces. Overwhelmed and caught by surprise, the heroes must target key powers among the Ragesian armies in order to give the Resistance a chance in the battle. Over two or three days of fighting, the Resistance army forces its way to the Heart of History, where during a battle with a titanic dragon, the heroes have a chance to aid a mutiny and force the Ragesian army to surrender.

The heroes descend a seemingly bottomless rift into the Heart of History, where they overcome impossible challenges of fire, water, stone, and time, finally reaching the cavern of the fabled Aquiline Heart. Leska, all her ambition and might having failed her, turns the sum of her fury upon those who have opposed her. But enemies have discreetly followed the heroes—the subtle trillith and the traitorous Shahalesti—and the heroes find themselves caught in a four-way battle to determine the fate of the world.

The heroes have met Etinifi (in Adventure Eight, *O Wintry Song of Agony*), and from him learned that they can only truly kill Leska if they destroy the Aquiline Heart. Etinifi,

REQUIREMENTS

This adventure makes use of the rules from the D&D 4E *PLAYER'S HANDBOOK*®, the D&D 4E *DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE*®, and the D&D 4E *MONSTER MANUAL*®. Additionally, the D&D 4E *PLAYER'S HANDBOOK*® 2, the D&D 4E *ADVENTURER'S VAULT*™, and the D&D 4E *MONSTER MANUAL*® 2 provide useful expansions to provide even richer immersion into the world.

The adventure is designed to be played with a party size of five player characters (PCs) and a Dungeon Master (DM). The encounters and experience awards assume a party of 29th-level characters. If the adventure is run with a different party size or higher levels, the encounters will have to be adjusted to provide enough experience to advance the characters to 30th level and slightly beyond.

ADAPTING THE ADVENTURE

If you plan to run *The Beating of the Aquiline Heart* as a standalone adventure, you could use the caverns of the Heart of History as an epic-level dungeon, with the heroes competing against Leska for the prize of immortality, or perhaps seeking to defeat her so they can fulfill their epic destinies. Alternately you could use the Battle of Opaline Wastes as the basis for a siege of any key location in a fantasy war, or Storming the Palace for a royal assassination plot.

If you run the adventure in your own campaign, we encourage you to replace NPCs in the rebellion with ones with whom your players will be familiar. The hidden trillith can simply become traitorous allies, and you can tweak the symbolism of the Heart of History to fit your setting's origin myths.

As Part One of the Ending Trilogy

You don't need to change much, other than the assumption that the PCs have already been to the dreamworld and back. In this case, defeating the Colossus during the Festival of Dreams was a heroic feat of such import that the Torch of the Burning Sky spontaneously repaired itself in the wake of the action. Leska and *Tempest* remain targets for the heroes, but they must ultimately take the Torch to the dreamworld in order to stop the trillith once and for all.

A more detailed summary of this plot thread can be found in Adventure Nine, *Festival of Dreams*.

As Part Two of the Ending Trilogy

Same as above, but the heroes have already tackled one of their final three adversaries. With the loss of Pilus or news of the trilliths' defeat, Leska decides it would be safer to defend the Heart herself, which draws the attention of Seaquen and the heroes, who quickly move to retaliate.

A more detailed summary of this plot thread can be found in Adventure Nine, *Festival of Dreams*.

THE BURNING SKY

As detailed in the *War of the Burning Sky Campaign Guide*, teleportation is hazardous during the adventure if the heroes have not repaired the Torch of the Burning Sky. If they have not, any creature teleporting will take fire damage based on the distance traveled. For more details, see the *Campaign Guide* and *Player's Guide*.

himself immortal and long tormented by Leska for some undisclosed betrayal, simply wants to die, and if the heroes have not dealt with him, he has allied with the trillith in order to destroy the heart. He knows it will doom the world, but he doesn't care.

