

ISSUE 22

GUILD MAG

INFILTRATING THE INQUEST



THE INQUEST THREAT

Infiltrate the Inquest with Draxynnic's lore primer on this asuran megakrewe.

COMMUNITY ART

As always we've got amazing artwork by the talented *Guild Wars 2* community.

NEW UNDERWATER EXPERIENCE

Underwater combat has evolved - but for better or worse? We find out!

IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURED

16 INQUEST LABS
Discover the various Inquest bases scattered around central Tyria.

56 COLLEGE OF AESTHETICS
Looking for badass heavy-armor looks for your asura? We've got you covered!

29 PESTILENCE & PLAGUE: SEASON 4 RECAP
Season 4 of the Living World is well and truly underway; recap the story so far.

LORE & HISTORY

06 THE INQUEST THREAT
Get up to speed on the Inquest with this primer by Draxynnic.

40 THE SCARAB PLAGUE
With the Scarab Plague prevalent in Season 4, Fearan explores its history.

11 DRAONIC ENERGIES & THE INQUEST
Elder Dragon research and the Inquest go hand-in-hand; uncover why with Amala.

45 TWISTING TIME
The latest entry in Draxynnic's exploration of elite specialisation lore.



EDITORIALS

22 DOWNLOADING THE TYRIAN CONSCIOUSNESS
Phoenix explores how choices are handled in the storytelling of *Guild Wars 2*.

50 THE NEW UNDERWATER EXPERIENCE
Underwater combat was updated this May. We explore the impact it's had.

ART & FICTION

64 COMMUNITY ART: FOR THE LOVE OF ASURA
Delve into this issue's collection of awesome community-created art.

70 RESISTING THE AWAKENED FETTERS
Inquest ideals vs the call of Joko; one asura attempts to resist his fate.

COMMUNITY

60 GUILD SPOTLIGHT
Black Lion Expeditions is a guild focused on supporting its members - find out more here!



EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to our latest magazine! This issue it's all about the Inquest; we explore who they are, their effect on Tyria and their part in asuran culture. Enjoy, bookah!

Greetings, progeny! This latest issue of the GuildMag magazine is all about asura, and in particular, the Inquest. This particular megakrewe can often be found on the wrong side of the Commander, willing to do what's necessary in the name of research. With their involvement in the early episodes of Season 4 of the Living World, now is the perfect time to probe further into the organization - so here we are!

Inside these pages you'll find articles covering a huge

range of areas, including a lore primer on the Inquest courtesy of Draxynnic, as well as beautiful community artwork inspired by asuran characters, curated by Starconspirator. In addition, Phoenix and Maiirin present an exploration of Inquest labs in central Tyria, while Amala shows off two outfits for asuran heavy armor-wearing characters in *College of Aesthetics*.

It's not all about the Inquest, however. We've got two great opinion pieces exploring the role of choices in storytelling and the latest updates to underwater

combat - make sure to give them both a read! Our guild spotlight feature is also back for another issue, this time with *Black Lion Expeditions [BLE]* - if you're looking for a guild, this could be the new home for you!

Our long-term readers may notice some changes in our team listing below. Since the start of the year we've recruited several new team members and re-shuffled some existing ones into new management roles, so please join me in welcoming everyone new and returning!

We hope you enjoy Issue 22!

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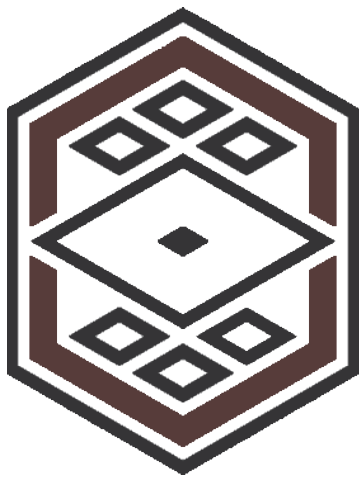
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THE INQUEST THREAT

BY DRAXYNNIC

A transcript of a lecture given by Professor Blorp to new Pact recruits early in the Season of the Phoenix, 1331 AE.

The Inquest. I'm sure you're all familiar with these arrogant little pus-stains on Tyria. They're probably the Pact's most persistent and annoying little irritations besides the Elder Dragons and their minions. Pretty much anywhere you might find yourselves assigned in the field, you're likely to find these slimeballs getting underfoot, stirring up any nearby dragon minions with their ill-conceived, so-called "research" into attempting to control the Elder Dragons, not to mention antagonising the locals by using them as unwilling test subjects and trying to steal artifacts and inventions needed for the Pact's mission.

You may think you're here to fight dragons, but each and every one of you bookahs will need to be able to deal with these bottom-feeders poking their putrescent olfactory

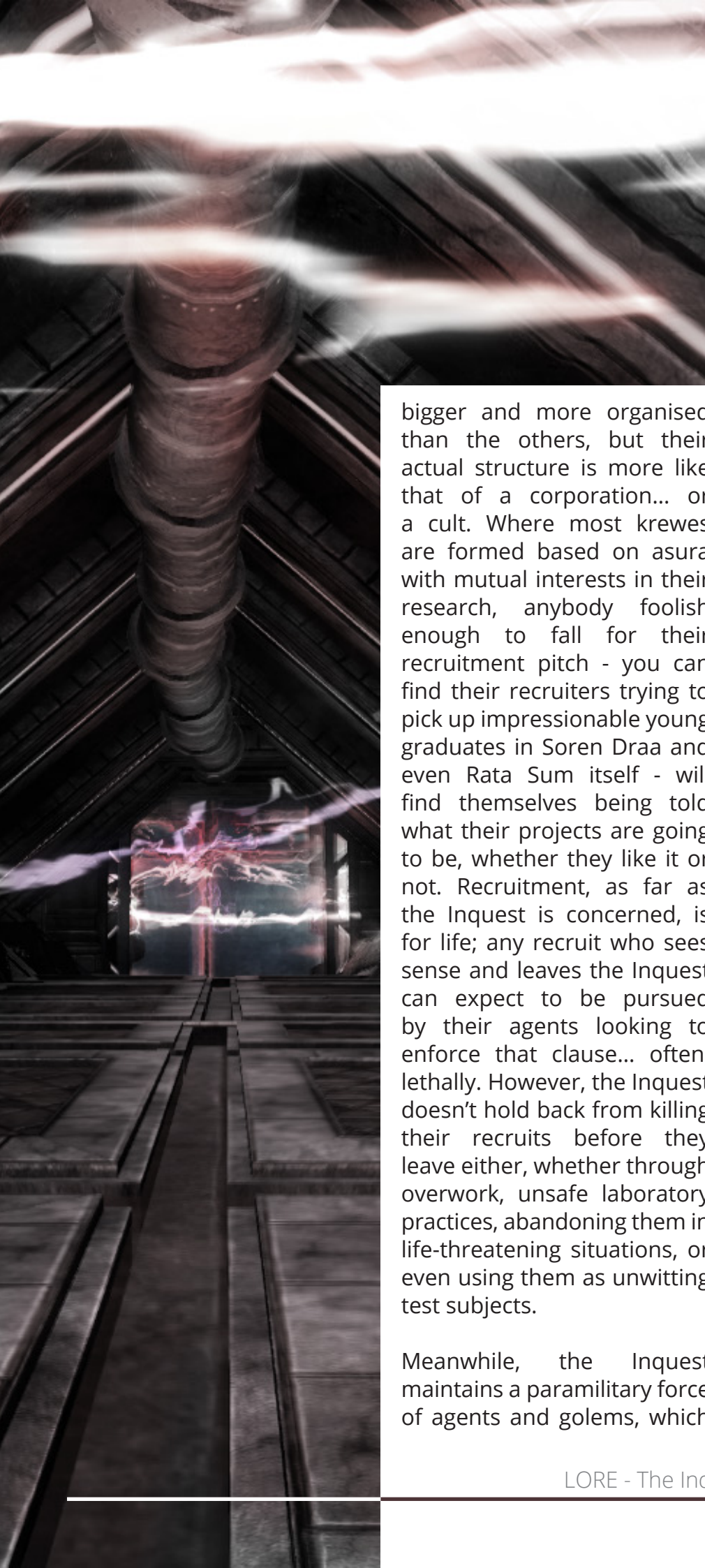
organs where they don't belong if you expect to be a successful Pact operative. Fortunately, you have me to educate you. You're welcome. Listen closely, because there *will* be a test on this. Passing means you get to make Tyria a marginally better place by killing them instead of getting killed.

