

Charge of the Aspects

Matt Burns

I have murdered one of my own.

The thought hit Nozdormu the Timeless One the instant he saw the desiccated bronze dragon. Zirion had shriveled into a husk half his original size. Lesions covered his body from head to tail. Instead of blood, golden sand cascaded out of the wounds in unending streams upon which shimmered ghostly images of his life that had not yet come to pass. His future was bleeding out of him.

Nozdormu strode across one of the isolated peaks of Mount Hyjal to stand by Zirion's side, every moment of history rippling over the Timeless One's sun-colored scales. As he loomed over the dying dragon, a wave of helplessness flooded through him. An impenetrable veil had descended on the timeways, one that not even he, the Aspect of the bronze dragonflight and the Guardian of Time, could pierce. The past and future—things he had once seen with clarity—had become muddled.

"Where are the otherssss?" Nozdormu craned his great neck toward Tick, who stood nearby. The loyal dragon had transported Zirion on her back from the bronze flight's lair in the Caverns of Time with all due speed, a feat possible only because of her passenger's withered state.

Tick's breaths were still labored from the ordeal. "He returned alone."

"How can that be?" Nozdormu growled in frustration. "Twelve I dispatched into the past. *Twelve!*"

He had tasked his agents with investigating the unsettling condition of the timeways, but now he couldn't shake the feeling that he had merely consigned them to their deaths. Upon returning to the present, the dragons were supposed to have met the Timeless One atop Hyjal precisely at midday. It was well past noon when Tick, whom he had not sent into the timeways, had arrived, bearing Zirion.

"What did you see, Zirion?" Nozdormu asked as he began weaving spells to reverse the sands of time escaping from the other dragon.

"I fear he has lost the strength to speak," Tick put in.

The Timeless One barely heard her. The impossible was happening: his magic was having no effect. His actions had been predicted and countered by equally powerful spellwork. There was only one being in existence who possessed the foresight and skill to best the bronze Aspect in the realm of time...

"When he first returned from the timeways," Tick continued hesitantly, "he recounted what he saw. No matter where he and the others attempted to journey in history, they always emerged at the same point in the future... the Hour of Twilight."

Nozdormu lowered his head and clenched his eyes shut. It was as he had feared. The strands of time had been gathered and pulled toward the apocalypse. In that gray and lifeless future, even the Timeless One would meet his end. That, at least, was what he believed. Ages ago, when the titan Aman'Thul had imbued him with his mastery over time, Nozdormu had also gained knowledge of his own demise.

"Who was responsible for his wounds?" The Timeless One knew the answer, but he hoped more than anything that he was wrong... that what he had seen was an anomaly.

"It was the infinite dragonflight and its... leader." Tick averted her eyes from Nozdormu.

I have murdered one of my own. The damning words echoed in the Aspect's head.

He had once thought the infinite flight was merely a symptom of an errant timeline. Yet, as inconceivable as it seemed, he had learned that he and his bronze dragons would in the future abandon their sacred charge—protecting the integrity of time—and work to subvert it.

Nozdormu mulled over the events of the past weeks, struggling to control his anger. He had been trapped in the timeways until recently, when the mortal Thrall had reminded him of the First Lesson: that living in the moment was far more important than dwelling on the past or future. The bronze Aspect had emerged from his captivity with a newfound understanding of time... only to find himself now confronted by his darkest fears.

"Forgive me," Nozdormu whispered to Zirion, not knowing whether his beloved servant could still see or hear. The wounded bronze cocked his head in recognition. He gazed from side to side until his dull and cloudy eyes locked on Nozdormu.

"Forgive me," the Timeless One repeated. Zirion's mouth stretched wide, and his body quivered. It almost looked as if he were laughing, but Nozdormu quickly realized that the other dragon was sobbing.

As the last of Zirion's future bled out of him, he used whatever remained of his strength to push himself away from Nozdormu, his eyes filled with terror.

Mount Hyjal thrummed with the sounds of celebration.

After a series of delays, the Dragon Aspects Alexstrasza, Ysera, Nozdormu, and Kalecgos had combined their magics with those of the shaman of the Earthen Ring and the druids of the Cenarion Circle to mend the ancient World Tree Nordrassil. More recently, word had arrived that Ragnaros—the elemental lord of fire, whose minions had sought to burn Nordrassil to ashes—had fallen at mortal hands.

Yet from where Ysera the Awakened stood in the Cenarion refuge at the base of the World Tree, the jubilation was a distant whisper. The Aspect of the green dragonflight heard only a tale of tragedy.

She was meeting with her fellow Aspects to discuss their next course of action against Deathwing, the maddened leader of the black dragonflight, who was responsible for shattering the world during the Cataclysm. Although Azeroth's defenders had recently triumphed in Hyjal and other regions, the tortured Aspect was even now scheming for ways to usher in the Hour of Twilight. So long as he drew breath, he would not stop until he had fulfilled his dark plans.

Instead of debating strategies, however, Nozdormu had recounted the death of Zirion and the infinite dragonflight's newest assault on the timeways. Wrinkles stretched across the Timeless One's otherwise smooth high elven face. He had, like his brethren, assumed his mortal form, a deed the Aspects performed whenever they were near the short-lived races that dwelled around Nordrassil.

"He wasss killed by my magic... by *me*," Nozdormu muttered. Ysera looked on, uneasy. Despite the Timeless One's horrific predicament, she couldn't help but notice how everything around her appeared distant. She floated between the waking world and the realm of dreams, anchored to neither.

"I must return to the meeting place." The bronze Aspect anxiously wrung his hands and fidgeted in impatience. "My other agents may yet arrive, but I do not know with certainty. I can only hope."

As Nozdormu turned to leave, Ysera frantically searched for words of comfort to offer him. He had clearly resigned himself to his fate. Aman'Thul had tasked him with upholding the purity of time no matter what harrowing events had taken or would eventually take place. On some level, the Timeless One's charge seemed wrong to Ysera, but she was not one to question his duties.