The heroes may already have defeated the leader of the trillith (in Adventure Ten, *Sleep, Ye Cursed Child*), but nevertheless some trillith survive, having bonded with corporeal creatures. Leska long used the trillith to manipulate and weaken her enemies, but now a deceptive trillith plans to use the heroes' attack on the supreme Inquisitor as cover for its attempt to destroy the heart.

The heroes should still have many allies they can trust, however, and they will need them to triumph. Much depends on how successful the heroes have been in their missions so far.

THE CLASH OF ARMIES

In Act Two, we provide an overview of the various allies and numerous enemies who can aid or oppose the heroes in their mission. While you can certainly go into more detail when running the grand battle, the following system simplifies the job of determining how victorious the heroes and Resistance are. For ease of understanding, we are formatting the tracking of the final day of battle as a skill challenge based upon the heroes' previous successes.

This skill challenge represents not only direct success in battle, but also strategic advantage. For instance, the players don't have to specifically decide how they will use the Torch of the Burning Sky in battle, but simply being able to use it helps them outmaneuver their foes. If the heroes take a direct role in leading the Resistance, you should encourage your players to flesh out the details of their orders, but generally we assume the heroes go on special missions while General Xavious and others direct the movements of armies.

The list below includes all the factors that influence success or failure, including some description of how they benefit or hinder the Resistance. Some factors can change in the course of the adventure. For instance, if Katrina survived her last encounter with the heroes and is an enemy, she poses a great danger to the Resistance, incurring a minor failure. But if the heroes defeat her, they suffer no failure, and if they win her back to their side (perhaps by bringing her brother Rantle to talk to her) they could even earn a minor success.

For those factors that involve NPCs, the person has to be alive to be "loyal." Someone who died a friend won't contribute much to this battle. Some factors are difficult or nigh impossible to actually accomplish, but we include them for those who manage to pull them off.

Last Days of the Burning Sky

Level 29 Skill Challenge (75,000 XP)

Complexity 5 (12 successes before 3 failures)

Everything the heroes have accomplished, and all the failures they have faced, come to bear.

Through the normal progression of the adventures up to this point, the heroes can start this adventure with up to 10 automatic successes. With exceptional effort on their part, they may even get 11 or 12, which practically guarantees their success. However, continued failure also adds up quickly.

► Major Successes

The heroes gain one automatic success for each of the following.

- ♦ **Sindaire's armies loyal.** Unless the heroes went out of their way to mess this up in the previous adventures, it's an automatic success.
- ♦ **Shahalesti "loyal."** These eladrin warriors blend magic with elite infantry tactics. Award this success if the heroes managed to ally with Shaaladel in Adventure Nine, *The Festival of Dreams*.
- ♦ **Saved the nobility of Dassen.** The armies of the Eight Lands fight for the Resistance. Award this success if the heroes defeated Madness in Adventure Four, *The Mad King's Banquet*.
- ♦ **The Torch is fully functional.** The heroes can take advantage of amazing strategic options, teleporting huge forces into the perfect position. Award this success if the heroes repaired the Torch of the Burning Sky in Adventure Ten, *Sleep, Ye Cursed Child*.
- ♦ **Ostalin's armies loyal.** (Difficult.) The aerial cavalry help defend against Ragesia's wyverns, while biomantic creations aid the ground war. Award this success if the heroes have somehow made an ally of Khagan Onamdamin. While an alliance is unlikely, the heroes meet Onamdamin in Adventure Six, *Tears of the Burning Sky*, and Adventure Eleven, *Under the Eye of the Tempest*.
- ♦ **Loyal forces control Tempest.** (Difficult.) The airship, though weakened, can still obliterate stationary forces. Award this success if the heroes somehow saved *Tempest* in Adventure Eleven, *Under the Eye of the Tempest*.

- ♦ **Trilla loyal.** (Difficult.) The gold dragon seeks redemption and relishes fighting against tyrants. All but a few trillith join with the heroes. Award this success if the heroes saved Trilla and convinced her to fight with them in Adventure Ten, *Sleep, Ye Cursed Child*.