So, how did our least favourite collection of odoriferous pond scum get started?

The Inquest's origins started in the generations after the asura diaspora to the surface. Many of the inventions made prior to the rise of the Great Destroyer were lost in the evacuation, and more still were lost in the years afterwards as their inventors refused to share them. After some generations of this, some bright spark decided that they weren't going to let this keep happening, and founded the Inquest

to become a repository of knowledge for all asura. Just how they went from the asuran equivalent of the PRIORITY to the gang of thieves, kidnappers and murderers we all know and hate is not something you'll find in their recruitment pamphlets. If I had to guess, I'd say that they found that the other asura weren't too happy about just handing over their hard-won data without a bit of strong-arming, leading to an increasing tendency towards ruthlessness among their organisation until it became their defining characteristic. Certainly, any inclination they might have ever had for using this information for the good of asurakind has clearly been put in favour of using it for the good of the Inquest... and I'm not talking about the suckers at the bottom.

Since then, they have been presenting themselves as just another krew that is



it employs to intimidate, sabotage, and steal from other krewes.

So, how do they get away with all this?

Because the idiots on the Arcane Council let them. Those who aren't Inquest themselves.

bigger and more organised than the others, but their actual structure is more like that of a corporation... or a cult. Where most krewes are formed based on asura with mutual interests in their research, anybody foolish enough to fall for their recruitment pitch - you can find their recruiters trying to pick up impressionable young graduates in Soren Draa and even Rata Sum itself - will find themselves being told what their projects are going to be, whether they like it or not. Recruitment, as far as the Inquest is concerned, is for life; any recruit who sees sense and leaves the Inquest can expect to be pursued by their agents looking to enforce that clause... often, lethally. However, the Inquest doesn't hold back from killing their recruits before they leave either, whether through overwork, unsafe laboratory practices, abandoning them in life-threatening situations, or even using them as unwitting test subjects.

Meanwhile, the Inquest maintains a paramilitary force of agents and golems, which

As most asura are more interested in research than politics, the number of places on the Arcane Council that need to be filled are greater than the number of asura in good standing with the ability to fill them. As a result, it has been simplicity itself for the Inquest to insert its representatives into the Council, ensuring that the Imbecile Council grants them status as a legitimate megakrewe and does not formally recognise their illegitimate activities. In exchange, the Inquest uses its ability to demand that its researchers pursue projects of the Inquest's choosing to take up projects that the Moronic Council considers necessary, but which no asura is likely to join of their own free will. In the meantime, the Inquest ensures that its plots to take over Rata Sum are maintained at a level of plausible deniability that allows the Oblivious Council to continue turning a blind eye, such as the use of supposedly "malfunctioning" golems.

Meanwhile, the Inquest are given free reign through much

of Metrica Province, opposed only by local Peacemakers and the krewes they victimise. The height of their arrogance could be seen in the western Brisban Wildlands before the rise of Mordremoth, where they formed an open alliance with the Nightmare Court and human criminals from Kryta.

From our perspective, however, their most dangerous activities come from their experimentation with dragon energy. These lunatics think they can harness and control the Elder Dragons for their own usage, and they are obsessed with creating dragon minions - usually by infusing kidnapped victims with dragon corruption, including that of multiple dragons - and controlling them. Unfortunately, their efforts to control dragon minions have met with some success, encouraging them to continue even if they do regularly lose control again. Every time one of their bases researching this has been destroyed, whether by their own experiments exploding in their face, Pact intervention, or some other cause, they've simply built a larger and more remote base elsewhere to continue their research.

This is not the only way in which they've been a problem for the Pact. While experimentation on sylvari has been banned among most asura, the Inquest continue this line of research, and seem particularly interested in

powering golems with sylvari life essence. Worse is that the Inquest does not restrict its theft to asura krewes - it is suspected that the airships used by Scarlet Briar's Aetherblades were based on designs stolen from the Pact by the Inquest, although the Inquest appears to have withdrawn their association from the Aetherblades shortly after Scarlet entered the picture. I might consider giving them some credit for disassociating themselves from that psychopath, if not for the fact that they were partially responsible for creating her in the first place, and thus knew her well enough to know that she'd care about any promises she made to members of her little coalition about as much as the Inquest leadership cares about their subordinates.

When the Zephyrite fleet came crashing down in the opening stages of the rise of Mordremoth, the Inquest were also quick to swoop in, claiming salvage rights over the entire crash site, kidnapping the fallen Zephyrites, and attempting to steal the magical crystals littered around the crash site - probably as part of their research into dragon energies. Fortunately, though, they did not appear to be eager to get further involved in the region as Mordremoth's forces grew in strength. The discovery of Rata Novus apparently piqued their interest, but it was secured by Pact forces and



more reputable asura before they even knew about it.

The next time that the Inquest got in the way of the Pact came when they provided mercenaries to the fallen human god of indiscriminate murder, Balthazar, initially in his disguise as that other fallen human god of unseen murder, the mursaat Lazarus the Dire. As a result, the Pact expedition pursuing Balthazar to Draconis Mons found the Inquest already well established there. However, the Inquest had split away from Balthazar's other mercenaries, being more interested in the ruins of Rata Arcanum and the possibility of uncovering some of the last discoveries of the rogue asura Zinn to be found there.



Their most damaging act of colossal stupidity, however, might have been the decision to build their latest set of major labs on the islands near Elona. We're still collecting reports as to what precisely happened, but preliminary data indicates that Inquest bases on Istan and the Dajkah archipelago were compromised by the lich Palawa Joko, granting him access to their work on receiverless gates, the Scarab Plague that consumed the Primeval Dynasty, and, knowing the Inquest, their latest work on dragon energies. Intelligence suggests that the self-aggrandising windbag intended to use these as part of some convoluted plot against Tyria in revenge for the co-opting of his armies during the final stages of the campaign against Balthazar. One might think that the insufficiently-decayed corpse might have reason to show some gratitude for the preservation of his empire and his release from a trap that could only be broken by the Arson God's death, but apparently he saw it as a reason to unleash war and pestilence on an innocent

populace instead.