What do you say to a being who would do anything to protect the dragons of his flight, but now holds himself accountable for one of their deaths? she pondered. Her mind was a storm of fragmented thoughts. It was as if she were standing in a vast library ripped

apart by a hurricane. Pages brimming with ideas and images whirled across her vision, but they were all parts of separate books.

Before the Awakened could grasp hold of anything meaningful, Nozdormu had left. An eerie silence followed. The night elves who normally inhabited the druidic haven were gracious enough to vacate it during the Aspects' meetings, but the absence of bustling life gave the place a cold and hollow feel.

"Whether or not the infinite flight is working in concert with Deathwing matters little," Alexstrasza the Life-Binder, Dragonqueen of her kind and Aspect of the red flight, finally said. "The reason we have all agreed to stay in Hyjal is to strategize about how best to deal with him. The timeways conundrum is just further evidence that we must act quickly. Kalecos, has your flight continued its research?"

"We have." The Aspect of the blue flight cleared his throat and straightened his back. Kalec's amiable demeanor had become strangely formal of late. He was the youngest Aspect, recently chosen to lead his flight after its former leader, Malygos, had died. Ysera surmised that Kalec was trying to prove his worth to his fellow Aspects, when in truth they already saw him as their equal.

Kalec swept his hand through the air, and a series of luminescent runes winked into existence, each detailing experiments his flight had conducted. The blues had scoured the ancient vaults of knowledge stored in their lair, the Nexus, for insight into Deathwing's weaknesses. Kalec's dragons were the stewards of magic, and if there was an answer hidden in the arcana, they would find it.

"We recovered portions of Deathwing's blood from the elemental realm of Deepholm, where he hid for many years. The samples were small, but they were large enough for our tests."

"And what of the results thus far?" Alexstrasza's voice was thick with anticipation. It was the most hopeful Ysera had seen her sister throughout these fruitless meetings.

"When we infuse the blood with arcane magic—an amount that would tear apart any other being—it only enrages the samples. The blood splits and boils, but ultimately it reforms."

"Not even arcane magic has an effect." The Life-Binder hunched her shoulders.

"But this is just the beginning of our tests," Kalec quickly added. "I believe we must have a tool at our side when we face Deathwing. Numbers, no matter how great, are of little help. We require a weapon... like none that has come before it. My flight will not rest until it solves this predicament."

"Thank you." Alexstrasza turned to Ysera. "Have you received any visions of note?"

"Not... as of yet," she replied, slightly ashamed. During these meetings, the Awakened often felt like nothing more than a fly on the wall. The titan Eonar had granted her dominion over nature and the lush primal forest realm known as the Emerald Dream. For millennia, she had lived there as Ysera the Dreamer. Just before the Cataclysm, she had been roused from the Dream. Ysera the Awakened, she was now called. Her eyes, so long closed, had opened, but she found herself wondering what she was supposed to see.

"Keep us apprised if anything comes to mind." The Life-Binder smiled, but Ysera sensed her anxiety. "We will reconvene again on the morrow."

With that, the meeting ended just as it had begun: without answers.

The next morning, Ysera wandered through the scattered camps at the base of Nordrassil. The great World Tree towered over her, its canopy veiled in a layer of clouds. Here and there, Earthen Ring shaman and Cenarion Circle druids were peacefully meditating. After Nordrassil had been healed, Ysera had taught the druids how to meld their spirits with the tree's roots to help them extend into the soil. The shaman,

meanwhile, worked to pacify the earth elementals, allowing the roots safe passage as they stretched into Azeroth's depths. The undertaking was an unprecedented union of the two dissimilar mortal groups. Yet as much as it emboldened Ysera, she knew that their noble efforts would be meaningless if Deathwing remained free to pursue his interests.

The Awakened continued up to a secluded ring of trees northeast of the World Tree. When she entered a clearing in the grove, Thrall was already waiting for her, deep in meditation. Ysera had profound respect for the orc shaman, likely more than he realized. Weeks ago, Deathwing and his allies had launched an assault on the green, red, blue, and bronze Aspects that would have destroyed them if not for Thrall's intervention. He had helped bring the dragon leaders together, and he had reminded them of their purpose in safeguarding Azeroth. The Aspects were more united now than they had been in over ten thousand years.

"Thrall." The Awakened spoke softly. Nature stirred at her voice. The wind tugged at the orc's long black braids. The grass rustled beneath his simple robes. Yet the shaman did not open his eyes.

She was amazed by his level of focus, but she knew that it had not come easily. During the first attempt to mend Nordrassil, Deathwing's servants had ambushed Thrall and sundered his mind, body, and spirit into the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water. Through the work of a mortal hero and Thrall's mate, Aggra, he had been saved. Ever since that time, Thrall had displayed a newfound connection with the earth that went beyond mere communication with the elements. He could feel Azeroth as if it were a part of *himself*, conjoining with the world in a miraculous way. Ysera believed that in the process of reforming his spirit, the essence of Azeroth had been taken into him.

"Thrall." Ysera gently placed her hand on the shaman's arm.

The orc finally broke out of his meditation and scrambled to his feet. "Lady Ysera, I have started without you. My apologies."

"I am here only to aid you when needed," the green Aspect assured him.

"If I may ask, how did the meeting go?"

"Progress was made," Ysera forced herself to say before changing the subject. "Shall we begin?"

"Yes." Thrall sat back down, and Ysera mirrored him. She had learned long ago that the best means of teaching was through demonstration. While Thrall's spirit melded with the earth, she would bind herself to Nordrassil's roots. The magics were different, but the principles of concentration were alike.