► Minor Successes

Total the following minor successes for the heroes, then subtract any minor failures (detailed below). For every two remaining minor successes, the heroes receive one automatic success.

- ♦ **Fire Forest fey loyal.** Seela scouts and spellcasters bolster allies throughout the allied armies. Award this success if the heroes saved the seela in Adventure Two, *The Indomitable Fire Forest of Innenotdar*.
- ♦ **Established unity temple in Seaquen.** The temple helps rival groups learn to work together. Award this success if the temple was established in Adventure Three, *Shelter from the Storm*.
- ♦ **Steppengard or Gallo is King of Dassen.** Morale and patriotism run high. Award this success if the heroes saved Steppengard or crowned Gallo in Adventure Four, *The Mad King's Banquet*.
- ♦ **Longinus loyal.** The monks of the West Wind protect against aerial threats. Award this success if the heroes made an ally of Longinus in Adventure Eleven, *Under the Eye of the Tempest*.
- ♦ **General Magdus loyal.** The rogue Ragesian general lends the survivors of the First Army to the battle. Award this success if the heroes convinced General Magdus to ally with them in Adventure Six, *Tears of the Burning Sky*.
- ♦ **Shaloshia loyal.** The Shahalesti, normally suspicious of foreigners, trust Shaloshia, and they follow orders better while she's around. Award this success unless the heroes went out of their way to alienate Shaloshia.
- ♦ **Katrina loyal.** The fire-happy sorceress kills hundreds of Ragesians. Award this success if the heroes have befriended Katrina.
- ♦ **The heroes possess the Torch.** This symbol of military supremacy incites fervor in their allies. Award this success unless the heroes managed to lose the Torch somehow.
- ♦ **Gate Pass loyal.** The city's beleaguered freedom fighters join the battle. Award this success unless the heroes somehow managed to mess up their alliance with Gate Pass during Adventure Nine, *The Festival of Dreams*.
- ♦ **The Mother of Dreams slain or freed.** The trillith present are restricted to corporeal forms. Award this success if Trilla died or was

otherwise released from her curse in Adventure Ten, *Sleep, Ye Cursed Child*.

- ♦ **Drakus Coaltongue loyal.** (Difficult.) The immortal warlord strikes fear in the soldiers who betrayed him for Leska and inspires the Resistance. Award this success if the heroes found Drakus Coaltongue, restored him to life, and convinced him to fight with them in Adventure Seven, *Trial of Echoed Souls*.
- ♦ **General Ashok Danava loyal.** (Difficult.) The Second Ragesian Army joins the Resistance, pitting brother against brother. Award this success if the heroes managed to secure Ashok Danava as an ally during his surrender in Adventure Nine, *The Festival of Dreams*.

► Minor Failures

See the above description for minor successes for more information about these minor failures.

- ♦ **Shaaladel in charge.** The Shahalesti lord makes sure his people suffer fewer casualties, leading to resentment. The heroes may have agreed to to secure Shaaladel's alliance in Adventure Nine, *The Festival of Dreams*.
- ♦ **Shahalesti opposed.** Shahalesti pride leads his people to trouble the Resistance.
- ♦ **Katrina opposed.** Allowing Ragesia, Katrina kills hundreds of the heroes' allies.
- ♦ **Vigilance dead.** Leska's armies include many lesser trillith who can possess allies and mislead them or cause nightmares and confusion. Award this failure if Vigilance died during Adventure Nine, *The Festival of Dreams*.
- ♦ **Fire Forest Quenched.** While this would be considered a Good act, having the Fire Forest of Innenotdar quenched provides a route for the Ragesian armies' support and reinforcements. Award this failure if the heroes quenched the forest fire in Adventure Two, *The Indomitable Fire Forest of Innenotdar*.

► Major Failures

Each of these circumstances counts as one automatic failure toward the Final Days of the Burning Sky.