Fortunately, his plot was foiled before the scarabs were released in their most virulent form, but he wouldn't have got that far without those short-sighted imbeciles at the Inquest.

So, now that you know why they are a problem, you may be wondering what to expect when these grease stains get underfoot.

First, they're asura. So don't expect many Inquest acting as meathead warriors or guardians when they can, and do, get golems to do the job. Expect to see golems providing the heavy

muscle, protective shields, and mobile artillery. They're also fond of using little golems that will try to sneak in and discharge energy fields, drop bombs, or just plain explode. The full range of golems that these scumbags have developed is too varied to detail them all, and new models are constantly adopted and old ones discarded. The Order of Whispers keeps dossiers on currently known models, and you are all advised to devote some time keeping yourselves up to date on the latest developments in between drinking yourselves to unconsciousness or whatever it is you ignoramuses think is a good use of your spare time.



Every so often you may find an Inquest member piloting a golem suit, but this is becoming less common as later models become increasingly more autonomous. You're probably more likely to see them being used as hazardous environment suits, prisoner control, or other non-combat purposes rather than being deliberately used in battle. Some of the Inquest higher-ups, though, like to do their fighting personally, but the babies want to avoid actually risking getting hurt when they do so, so they'll build the most souped-up golem exoskeleton they can and fight you from inside that. Crack it open and give them the thrashing they deserve.

Those Inquest who have more bravery than the typical rabbit - my most insincere apologies to any Hare followers there may be in the norn section of the audience, why you would worship rabbits of all things I just do not understand -



tend to be more predictable, probably since it's a bit harder to teach an Inquest dog new tricks than to come up with a new golem. Expect to face a lot of spellcasters, although they may not be all that competent, since those that are actually valuable will probably be holed up in a panic room somewhere at the slightest hint of danger, leaving apprentices to do the fighting. Elementalism seems to be their most popular form of magic, possibly because they find it the easiest to work into their magitech.

Engineers, unsurprisingly, are also common to see in an Inquest deployment. As well as keeping larger items of technology in passable repair, you're likely to see Inquest engineers deploying field turrets and scrapper-style heli-drones. Grenades are also popular, and instead of flamethrowers they have developed a kind of ice-thrower - probably primarily intended for damage control when one of their experiments inevitably goes haywire through their own incompetence, but they'll happily turn you into an icicle if given the chance.

Finally, if you've demonstrated that you have better short-term memory than the average goldfish and you recall the start of this lecture, you'll remember that the Inquest likes to intimidate, sabotage and steal from from reputable krewes, Pact

bases, and anyone else who gives them an opportunity. Not surprisingly, they have a special forces division of thieves and assassins to perform such underhanded tasks. Don't underestimate these operatives - they're likely to be veterans in field operations rather than the usual stream of apprentices being sacrificed as cannon fodder by the Inquest higher-ups, so they may catch you by surprise by proving to have genuinely dangerous combat skills even if they don't have the typical magic and gadgets of the Inquest.

And this isn't considering the threats posed by whatever ill-conceived experiments and superweapons they might be developing. This will vary over time and between bases even more than their golem designs, and I really don't have the time to give you an overview of the things that you might face that half of you will probably forget next time you drink yourselves silly. Remember to keep up to date with the dossiers provided by the Order of Whispers if you even suspect that there's an Inquest base nearby. It probably won't be enough to make sure you're prepared, but at least then you might have a chance to not be surprised by whatever abomination they might cook up next to you.

All right, that's all I have for you morons today. Get out of here! Class dismissed!



BY AMALA

DRACONIC ENERGIES & THE INQUEST

We shall begin with the definition of draconic energy. Also known as dragon energy or dragon magic, draconic energy can be described as the magical signature unique to each Elder Dragon. To illustrate, Zhaitan was the only Elder Dragon able to raise the dead, but after his defeat the remaining Elder Dragons absorbed some of his unique energy. Recent observations such as Kralkatorrik's ability to Brand the dead is due to this phenomenon.

The Inquest, through diabolical means and opportunistic accidents, have come to be at the forefront in experimentation utilising draconic energy. Here, I seek to chronicle the evolution of their research from the discovery at the Thaumanova Reactor to their present-day activity.

THEY BLEW IT UP

Your first encounter with the Thaumanova Reactor was likely to be its ruins in Metrica Province. Amid the broken buildings and coughing asura, there was chaos in the most literal sense. The fallout of some disaster imbued the atmosphere with a high concentration of chaos energy, an unpredictable form of magic at best, which caused the teleportation of random creatures from all around Tyria to the ruins. A crackle of energy would bring forth a minotaur and if you waited long enough that crackle would sound again, and the minotaur would now be a griffon.

Certain rooms inside the building had been transformed into distinct biomes. There was vegetation and a disorientated oakheart in one room. Not far from there, snow fell in a room filled with creatures native to the cold, such as Ice Elementals. The next hall wouldn't be classed as a biome, but it stood apart from the others in its patches of fire on the floor. It was here that a giant fire elemental was created when a golem meant to clear the chaos energy, had its core fuse with it instead. Lastly, there was the strange room filled with angry crabs. The walls were covered with

coral and a slow mist rose with the faint impression of bubbles.

Where do the Inquest come into this? You wouldn't see them amongst the casualties or the clean-up operations and you shouldn't expect to, as this wasn't even an Inquest lab. They were there though. Underneath the Thaumanova Reactor they conducted their dangerous research on chaos energy in secret. It is unknown how long they had occupied the facility.

CHAOS ENERGY IS A MISNOMER

In 1326 AE, Captain Ellen Kiel ran against Evon Gnashblade for a spot on the Captain's Council and won. She then delivered on the electoral promise she made to win over the asuran council members: an investigation into the Thaumanova disaster using the Consortium's Fractals of the Mists. You could now immerse yourself in the moments before the catastrophe and discover its cause.

“ A crackle of energy would bring forth a minotaur.

Inside the Thaumanova Reactor fractal was pure mayhem. Portals popped up all around the reactor. They spewed out aatxe from the mists, Flame Legion from Ascalon, Destroyers from the depths of Tyria and more.

Increasing the tension of the Inquest scientists was the knowledge that if they didn't escape soon, they would be incinerated in a magical explosion. The Thaumanova Reactor was going into meltdown. They had pushed science too far.

Several of the Inquest blamed the same person for their current predicament while they fought or fled for their lives. A 'special consultant', someone with whom the Inquest had previous dealings, had been called in to assist their research. It was this consultant who goaded the krewa chief into a little competition of who could push things further, faster. Some scoffed at this consultant, this *sylvari* who told them that it wasn't even chaos energy they were playing with, but something else entirely.





Her name was Scarlet Briar. With her work at the Thaumanova Reactor, she identified the global network of magical channels that, until then, scholars had only theorized: ley lines. This historic moment brought her closer to her goal of using them to awaken the Elder Dragon Mordremoth.

Chaos energy was a misnomer, she told them. What the Inquest harnessed, and at her recommendations agitated and amplified, was in fact draconic energy. Combine the Inquest's ignorance with the fact that the Thaumanova Reactor sat on an intersection of multiple ley lines and you reach the explosive end of unstable research. The investigation could be closed.

Solve one mystery and another one appears. The fractal's exit route was blocked by a coalescence of energy which took on a humanoid form. Dessa, the head of research in fractals, called it an anomaly, a remark which ended up naming the entity 'the Thaumanova Anomaly'.