"Have you experienced the same troubles of late?" Ysera asked. Thrall had spoken of his failure to connect with the earth beyond Hyjal as if there were mental barriers blocking his spirit. The orc was determined to understand his new abilities, but he appeared hesitant to venture too far into Azeroth.

"I have." Thrall wrinkled his brow in frustration. "It is as if I were standing in the surf of a great ocean. The farther I wade into the deeps, the more distant I feel from the shore..."

"Thrall," Ysera said as she scooped up a handful of dirt and placed it into the orc's left palm. "This is Azeroth. If your spirit can enter this soil, it can tread anywhere. Hyjal is not a magic anchor; it is the same earth that lies beneath the streets of Orgrimmar or the jungles of Stranglethorn. This world is one body."

"One body..." The orc regarded the soil and laughed heartily. "Oftentimes the most difficult problems are solved by the simplest answers... the things that are right before our eyes. My old tutor, Drek'Thar, once told me that many years ago. You have much in common with him. So wise and patient... No matter what obstacles I encounter, you always know how to overcome them."

Ysera willed herself to smile as the irony of Thrall's words hit her.

"This will be my anchor." The shaman clenched his hand around the dirt.

Thrall closed his eyes and breathed deep. Ysera did so as well and then spoke. "Quiet your thoughts. Detach your spirit from the flesh and feel the earth around us. Know that the rocks beneath you are the same as those beneath me. Know that if you can take one step, you can surely take another."

Ysera took her own instructions to heart as her spirit joined with one of the World Tree's colossal roots. Thrall believed that his burgeoning powers were never meant for him, that they were a fluke. In truth, they were quite the opposite. His purpose was clear, even if he didn't know it. All his years of dedication as a shaman had led to this extraordinary ability to join with the earth. The Awakened longed for a similar sense of fulfillment.

Her thoughts drifted to the meetings with the other Aspects. She focused on every detail, wondering if there was a simple answer hidden among the endless discussions. The Awakened's attention turned to Kalec. Something the young Aspect had mentioned itched in her mind.

"A weapon... like none that has come before it."

The words held power, a significance just beyond her understanding.

A weapon...

"... like no other. It must be like no other." A familiar voice boomed in her head. It crashed over her like a tidal wave, sweeping away the millions of disjointed ideas circulating in her consciousness.

Ysera opened her eyes in shock, but she was no longer in Hyjal.

She floated through a dark and cavernous room that she recognized as the Chamber of the Aspects, the hallowed domain of the five dragonflights. Below her stood a gathering of dragons. Ysera—a past version of herself—was among them, along with Alexstrasza; Nozdormu's prime consort, Soridormi; the late blue Dragon Aspect, Malygos; and... *Deathwing*.

No... not the scarred and hideous creature of the present. It was Neltharion the Earth-Warder, the once-proud Aspect of the black dragonflight. Unbeknownst to his comrades, he had already been corrupted by the insidious Old Gods—unfathomably powerful beings of madness imprisoned in the earth by the titans—and had forsaken his charge to protect Azeroth.

Ysera discerned the time immediately. It was over ten thousand years ago, amid the War of the Ancients. The demonic Burning Legion had invaded Azeroth, and the Aspects had gathered to undergo a ceremony that they hoped would spare the world from annihilation. They encircled a featureless golden disk hovering in the air.

It looked, at first glance, like an unassuming trinket. Yet it was the weapon that would shatter the unity of the dragonflights... the weapon that would murder countless blue dragons and drive Malygos into millennia of seclusion. The Dragon Soul.

Ysera watched in terror as the ritual concluded. Each of the Aspects—save Neltharion—had allowed a portion of his or her essence to be sacrificed, thereby empowering the artifact. The dragons had performed the drastic act in the belief that the disk would be used to drive the Legion from Azeroth.

"It is done..." Neltharion declared. "All have given that which must be given. I now seal the Dragon Soul forever so that what has been attained will never be lost."

An ominous black glow enveloped the Earth-Warder and the artifact, a subtle hint of its true nature.

"Should that be?" Ysera's past self asked quietly.

"For it to be as it must, yes," Neltharion replied, barely hiding his defiance.

"It is a weapon like no other. It must be like no other," added Malygos.

The walls of the chamber fractured and then fell away like shards of glass after Malygos spoke, revealing the emerald-hued terrain of the clearing. Thrall remained fixed in his meditative state, oblivious to Ysera's vision. She scarcely glanced at the orc as she rose to her feet, trying to piece together what she had seen. *Is it wrong to think that the Dragon Soul could be the salvation of Azeroth after all the suffering and death it unleashed?*

The Awakened raced out of the grove in search of Kalec and Alexstrasza. *The other Aspects will think me mad when I propose using it to our own ends.* Despite her apprehension, one simple thought urged her forward: *Deathwing's tyranny must end how it began.*

The soil was not an object in Thrall's palm. It was, he realized, as much a part of him as his fingers were a part of his hand, unique in and of themselves but pieces of the greater whole.

The orc's spirit descended into the earth beneath him and then into the depths of Hyjal. He experienced every stone and grain of sand as if it were an extension of himself. The chaotic earth elementals, whom he had for so long struggled to calm, embraced him—*welcomed* him—as one of their own.

The mountain was alive with activity. Shaman—Aggra among them—whispered to the earth in a harmonizing chorus that soothed Thrall's spirit just as it did the elements. Elsewhere, druids guided Nordrassil's roots ever deeper into Azeroth. The orc's essence moved alongside them, where jagged rocks and chunks of granite had crumbled to soft dirt so that the World Tree could nurture itself and in turn strengthen the earth. He drifted through the cycle of healing, invigorated.

Thrall's spirit reached the foothills of the mountain. This was the farthest he had dared to go before. His awareness of his physical body was as distant as it had been in his previous attempts. The orc focused on the faint sensation of soil in his hand, repeating Ysera's sage lesson. *This is Azeroth... This world is one body.*

Emboldened by the words, Thrall purged all reservations from his heart and plunged into Azeroth.