- ♦ **Koren Obelisk still functional.** The Ragesians can slay entire armies in a matter of minutes with its power. Award this failure if the heroes didn't destroy the Koren Obelisk in Adventure Eight, *O Wintry Song of Agony*.
- ♦ **Seaquen destroyed.** Devastating blow to morale. Award this failure if the heroes didn't prevent the destruction of Seaquen in Adventure Three, *Shelter from the Storm*, or Adventure Eleven, *Under the Eye of the Tempest*.
- ♦ **Annihilation unleashed.** The colossal trillith horror destroys the world. This counts as three

failures, because if Annihilation really destroyed the world in Adventure Ten, *Sleep, Ye Cursed Child*, there's nothing left to save. We include it here for completeness.

► Narrating the Grand Battle

When the heroes reach certain thresholds, they trigger significant victories for the Resistance. These provide a framework for narrating the conflict. When the heroes reach a milestone, this represents the Resistance being in a tactical position to make decisive progress in the battle. It takes at least a few hours of battle for the Resistance soldiers to actually accomplish what is listed below after the heroes acquire enough successes for the milestone.

After resolving the events in "Through the Two Dragons" (12 successes, below), Resistance forces clear a path to the rift, and after defeating the commander of the Seventh Army and the green dragon Phaaughsmat, the heroes force the surrender of the Ragesian forces, and declare victory in the Battle of the Opaline Wastes. All that remains is to descend into the Heart of History and defeat Leska.

► Progress

Begin

Engagement: Less than an hour after the Resistance's arrival, and before they can launch their first attack, the hidden Fifth Ragesian Army strikes from multiple directions, while elements of the Sixth Ragesian Army sally forth, catching the Resistance in a pincer. Ragesian druids unleash unnatural weather on the center of the Resistance formations, pinning them down while the Ragesians maneuver to favorable positioning.

6 Successes

Repulse: The Resistance armies manage to cut the Fifth Ragesian Army's infantry in two. Their cohesion weakened, the army withdraws to regroup. Meanwhile, the Resistance defends against attacks by the golems, undead, and monsters of the Sixth Ragesian Army, but it wins the day.

8 Successes

One Down, Two to Go: The Resistance crushes the Fifth Ragesian's infantry, and the remainder withdraws to a defensive position in the badlands. Allied forces hunt them down and kill those who don't surrender. Attention turns to the Sixth Army. (This happens no earlier than the morning of the second day.)

10 Successes

Trench War: Faced with heavily dug-in defenders from the Sixth Ragesian Army, the Resistance fights many skirmishes and ambushes

until it finally controls the Opaline Wastes. They turn their attention to Two Dragons Canyon. (This happens no earlier than the afternoon of the second day.)

12 Successes

Through the Two Dragons: The Resistance encounters a cavern full of fortified side tunnels from which the Seventh Ragesian Army snipes and assaults the Resistance. Sappers open paths into these tunnels, and room to room fighting begins. (This happens no earlier than the morning of the third day.)

GALLERY OF ALLIES

Throughout the war, the heroes have met and fought beside a wide array of allies, and each of them has some role in the campaign's climax. Whenever you see a scene marked with a red "fireball" icon, the encounter involves one or more NPCs from earlier in the campaign who may not necessarily be alive or allied with the heroes. If a given NPC died or isn't an ally, these scenes can either be cut out or the character can be replaced with a random Resistance member. But with luck, the heroes will be reminded of their successes throughout the campaign saga, and be more motivated to fight for victory, not just for themselves, but for all those fighting at their side.

Most of the NPCs are low- or mid-level, so they will be facing challenges better suited to their skills, but stat blocks for those likely to play a prominent combat role appear in Appendix Two. If the heroes end up dragging lower level allies into combat, you can use their original stats from their previous appearance.