Two years later, after the death of Mordremoth, more of these anomalies appeared. Created by the influx of magic borne by the death of the Elder Dragon, the Ley Line Anomaly is far larger than its Thaumanova relative. Furthermore, contact with these new anomalies caused hallucinations where smaller unhappy anomalies flash in and out of existence near you, a condition which can only be cured with a shadowstone or some Consortium-sold krait oil.

To avoid speculation, I will let you draw your own conclusions on the link between draconic energy, ley lines and these anomalous beings.

COLOURS OF THE COIL

After the destruction of the Thaumanova Reactor, the Inquest committed resources to their facility in Mount Maelstrom: the Infinite Coil Reactor. There were six main zones around the perimeter of the facility. Each was assigned a colour and a different type of dragon minion for experimentation.

Zone Black held the Risen.

Zone Red held the Destroyers.

Zone Violet held the Branded.

Zone White held the Icebrood.



Zone Green was intended for the Mordrem, but as Mordremoth was not yet awake, the area held dangerous plant life.

Zone Blue was intended for the minions of Deep Sea Dragon, but the construction of this area was not completed.

This separation of the types of minions resembles the aftermath of the Thaumanova Reactor, where different biomes appeared after the fallout. What seemed accidental and chaotic at Thaumanova was harnessed and controlled at the Infinite Coil - the Inquest appeared to have learned from their mistakes.

Eventually, the Pact launched an attack on the facility and wrested control of it from the Inquest. It then became clear that the surface buildings were only the tip of the iceberg.

CREATING MONSTERS

The central part of the complex, the Crucible of Eternity, went deep underground, with a pillar of light piercing through the levels. This light was caused by the draconic energy that had been siphoned from minions, to be concentrated at the bottom of the complex, at Eternity's Focus.

Kudu was the head of the operation. His work in the Crucible of Eternity expanded on the research done by his late mentor, Snaff, one of the founding members of Destiny's Edge. However, where Snaff found research into draconic energy to be too dangerous to continue, Kudu was seduced by its potential. Zojja, who was Snaff's apprentice at the time of his death, could not allow the perversion of their mentor's work to continue, choosing to head a strike team which went down to stop him.

As they went down through the labs which spiralled the central pit, they found evidence of disturbing experiments. Among the containment cells holding dragon minions were also cells holding captives. Some were saved by the strike team before the remaining captives were subjected to the 'Transmutation Protocol'. Using the draconic energy collected at Eternity's Focus, the captives were turned into various dragon minions.

Kudu wanted the power of Elder Dragons: the ability to make minions only he could control. He succeeded. By the time Zojja and her friends reached Kudu, he was unrecognisable. Corrupted by dragon energies, branded crystals had sprouted from his

back and his skin was tinged purple. In that moment, he regretted nothing, claiming enlightenment was worth any price.

Kudu was defeated, but in his dying moments, he unleashed a monster. The creature looked like a Risen giant but could not be classified as such as it not only had the abilities

typical of the Risen, but also of the Branded, Destroyers and Icebrood. It would switch between these states while in combat, channelling them as elementalists do their attunements. Regardless, this creature was also defeated.

Kudu's monster was not the only one of its kind. Further exploration of the Crucible of the Eternity led to the discovery of Subject Alpha, one of Kudu's early experiments. It too had the abilities of multiple dragon energies, including all the energies that created Kudu's monster as well as the energies of Mordremoth and the Deep Sea Dragon. Subject Alpha could also split its body into multiple glob-like essences which could slither away to escape in separate directions, before recuperating and reforming to fight again.

Subject Alpha was defeated several times. Its last battle ended with all its essences,

“ The central part of the complex, the Crucible of Eternity, went deep underground.

save one, being destroyed. It is unknown what happened to this last essence.

THE LEGACY CONTINUES

The latest Inquest facility to be discovered is Rata Primus, located in the southern region of Dajkah. It reveals that the defeat of Kudu and the closing of the Infinite Coil Reactor did not abate their research into dragon energies. Instead, this mantle was taken up by Kudu's daughter, Overseer Kuda, who also experimented in creating her own dragon minions. These minions were housed in the specimen chamber in the Western Complex of Rata Primus.

An opportunity for infiltration presented itself when tar seepage from the Awakened caused the laser array protecting the specimen chamber to lose power. Kuda was not present but she spoke to the infiltrators through a large hologram and, unperturbed, continued her research by releasing some of her specimens to attack them.

The chamber held six varieties of dragon minions. Five were the standard type of dragon minions we commonly face, one for each Elder Dragon minus the Deep Sea Dragon. The last was Subject Beta. Like its predecessor, Subject Alpha, it had access to the various dragon energies and abilities.



It was also much like Subject Alpha in appearance, except Subject Alpha seemed closer to the Risen while Subject Beta seemed closer to the Branded.

It is unclear how many specimens Kuda has stored in Rata Primus, as even after the defeat of a specific minion, she was able to reproduce it moments later. Instead of housing the original subjects, the specimen chamber holds simulacrums of those subjects.

Kuda's location remains unknown.

OUTSIDE THE INQUEST

Though the Inquest have come far in their research of draconic energies, they are not the only ones with expertise on the subject.

Professor Gorr of the College of Synergetics delivered a lecture in Rata Sum detailing his draconic enchanto-

consumption theory. He proved that the waking of Elder Dragons coincided with a drop of magic levels in Tyria and concluded that they devoured magic. This theory led to his invention, the Vacuumagic Polarizer, which removes a person's or object's magic and sends it back poisoned.

Taimi, also of the College of Synergetics, has made several important discoveries in the field. She discovered that the death of Elder Dragons empowered the remaining ones with new abilities; that the energies of Jormag and Primordus nullify each other; and most importantly, that the death of any more Elder Dragons would be apocalyptic without a viable solution for the extreme increase of draconic energy in Tyria.