His essence raced headlong through the leagues and leagues of earth that unfurled around him. He moved through the sun-baked soil of Durotar and then to the muddy banks of the Swamp of Sorrows. All the lands, no matter how remote or distinct, were connected in a way that he had never comprehended.

Apart from the areas he knew, Thrall encountered other places and oddities in Azeroth of which he had been ignorant.

Somewhere in the Great Sea was a mysterious island shrouded in mists...

Beneath the Eastern Kingdoms, a presence stirred in the mountains of Khaz Modan. The spirit there was strong, but it was not an elemental. It was, strangely, like Thrall: a mortal who had transcended the bounds of flesh. The unknown being patrolled the ancient earth of the region as if it was keeping a silent vigil over the land. It spoke in a dwarven accent that echoed across Azeroth.

"For behold, we are earthen, o' the land, and its soul is ours, its pain is ours, its heartbeat is ours..."

Thrall also saw that the deep places of the world were riddled with molten lesions and other wounds.

What gave him the most pause was immense caverns, cold and unnatural, scattered throughout the globe. They were pockets of lifelessness that even the earth elementals were hesitant to approach.

One of the voids sat far below Mount Hyjal. Thrall directed his spirit toward the subterranean hollow. Unlike the rest of Azeroth, what lay inside the cavern was hidden from his sight. As he moved closer, a single voice surged out from within the chamber, bristling with unfathomable power.

"Shaman."

It thrummed along the orc's spirit as if Azeroth itself was speaking to him.

"Come."

Thrall was drawn toward the source, compelled to seek it out. His essence circled the outside of the chamber until he found an opening in the cavern's seemingly impenetrable walls. As he pushed his spirit into the void, rocks and soil entered with him. The debris coalesced into legs, a torso, arms, and a head; two multifaceted crystals served as his eyes. His new form resembled his true physical body save that it was made of earth.

"Who are you?" Thrall called out in a sharp clatter that sounded more like stones grinding together than a coherent language.

Pools of roiling magma offered the room's only illumination. The walls and floor were coated in a rough crystalline substance so black that it appeared to consume all light around it.

"Here," a reply came from the center of the subterranean hollow. "*Here lies the truth of this world.*"

Thrall lumbered deeper into the chamber, enticed by the authority of the words. His connection with the rest of Azeroth and his body on Hyjal grew thinner with each step he took. In the middle of the cavern stood a humanoid figure, its features shrouded in a strange, almost tangible darkness.

He plodded closer until two eyes opened on the statuesque being, burning the color of molten rock.

Thrall stumbled back as the shadows veiling the figure dissipated, revealing a grotesque human male. A massive piece of metal in the shape of a jaw was bolted to his ashen face. Jagged horns curled up from his shoulders, and his fingers ended in dagger-like claws. Veins of magma coursed across his chest.

The orc did not recognize the human, but he sensed his identity: *Deathwing* in his mortal guise.

"The arrogance of shaman never ceases to amaze me," the black Aspect rumbled, his voice like two immense boulders shattering against one another. "You seek to tame a power that by rights is not yours to command... a power beyond your comprehension."

Thrall bolted toward the wall where he had entered the cavern. Plates of black crystal ripped up from the floor and slammed over the exposed earth. The orc rammed his shoulder into the barrier, pleading with the elemental spirits to part before him. The vile substance did not heed his calls as the rest of Azeroth's earth elementals did.

"Intriguing, is it not?" Deathwing growled behind him. "The blood of the Old Gods does not answer to your whims, for they are not of this world. Only the chosen hold true sway over it."

Thrall whirled toward the Aspect, expecting an attack, but Deathwing had not advanced.

"I have been awaiting your arrival, watching your spirit stumble blindly through the slopes of Hyjal," Deathwing said. "I had presumed you lacked the courage to journey beyond the mountain, but your progress proves what I have suspected... The other Aspects seek to grant you my powers. They wish to replace me with a mortal."

The meaning was lost on Thrall. Although he now possessed enhanced abilities, Ysera and her comrades had told him that he would never become an Aspect or, by extension, the Earth-Warder.

"They had no part in giving me these powers." Thrall edged along the cavern wall, groping for a crack or weak spot between the plates of Old God blood. "And the decision to use them was mine alone."

The chamber trembled at Deathwing's laughter. "So you have been led to believe. I have eyes in many places, shaman. I know that the other Aspects have stayed in Hyjal to scheme and that you are with them. Like cowards, they have lured you into this fate without your knowledge, intent on making my curse your own."

"What you were given was a gift, not a curse," Thrall said. He had learned much concerning the titans and the Aspects in recent times. Long ago, the titan Khaz'goroth had imbued Deathwing with dominion over the world's earthly expanses and charged him to protect them from any harm. However, this duty had made him susceptible to the influence of the Old Gods shackled within Azeroth. The trials and tribulations that had afflicted the Aspects throughout history, from Deathwing's betrayal to the impending Hour of Twilight, were all part of the Old Gods' grand scheme to scour life from the world.

"A *gift*?" Deathwing snarled. "You are as misguided as the other Aspects, too fool to recognize that the charges imposed upon us are nothing more than prisons."

"The titans gave you a purpose," Thrall retorted. His connection with Hyjal was more distant than ever. He sensed that the soil he held in his physical hand leagues away was running through his fingers.

"There is no purpose to what they do." Deathwing stomped toward Thrall, each step thundering through the chamber. "Azeroth was an experiment to the titans. A plaything. When they were done, they turned their backs on us all, indifferent to the broken world that they left behind."

"It is broken because of what you have done, because you forsook your gift!" Thrall roared.

"It is not a gift!" Deathwing's body quaked with rage.