THE DUNGEON MASTER'S TOOLKIT

Below are some guidelines for running the adventure within the context of the War of the Burning Sky campaign saga. *The Beating of the Aquiline Heart* assumes the party consists of 5

☑ Encounters	Level	XP	Parcels
<input type="checkbox"/> Breaking and Entering (Tactical Encounter)	25	35,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Forbidding Barrier (Trap Encounter)	28	75,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Minions in the Halls (Monster Group)	25	35,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Column Lurkers (Monster Group)	26	36,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Ambush Squad (Monster Group)	26	45,000	29
<input type="checkbox"/> Imperial Court (Tactical Encounter)	27	55,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Roav, Consultant of the Damned (Tactical Encounter)	29	75,000	29
<input type="checkbox"/> Storming the Palace Complete (Minor Quest)	27	55,000	29
<input type="checkbox"/> Wave One (Tactical Encounter)	29	75,000	29
<input type="checkbox"/> Wave Two (Tactical Encounter)	29	75,000	29
<input type="checkbox"/> Battle Against the General (Tactical Encounter)	29	75,000	29
<input type="checkbox"/> Army of Darkness (Monster Group)	27	55,000	29, 29
<input type="checkbox"/> Golem Battle (Monster Group)	30	95,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Chase the Necromancer (Tactical Encounter)	28	65,000	29, 29
<input type="checkbox"/> The Flayed Druid (Tactical Encounter)	30	95,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Assassins in the Command Tent (Tactical Encounter)	29	75,000	30, 30
<input type="checkbox"/> The Devil and the Nightmare (Tactical Encounter)	31	115,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> The Coup (Tactical Encounter)	30	95,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Last Days of the Burning Sky (Skill Challenge/Major Quest)	29	75,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> Time Trial (Tactical Encounter)	31	115,000	30, 30
<input type="checkbox"/> The Supreme Inquisitor (Tactical Encounter)	34	195,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> The War of the Burning Sky (Major Quest)	30	95,000	

adventurers of around 29th level. If you have more or less than this number, consult the D&D 4E DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE® for rules on scaling the encounters.

THE EPIC TIER

The Beating of the Aquiline Heart is presented as the final adventure in the War of the Burning Sky Campaign. The heroes have battled through 29 levels of traitorous allies, deranged fey, and dangerous monsters to get to a point where they can finally challenge Leska and destroy the Torch of the Burning Sky.

EXPERIENCE TRACKING AND TREASURE

Use the table to mark the total experience the heroes gain. As they complete encounters and skill challenges, the table provides a way for you

to track awards. The table is colored by act.

Partway into the adventure, the heroes advance to 30th level. At this point, they should be prepared to venture into the lair of the Aquiline Heart and defeat Leska.

This adventure awards treasure using the parcel system described in the D&D 4E DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE®. No specific treasure parcels are detailed in this adventure. The Dungeon Master should consult with his players about their wish list items and make them available during play. The encounters most appropriate to parcel awards are shown in the table.

KEY TO THE TABLE

- ♦ **Monster Group** encounters generally consist of more generic creatures or groups thereof. A given Monster Group can be encountered several times during the adventure.
- ♦ **Quests** provide additional experience upon completion. Notice that, including the major quest experience in this adventure, more than two levels can be awarded.
- ♦ **Skill Challenges**, whether on their own or combined with another type of encounter, often give a flat experience award for completion and also either influence key NPCs or provide clues that progress the story line.

"Cost of Failure" Text	Explanation
fail	The check counts as a failure.
fail/healing surge	The check counts as a failure and the hero loses a healing surge.
fail/group healing surge	The check counts as a failure and all heroes in the party lose a healing surge.
—/healing surge	Not a skill challenge failure, but the hero loses a healing surge. (This is a result of a secondary skill use.)
—	Not a skill challenge failure. (This is a result of a secondary skill use.)
fail/healing surge*—Skill	The check counts as a failure and the hero loses a healing surge, but there is a secondary skill use that changes the consequence. The secondary skill that helps will be marked with an asterisk as well.