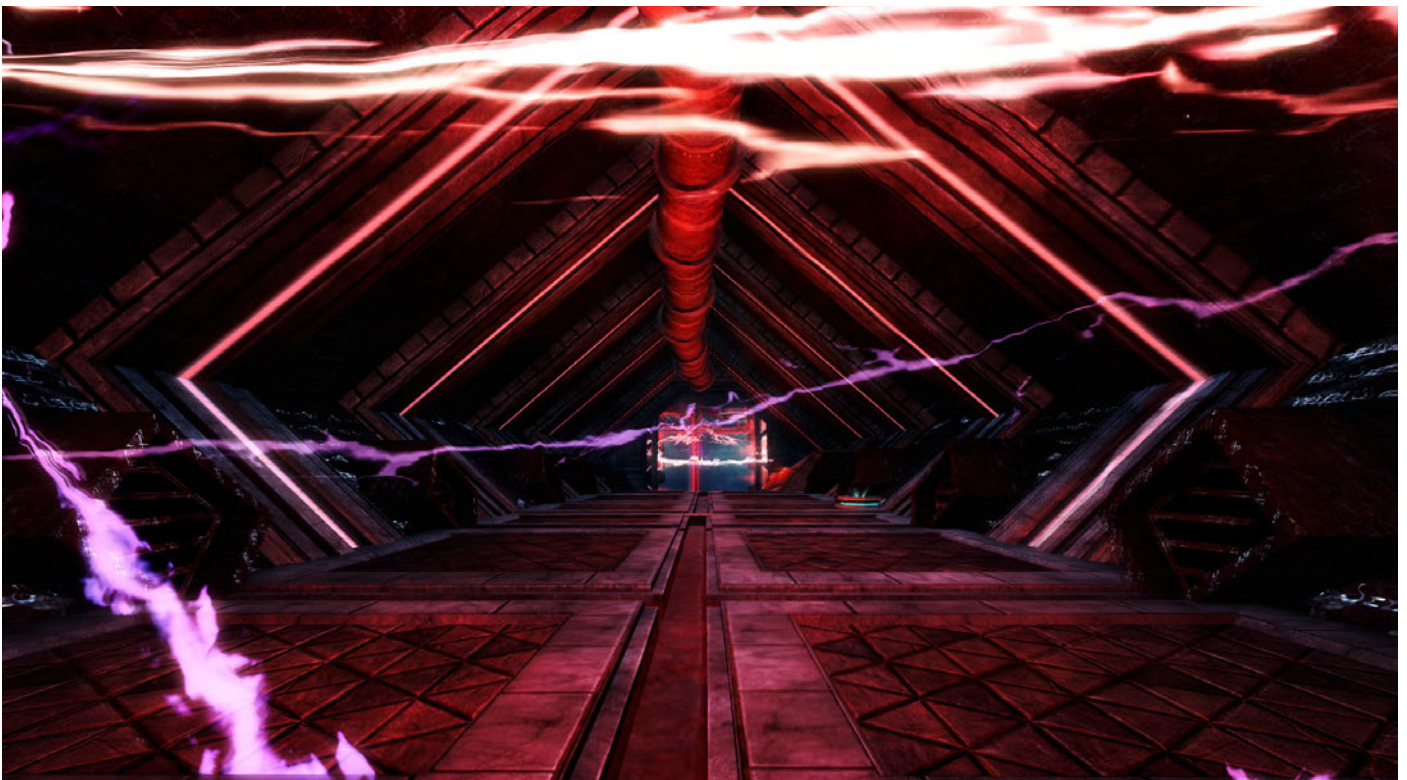
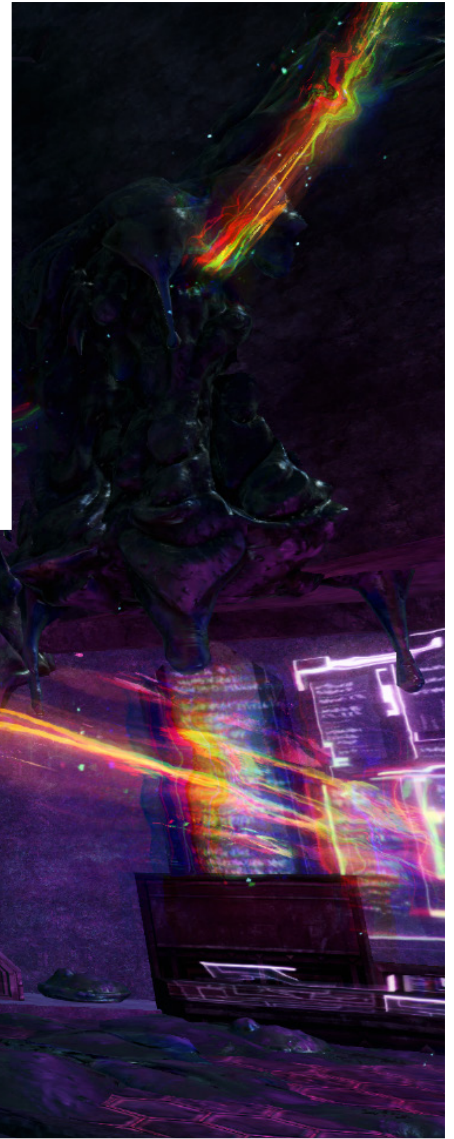
Without sacrificing ethics in the name of science, they have studied draconic energy to the benefit of all Tyrians whereas the Inquest have thus far only sought its weaponization.

INQUEST LABS

BY PHOENIX & MAIRIN

RATA PRIMUS

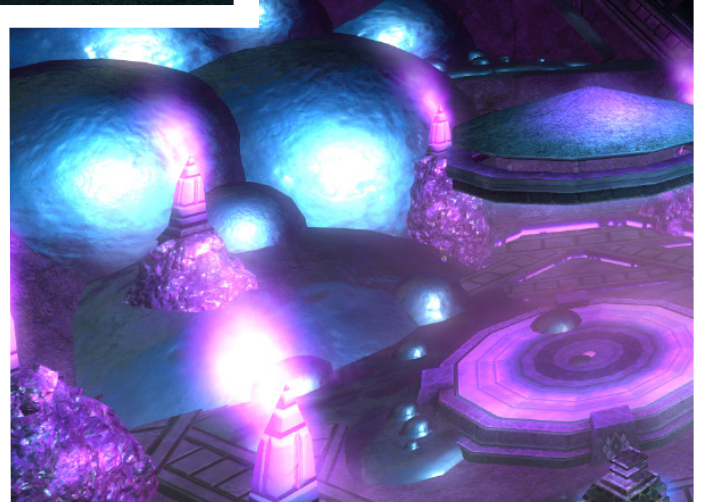
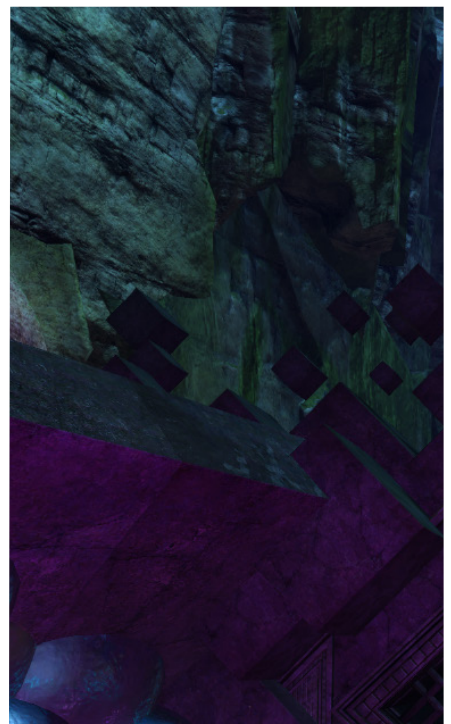
The Inquest perform all manner of research at this megacomplex in the Sandswept Isles. The giant floating cube in the center is based off of Rata Sum. Prominent studies conducted here include non-asura gate translocation technology, the revival of the Scarab Plague and its effects on local fauna, and the consequences of infusing Kralkatorrik's minions with the magic of other Elder Dragons.