Thrall noted that his words were having an effect. He continued goading the Aspect, hoping that he would reveal some kind of weakness. "The *gift* you did not have the strength to bear. The *gift*—"

"Silence!" Deathwing commanded. "If you insist on calling it a gift, so be it. Know then what it is to be me, to be given this gracious *gift*... to feel the fiery heart of this world as your own."

Pain flared deep within Thrall's earthen chest. The ceaseless flames that blazed in Azeroth's core churned inside his spirit. His stone skin hissed and steamed, glowing a dark and angry red.

"Know what it is to feel the weight of this dying world on your shoulders."

Thrall's legs trembled as every rock in Azeroth pressed down on him. His body splintered and cracked. It was beyond physical agony; his spirit was unraveling, suffocated by the unfathomable load.

"Does the gift taste as sweet as you thought it would?" Deathwing asked in amusement. "This is what the other Aspects wish: to chain you to this world as I have been. To damn you to a life of eternal torment."

Through the blinding pain, Thrall realized that he now possessed incredible strength. The weight of Azeroth was his to command. Was Deathwing so arrogant that he had given him this advantage?

The orc didn't question his intuition; this was the lapse in his foe's judgment that he had been awaiting. In one swift movement, Thrall channeled the burden of Azeroth into his fist and lunged toward Deathwing. The power was intoxicating. He felt as if he could crack a mountain in two.

The black Aspect stood motionless as Thrall approached. An instant before his fist plowed into Deathwing's chest, the weight of Azeroth—and all of its might—was ripped away from the orc's grasp.

His hand slammed into the Aspect's human form, and Thrall's arm shattered into a thousand pieces up to the elbow. He sank to his knees and howled in agony as magma boiled out of the broken limb.

Far off in the distance, near his physical body in Hyjal, he sensed the earth tear asunder.

There were mortal magi, even members of the blue dragonflight, who held that the rules of arcane magic were absolute. Yet where they saw limits, Kalec saw only the potential for new discoveries. For him, magic was not a rigid system of cold logic. It was the

lifeblood of the cosmos. It was boundless in its possibilities. It was the closest thing to beauty incarnate that he had ever known.

When Ysera had come to him, speaking excitedly of the Dragon Soul and the role it might play, he was immediately consumed with the puzzle of overcoming the impossible. Deathwing had not imparted his essence into the weapon as the other Aspects had, and the question of how it could be employed against him was a difficult one. Of equal concern was the belief that *any* dragon who used the artifact in its original state would be irrevocably damaged by its powers. The Dragon Soul had even torn apart Deathwing's body, forcing him to bolt his raging form together with metal plates.

Despite the challenges ahead, Kalec viewed the artifact as an opportunity to validate his place among the other Aspects, beings to whom he had always looked for inspiration. He had become the Steward of Magic at a time when the blue, green, bronze, and red flights were threatened with extinction. The miraculous powers bestowed upon his late leader, Malygos, by the titan Norgannon were now his own. The blue dragons—the heart of the entire flight—had chosen him, had put their faith in *him*. He wouldn't let them down.

"The Dragon Soul cannot be turned against Deathwing, for it does not contain his essence," Alexstrasza said, although there was a hint of uncertainty in her voice. After Ysera had told Kalec of her discovery, the two Aspects had convened with the Life-Binder at their meeting place in the Cenarion refuge to discuss the plan's merits.

"True," the blue Aspect stammered. He felt the eyes of the other Aspects boring into him as if they were judging his every word. "We would need his essence. Unfortunately, the blood samples we acquired, while valuable in their own right, are devoid of this. But with enough arcane energy, it might be possible to alter the Dragon Soul's properties so that it *would* affect him... in theory, at least."

"In theory," the Life-Binder repeated.

Kalec winced inwardly. The artifact was, admittedly, a risk. Much of what he knew concerning how it worked had been gleaned from the writings of Kirin Tor magi, in particular the human Rhonin. He had handled the weapon himself and discerned some of its attributes, and his treatise on the subject was an invaluable source of information for Kalec. Still, very little was proven.

"We have no other option." Ysera stepped forward, much to Kalec's relief. "I know it pains you, but it feels right. It was this weapon that started everything... that broke us apart. This dark era in our lives must end how it began."

Alexstrasza cast her eyes down. Kalec saw the turmoil raging in them. In truth, he had been concerned about what the Life-Binder's reaction to the ploy would be. He was aware of the artifact's sordid history. At the end of the War of the Ancients, the blue, green, bronze, and red Aspects had found and enchanted the weapon so that neither Deathwing nor any other dragon could wield it again. Millennia after that, it had fallen into the hands of the Dragonmaw orcs, who had then used it to enslave the Life-Binder and her brood. Many red dragons had been forced to act as mounts of war during that harrowing time.

"This is the answer we have been waiting for, Lady Alexstrasza," Kalec reassured her.

"I know..." The Life-Binder sounded forlorn. "I will depart to inform Nozdormu, then. Continue your research."

Everything hinged on the Timeless One. Even if Kalec found a means to alter the artifact, the Aspects would need to call upon Nozdormu's aid to retrieve it from the timeways. The Dragon Soul no longer existed in the present. Much of it had been destroyed over a decade ago by Rhonin. Thereafter, the black dragon Sinestra had collected the weapon's remaining shards—by then largely devoid of their power—and used them to her own ends. Those last fragments of the Dragon Soul had eventually been obliterated as well. Bringing the artifact back was an impossible thing to ask of the Timeless One, yet Kalec, Ysera, and Alexstrasza knew it must be done.

After the Life-Binder left, Kalec returned to a small table in the Cenarion refuge. Scrying orbs, which he used to communicate with his agents in the Nexus, were scattered across its surface. He plucked one of the devices up and rotated it in his hand, mulling over the Dragon Soul's hurdles.