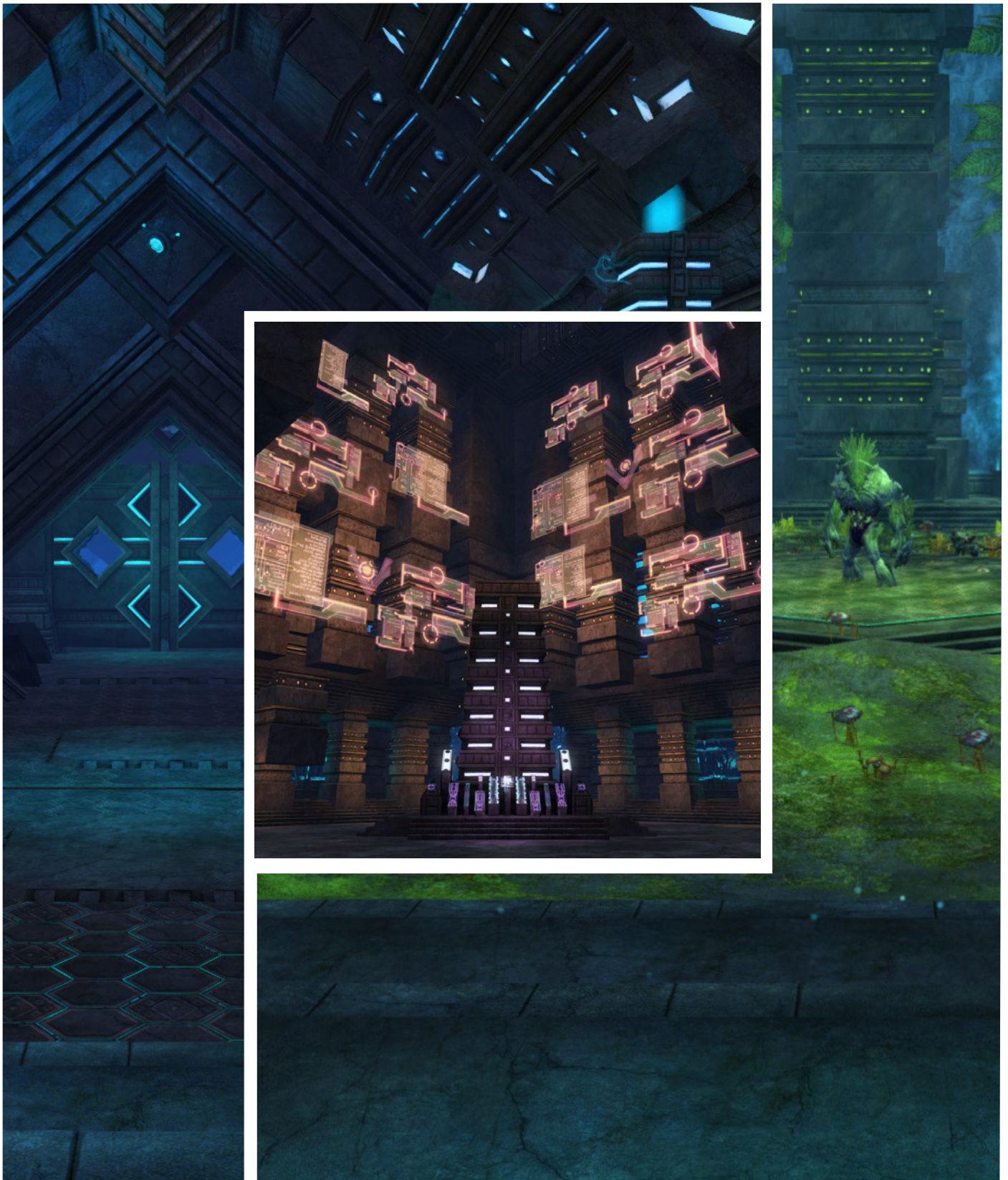




INFINITE COIL REACTOR

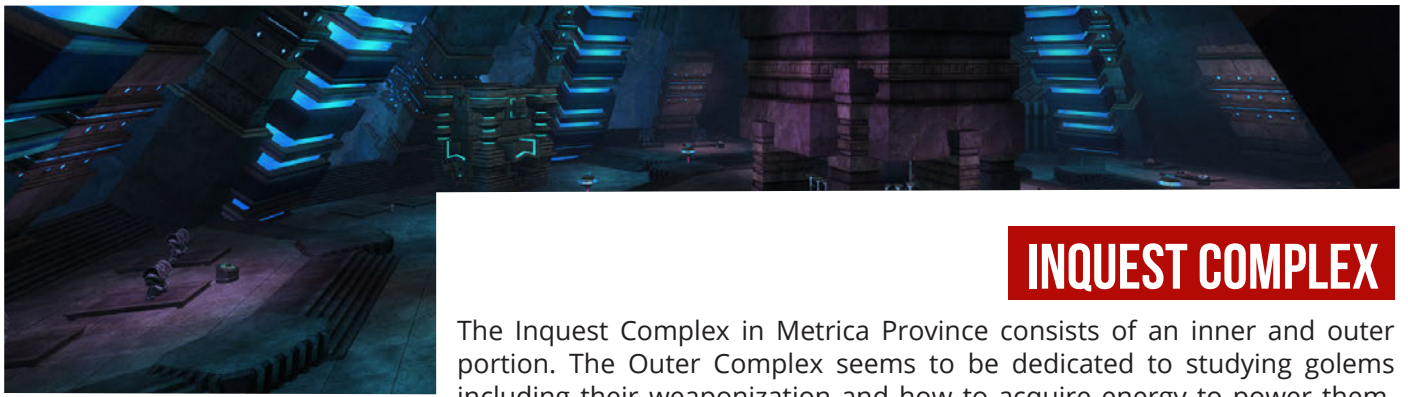
The Infinite Coil Reactor was built after the Thaumanova Reactor fallout. There are six color-coded zones, each corresponding to an Elder Dragon, where the Inquest experiment on their minions. The center of the reactor houses several floating platforms as well as the entrance portal to the Crucible of Eternity.





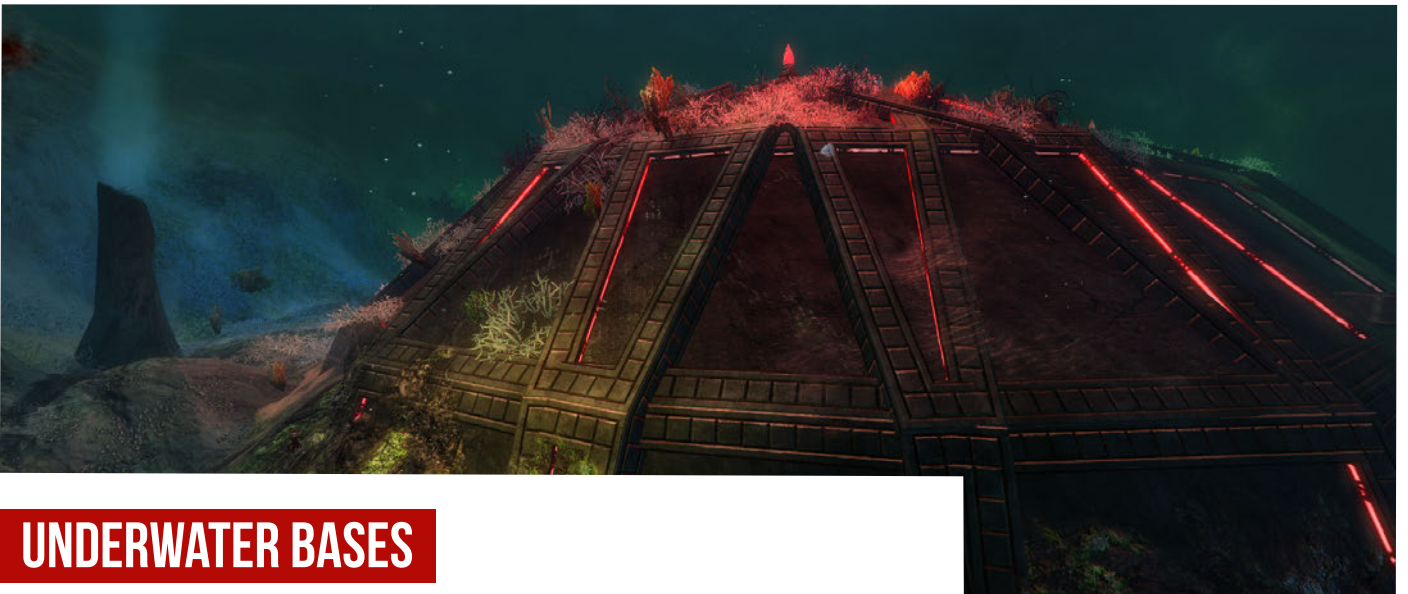
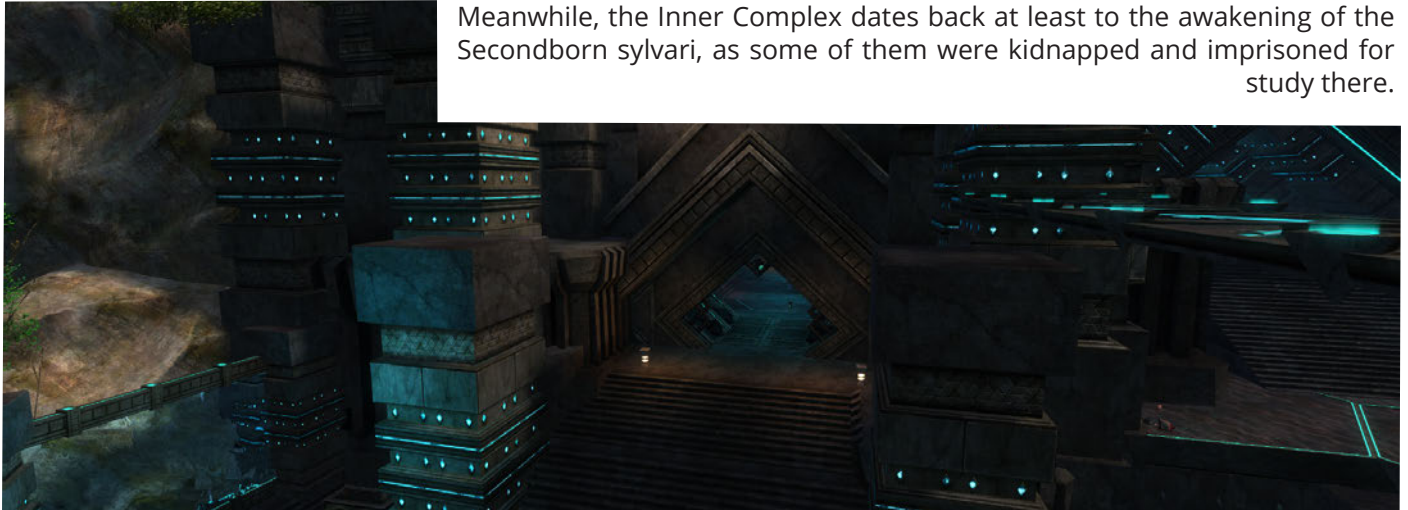
CRUCIBLE OF ETERNITY

This is the inner underground complex of the Infinite Coil Reactor, primarily dedicated to studying draconic energy. It too contains Elder Dragon laboratories and an aquarium, presumably meant to hold minions of the Deep Sea Dragon. There are also facilities intended to hold prisoners and containment units for dragon minions.



INQUEST COMPLEX

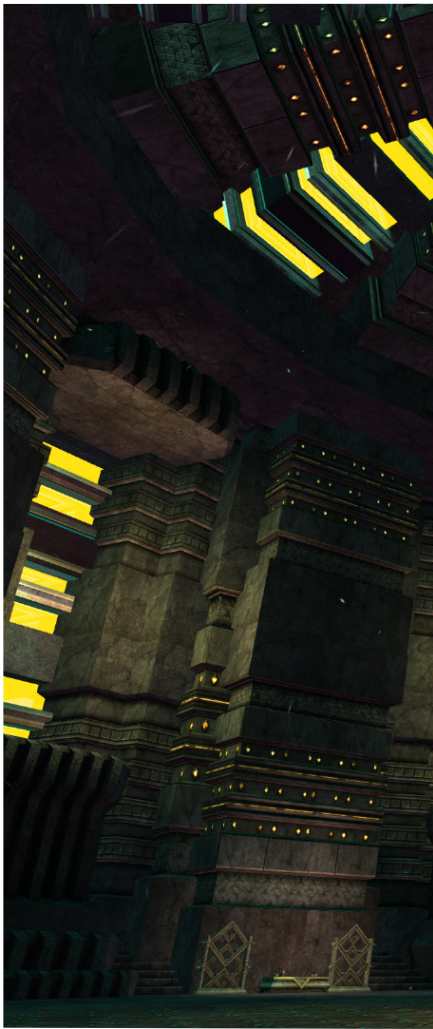
The Inquest Complex in Metrica Province consists of an inner and outer portion. The Outer Complex seems to be dedicated to studying golems including their weaponization and how to acquire energy to power them. Meanwhile, the Inner Complex dates back at least to the awakening of the Secondborn sylvari, as some of them were kidnapped and imprisoned for study there.



UNDERWATER BASES

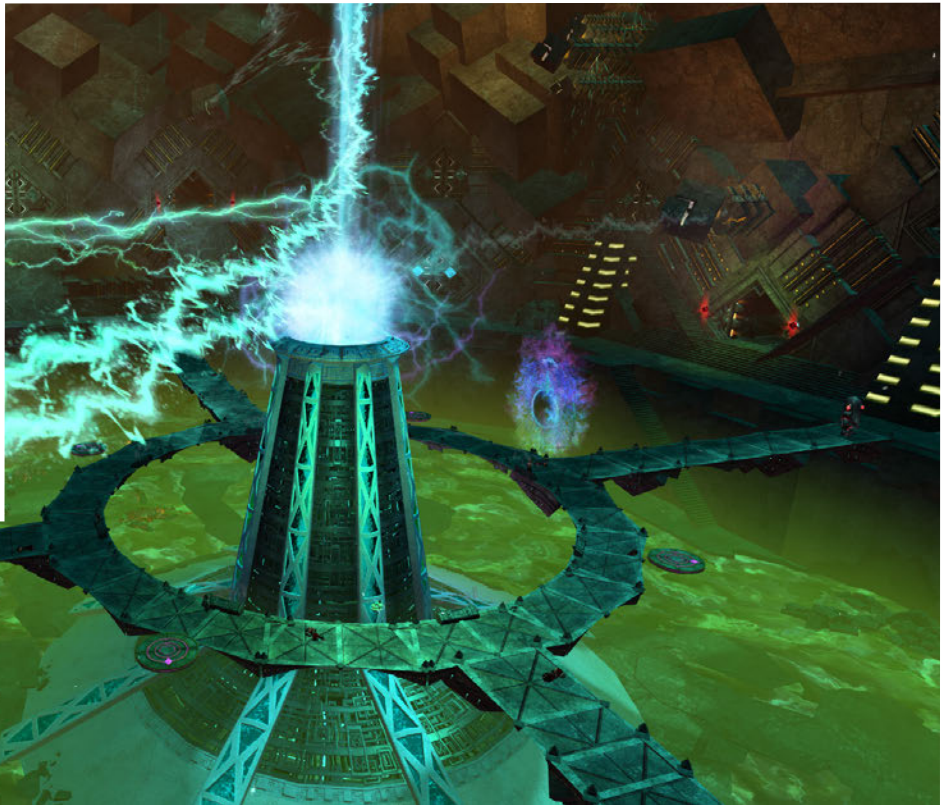
The Inquest maintain multiple underwater bases around the world: the Aquarium Hydropost in Bloodtide Coast, Aquabase Terror Seven in Mount Maelstrom, and Bauxite Alchemicals in Malchor's Leap are among the most prominent. They tend to experiment on quaggan in these bases and they don't seem to care about the water pollution their research causes.