Ysera padded to Kalec's side and opened her mouth to speak when the earth wrenched, nearly knocking both of them to the ground. Screams began drifting in from the base of Nordrassil, where the Earthen Ring and Cenarion Circle were camped. The blue Aspect exchanged a wary glance with Ysera. Quakes had been common since the Cataclysm, but this one had felt as if it originated right beneath their feet.

The earth heaved again, more violently than before.

"It cannot be..." Ysera's eyes widened as she braced herself against one of the druidic structure's wooden walls. There was a mix of fear and understanding in her voice that made Kalec uneasy.

"Is it Deathwing?" A sliver of dread crept up his spine. "Is he here?"

The green Aspect rushed out of the building without answering. Kalec followed on her heels as she raced toward Nordrassil's base.

Numerous fissures had opened around the World Tree. The shaman and druids there were pulling their comrades who had fallen into the chasms to safety. Ysera, however, did not stop. Much to Kalec's confusion, she continued past the World Tree and up through a line of trees encircling a tranquil clearing. Sitting at the center was Thrall, absorbed in meditation, from the looks of him. His mate, Aggra, was at his side, shaking the other orc's shoulders.

The brown-skinned female turned to Kalec and Ysera when the two Aspects entered the clearing.

"Something is wrong with Go'el," she said, using the orc's birth name. "I searched for him when the earthquakes began and found him like this. He will not wake from this state. What has happened?"

Ysera knelt by Thrall. The male orc looked as if he was in extreme agony, his face contorted in pain, but there were no visible injuries on his body. "It is him, then..." the green Aspect said.

The Awakened scrutinized Thrall's left hand. It was empty, from what Kalec could see. This gave the green Aspect pause. She quickly scooped up a handful of soil and placed it in the orc's palm.

"Is there a connection between Thrall and the earthquakes?" Kalec asked.

"He has communed with the earth in a manner that no other shaman has before. The earth is a part of him, and he a part of it. Something has trapped his spirit. These fissures... these are his wounds."

"There must be a way to free him," Aggra pleaded.

"If his spirit has not traveled too far from Hyjal, there is a possibility." Ysera stood and beckoned to Aggra. "We must assemble the shaman and the druids. Much work lies ahead of us."

Thrall's mate hesitated. "I cannot leave him like this..."

"You must trust me if you wish to save him." Ysera's voice was barely a whisper, but it filled Kalec with an overwhelming sense of urgency.

Aggra must have experienced it too. Slowly, the orc joined the green Aspect.

"Lady Ysera, is there anything I can do?" Kalec felt woefully out of place. Thrall's predicament lay in the realm of the elements, a domain over which the blue Aspect had no power.

"Stay by his side and, whatever happens, ensure that there is always soil in his hand."

With that, Ysera and Aggra departed, the latter glancing back over her shoulder in worry.

It was not the answer Kalec had hoped for, but he complied. Briefly, he wondered if Ysera had given him this menial task because she did not think him worthy of something greater, but he knew that the Awakened was not one to judge others in that way. There was no hidden meaning in her words. He was needed here. That was all.

As he sat down next to Thrall, Kalec realized that perhaps he had been trying too hard to find a means for *himself* to defeat Deathwing, thus overlooking other, more viable solutions. If Thrall had truly managed to combine his essence with the earth, and vice versa, did it signify that this mortal held a portion of Azeroth within his spirit in the same fashion that Deathwing did?

The blue Aspect pulled a scrying orb from a pouch at his side. After a moment, the cloudy mist within the device faded away, revealing the face of Narygos, a member of his flight.

"Kalecgos." The other dragon bowed his head.

The blue Aspect returned the gesture before speaking. "There was a short-lived being who once wielded the Dragon Soul against the red dragonflight, correct?"

"The orc named Nekros Skullcrusher," Narygos replied. "A most despicable creature."

"Yes, yes. He was the one. How badly was he damaged by the artifact?"

"From what Rhonin documented on the subject, not at all," Narygos stated. "The Dragon Soul does not negatively affect short-lived races in the way it does our kind. It is quite unique in that respect, in fact."

"Thank you, my friend. That will be all." Kalec slipped the orb back into its pouch.

Thrall, a mortal who has tapped into the essence of the earth, the blue Aspect pondered. Not long ago, the orc had helped bind Earth to Kalec, Ysera, Nozdormu, and Alexstrasza, allowing them to combine their powers and stave off an attack by Deathwing's servants. At that time, the shaman had acted merely as a conduit to Azeroth. Now, however, he was much more than that. *He* was the answer... the fulcrum by which the Dragon Soul could be turned against its maker.

Kalecgos added soil to Thrall's palm and watched the orc's face twist in pain, fearing that the only hope the Aspects had for completing their venture was on the verge of being lost forever.

Deathwing raked Thrall's chest with a clawed hand, tearing another gash in the orc's earthen skin. The shaman's body was riddled with molten gouges, but not one of his foe's attacks had been a killing blow.

The black Aspect longed to break Thrall's will, to mold him into an agent of the dragon's own design. That was the only explanation the orc could find for why his adversary had not yet destroyed him.

Deathwing had almost succeeded. Trapped within the cavern, Thrall's spirit had become numb to Azeroth save for its pain. If he had been in this situation mere weeks ago, when his doubts, fears, and anger still ruled his heart, he would have given in. He would have

lost himself to this prison of isolation. Yet now he had never been surer of his purpose as a shaman.

"The titans believed that you had the strength to endure," Thrall said. His power was nothing compared to the Aspect's, and so the orc used the only weapons he could: his words. "They trusted you. Was it fear and doubt that caused you to fail and align with the very beings who seek to end all life on Azeroth?"

"Your loyalties are misplaced, shaman. If so inclined, the titans would exterminate your kind and the other lesser races without a second thought. The Old Gods know the futility of the titans' works. They have pledged to break the shackles of my charge. When that day comes, I will purge every remnant of the titans' presence and reign over this world from on high. Azeroth will be born anew."

Deathwing drove his knee into Thrall's chest, sending the orc crashing back into the cavern wall. The shaman was struggling to rise when he heard a series of voices reverberate through the earth outside the chamber. It was the Earthen Ring: Muln Earthfury, Nobundo, and... Aggra.

Through the spirits of the elementals, the shaman were searching for him. Thrall reached out for his physical body and, to his surprise, felt a fresh pile of cool, damp soil in his hand. His connection with the leagues of earth between Hyjal and the cavern flared to life. The orc focused all of his concentration to mentally shout a reply to the elementals just outside the chamber.

Silence followed.

He was preparing to call out again when energy surged through him, and his earthen body began to heal. The shaman were also sealing the chasms in Hyjal, he realized. As they did, his wounds were mending. The orc sprang to his feet, reinvigorated.

"You didn't answer my question," Thrall said. "Was it fear and doubt that caused you to fail?"

Deathwing's eyes blazed crimson. He lunged forward and caught Thrall by the throat, hauling him into the air. The black Aspect drew one of his vicious claws across the orc's stomach.

"In a system flawed to its core, the only failure is blinding yourself to truth. However many wretched beings you and the other Aspects deceive with your erroneous cause is of no consequence. Victory will always prove elusive so long as you throw your lives away for a hopeless future."

Thrall's stone skin was melting where the black Aspect clenched his throat. Deathwing tightened his grip, his fingers sinking through the orc's neck. His connection with Hyjal wavered again.

"No..." the orc snarled as he thrashed against Deathwing's hold. "We will triumph... because we face our challenges... together. You failed... because you chose to... bear your burden... *alone!*"

The earth around the cavern began trembling in what Thrall attributed to a manifestation of Deathwing's anger. Yet rather than press his attack, the black Aspect suddenly cast him aside.

Deathwing thrust his hands out, roaring in fury. Massive boulders of the Old Gods' blood wrenched up from the cavern floor and moved to a high corner of the chamber, forming a thick barrier of the crystalline substance. It took a moment for Thrall to put the pieces together and find the source of the tremors. The roots of Nordrassil were hurtling toward the chamber, burrowing through stone and soil at incredible speed.

The Earthen Ring—and the Cenarion Circle, it seemed—had found him.

Thrall charged forward and plowed into the Aspect, knocking him to the floor and interrupting his spellwork. Deathwing scrambled up, seething. His body pulsed, tendrils of lava slithering out from the cracks in his breastplate. The black dragon was beginning to move toward Thrall when one of Nordrassil's roots exploded through the cavern wall in a shower of crystal shards.

Deathwing planted his feet as the World Tree's root careened into him. For a short time, he held his ground against the living battering ram, its width greater than a kodo beast's girth. Three other roots followed soon after, bursting into the cavern and driving the black Aspect through the bottom of the chamber.

A fifth root slowly entered the hollow. It wrapped around Thrall's waist and pulled him out of the void. Once outside, the orc's connection with his physical body solidified. He felt the earth as it was, as it was meant to be, without the influence of the Old Gods. All of the pain and agony that he had experienced, the spirit-rending feelings that were Deathwing's entire existence, melted away.

Alexstrasza found the Timeless One waiting.

He stood motionless high atop the mountain. This far from the druidic and shamanic camps, the Life-Binder had assumed her draconic form. It was refreshing to stretch her wings again after spending so much time in her elven body. Once she had landed beside the scaled bronze Aspect, she told him of Ysera and Kalec's plan regarding the Dragon Soul and the part he would be required to play in it. The Life-Binder had surmised that Nozdormu would reject her, and she wouldn't have questioned why. His mood, however, was much more subdued than she had expected.

"The Dragon Soul..." Nozdormu said. "There have been times when I considered going back and righting that day. Saving Malygos's flight... sparing all of us from that terrible fate."

The Timeless One heaved a great sigh, never breaking his gaze from the horizon. "And if I were to commit such an act, I would be no different than the infinite dragonflight and... my future sself."

"You would be more different than you can possibly imagine," Alexstrasza replied. "Eonar charged me with preserving life. When the topic of the Dragon Soul was broached, I asked myself how I could observe my duty while bringing the most destructive weapon ever forged back into existence."

"Yet you plan to do sso," Nozdormu stated.

"Yes. Because to protect life, there are times when we must destroy that which seeks to end it..."

The Life-Binder had thought long about the Dragon Soul and the unthinkable suffering it had caused not only her and her flight, but also other living beings throughout history. Ultimately, she had come to a difficult realization: no cost was too great if it meant preserving the world.

"I cannot force you to do what you think is wrong," Alexstrasza said. "But ask yourself this: did Aman'Thul grant you dominion over time just so you could watch this world die?"

"This future inhabited by the infinite dragonflight, if I were to travel there..." Nozdormu trailed off. Apprehension and fear radiated from the Timeless One. The Life-Binder sensed that something about the apocalypse beyond the state of the timeways troubled the bronze Aspect. Yet she was already asking so much of Nozdormu; if he did not wish to voice his concerns, that was his choice.

Alexstrasza lowered her head to Nozdormu and spoke softly. "Unto each of you is given a gift..."

"Unto all of you isss given the duty." The Timeless One completed the ancient words without hesitation. They were the titans' last command to the Aspects, a reminder that while each of them was unique, their powers and knowledge were never meant to be separate. They were one.

"Time is your charge just as life is mine, but what is *our* duty?" Alexstrasza said.

"To preserve thisss world at... all costs. To prevent the Hour of Twilight," Nozdormu whispered.

The Timeless One was quiet after that. The Life-Binder followed his gaze into the sky, sorrow tugging at her heart. "Have any of your other agents returned?"

"No. None will. Yet I wait. I wasss once lost in time until Thrall aided me. Now I am losst outside of it." To Alexstrasza's surprise, the bronze Aspect chuckled in pained amusement.

The Timeless One finally turned away from the horizon and looked to Alexstrasza. "For too long I have been rigid in my waysss. What you say is true. The time for waiting is past..."

The four Dragon Aspects and Thrall had gathered at the druidic haven at the foot of Nordrassil. An ethereal representation of the Dragon Soul hovered in the air among them. It gave Alexstrasza a chill to stand there. In a way, it reminded her of the ceremony that had been conducted millennia ago to empower the artifact.

Despite being an arcane facsimile summoned by Kalecgos, the weapon held power. Bathed in the pale violet light emitted by the Dragon Soul's image, the Aspects noticed

that their shadows were flickering between their current mortal forms and their true draconic bodies.

"If we are to acquire the Dragon Soul, we must first journey to the future I have foreseen: the end of time itself," Nozdormu said. "By destroying the infinite dragonflight and its leader, who lord over the apocalypse, the timeways will be reopened, allowing us to slip into the past and retrieve the Dragon Soul."

"How can history proceed if the artifact is suddenly plucked from the timeways?" Thrall asked. The orc had been standing silently among the Aspects. He had already done so much to help them. The Life-Binder wanted to grant him peace, but she needed him to risk his life once again for the safety of Azeroth.

"Time is not as linear as some might think. My flight will halt the flow of history to negate the impact we make on the past. But we can hold together the integrity of the timeways only for so long. When our work is done, we will return the Dragon Soul to its rightful place..."

"As to the matter of its rightful place," Kalecgos said, "there are many points in time when we could obtain the artifact. Its properties, however, were altered over the course of history. If our plan is to succeed, we must use the weapon in its purest form. Once Nozdormu has opened the timeways, we will take the Dragon Soul from the era in which it was created: the War of the Ancients."

"That leaves the wielder," Alexstrasza said, then beckoned toward Thrall.

"My friend." Kalecgos rested his hand on Thrall's shoulder. "From what I have discovered, the artifact was constructed in such a way that dragons who wield it are torn apart by its energies. It fills us with a pain that leads to madness. But short-lived beings, due to their very nature, can use it without bodily harm."

"There is great risk in what we ask of you, Thrall." Ysera's lilting voice wafted through the room. "After the Dragon Soul is brought to the present, you must transport it to Wyrmmrest Temple. It is a place of great power connected to the Chamber of the Aspects, where the artifact was originally imbued. The Dragon Soul will already be empowered, but we will infuse it with our essences again, making it more potent than it ever was... and potentially more unstable. Know that if Deathwing learns of our intent, he and his minions will surely converge on the temple to waylay you at all costs."

"I do not mean to question your wisdom," Thrall said humbly, "but other races throughout Azeroth have also suffered Deathwing's fury. We could muster an army of mortals the like of which has never been seen to crush the black Aspect. Would that not be a simpler course of action?"

"Even if every living mortal faced Deathwing, it would matter not," Alexstrasza said. "He has been twisted by the Old Gods' dark energies. No physical assault, however immense, can destroy him. He must be... *unmade*. His very essence must be unraveled, and the Dragon Soul alone has the power to do so."

"But only with you at our side," Kalec added. "The artifact was imbued with the essences of the four Aspects, but Deathwing never imparted his into it. If we are to use this weapon to defeat him, we must infuse it with the power of the Earth-Warder. You, Thrall, possess a portion, however small, of that exact thing: the essence of Azeroth itself."

"It is impossible for us to use the Dragon Soul on our own," Alexstrasza said to Thrall. "It falls to you... if you choose. This is more than I would have ever wished to ask of you, especially after you have already risked your life to help us."

"I am honored that you seek my aid," Thrall said. "I have but one request. The short-lived races vanquished Ragnaros, and before him the Lich King and countless other threats. Time and time again, we have been instrumental in safeguarding Azeroth. We

are invested in it as much as you are. With all due respect, I believe that this plan, as noble as it is, can succeed only with their assistance."

There was no doubt that what Thrall said was right. Alexstrasza had hoped to avoid dragging more mortals into this perilous endeavor. "If they are willing, they are welcome."

"There are always those who are willing." The orc smiled. "I will send out the call."

After Thrall departed, the Aspects lingered in silence.

"A question has plagued me," Kalec said. "If stopping the Hour of Twilight is *our* purpose, if this is what the titans created us to do, then what will become of us when it is done?"

A chill breeze stole through the Cenarion refuge as if to punctuate Kalec's words. The Aspects shifted, glancing sidelong at one another. They had all pondered this troubling mystery.

"Yesss... If we fulfill our duty, what worth do we have afterward?" Nozdormu brooded. "With the timeways defiled, even I cannot see what the future has in store for uss..."

"Will our actions result in loss... or attainment?" Ysera mused.

"The titans clearly had a plan for us," Kalec argued. "Magic, time, life, nature... they will forever exist. It is only logical that we were meant to safeguard them for eternity."

Alexstrasza looked on as Ysera, Kalec, and Nozdormu broke into a discussion, voicing their hopes and concerns. Their path forward was straight, but beyond the Hour of Twilight it was shrouded in a fog of uncertainty. The Life-Binder kept her own fears locked tight inside herself. She was the Dragonqueen, and if ever there was a time when her comrades needed her to guide them, it was at this moment.

"None of us knows for sure," Alexstrasza said, drawing the others' attention. "And if we did, would it matter? This is *why* we were charged by the titans. The wondrous gifts that they gave us are for us to use now."

The Life-Binder grasped the hands of the two Aspects nearest to her, Ysera and Kalecgos. They in turn did the same with Nozdormu. Their magics intermingled, flowing through each of the dragons. The soothing energies calmed their nerves and filled them with a sense of unwavering determination.

"We will venture into the unknown as one," Alexstrasza said. "As we were always meant to be."