THAUMANOVA REACTOR

Some time after Scarlet Briar became involved with the Inquest in the ThaumANOVA Reactor, there was a catastrophic explosion, destroying many of the labs and leaving radioactive material in its wake. Prior to its meltdown, the reactor was a fully-functioning facility dedicated to studying chaos magic with dormitories, live-subject and repulsor labs, and at least a few rooms dedicated to studying Elder Dragon minions.





DOWNLOADING THE TYRIAN CONSCIOUSNESS

CHOICES IN *GUILD WARS 2*'S STORYTELLING

BY PHOENIX

We watched the sylvari wrestle with Mordremoth's influence in *Heart of Thorns*. We tried to appeal to the Herald of Balthazar's humanity in *Path of Fire*. We also listened to the struggles of Glint's offspring, Vlast, trying to come to terms with his legacy, and witnessed him jump in front of Balthazar's greatsword to save our life. Now, in *A Bug in the System*, the second episode of *Living World Season 4*, the classically corrupt Inquest become humanized in the player's eyes. As the player character, we made choices throughout our personal stories that altered our paths and changed how we arrived at our climactic battle with Zhaitan. But recently,

ArenaNet has relegated the big choices to our allies and enemies to make us feel like although we are the star of the show, we are also part of something bigger. I'll be looking at some of those NPC choices and examining how they complicate our world.

Recently we learned that Taimi's college friends, two brothers named Blish and Gorrik, had joined the Inquest, unwittingly assisted Palawa Joko in reproducing the Scarab Plague, and set up a network of asura gates to help him spread it. Taimi is upset about her friends' involvement in the organization: she laments that Blish is "tragically now an Inquest stooge," and says Gorrik is "kinda weird. But still, the Inquest?"

Nevertheless, she is happy and nonjudgmental at their reunion, even after seeing that Blish's consciousness had been downloaded into a golem.

The personal story raises us to believe the Inquest are essentially evil, stealing patents and inventions, threatening the Arcane Council and the city of Rata Sum regularly, and tampering with dragon energy in their labs. Despite this, they are still allowed to operate in Rata Sum. As we keep discovering their bases throughout Tyria, this raises a question: even though the Inquest's reputation has been thoroughly besmirched and they're associated with a lack of ethical principles, why do





asura keep lining up to join?

The most obvious reason is the additional freedom and productivity that comes with a lack of bureaucracy. Time and time again we've seen that the Inquest are on top of modern technology, from Kudu's teleportation device to the outbound

asura gates that don't require a receiving gate — they just spit you out of a portal wherever

the coordinates point. However, these marvels usually come as a result of thieving or plagiarizing the work of others. Zojja says Kudu stole the designs for his personal teleporter and Taimi tells us Zinn and the Rata Novans were working on the advancements in asura gate technology. But if you place a high value on knowledge-sharing and believe that progress moves faster if multiple people are able to look at a plan from different angles, it's easy to see why the allure of the morally-bankrupt Inquest trumps the strict regulations on copyright and patent law.

If you stick around a krewe's camp in Mon Maelstrom long enough, you can hear some interesting ambient dialogue that addresses this issue.

"The personal story raises us to believe the Inquest are essentially evil, stealing patents and inventions."

Apprentice Klinx asks why no one has designed an anti-destroyer golem yet. Krewe Leader Ambr replies, "Snaff came close, but he never shared the design." Would this be a problem for the Inquest if they could have pilfered the data and schematics? Later, a lab worker expresses

frustration that they can't beat the Inquest in the nearby lab if they can't utilize shortcuts.

Ambr tells him that they'll "prevail through dedication to sound alchemical principles." Understandably, this brings little comfort when you're constantly being attacked by destroyers.

As a "megakrewe," the Inquest is also able to offer its members additional resources. A normal krewe is a corporate entity put together for one task or research project. It might get its financing from the krewe leader or an outside investor, but funds are limited and no one wants to spend more money than necessary. At the aforementioned camp belonging to Ambr and her krewe, Lab Worker Flinka says they should research flame-retardant fabrics. As another lab worker points out though, "Hiring new krewe

members is cheaper than the materials needed," implying that bringing in brave but disposable labor is preferred over trying to better protect the existing krewe members. Indeed, one thing Gorrik bemoans upon escaping the catastrophic explosion of Rata Primus is that he and Blish lost their funding. In fact, Gorrik seems to care little about where he's working or who he works with, as long as he can continue the research he wants to pursue on insects.

During that same conversation, Blish mentions he was able to save data on Kralkatorrik. This brings up another advantage to working with the Inquest, namely that they perform a lot of research on the Dragons and their minions. This poses a dangerous risk as it's led to such events as Kudu's corruption by draconic energies and the Thaumanova Reactor fallout. But with the threat posed by the Elder Dragons and the potential catastrophe that would result from killing them and releasing their magic without an entity to contain it, the research is necessary.

Anyone who's played the asuran personal story will remember Professor Gorr being booed off stage when he proposed his theory that magic was a finite resource being consumed by the Elder Dragons. Even the asura know little about the Elder Dragons, let alone the average





layperson. We, as player characters, have enough trouble wrapping our heads around the idea that we can no longer kill the Dragons, but must rather protect ourselves from them or transfer their magic to a different source. How are we to convince the rest of Tyria of this if the research is frowned upon and isn't easily demonstrable? Maybe the Inquest with their low regard for appropriate, law-abiding research subjects and methodologies have it right... at least in some ways.

The Inquest simply has more money, more expendable labor, and larger, more widespread facilities. In addition, since the krewes never disbands, it allows asura to continue working on their projects for as long as possible, whereas a regular krewes might disband as soon as they accomplish their goal, even if new or superior ideas are on the horizon. If you're able to sacrifice some workplace safety and moral sensibilities for efficiency

and vast technological advancement, the Inquest might not be such a bad organization to be a part of.

Blish and Gorrik might be the first members of the Inquest to make players consider there are additional motives for joining beyond an inherent wickedness. This is not, however, the first time the storytelling of *Guild Wars 2* has put delicate and difficult choices under a scrutinizing eye. For instance, such choices are ingrained in sylvari culture. A sylvari can choose to abide by the tenets of Ventari, embrace the nightmares in the Dream of Dreams, or cut off all contact with the Pale Tree and the hive mind of their fellow sylvari, becoming Soundless.

Heart of Thorns is notorious for not expanding on sylvari culture as much as it could have. It failed to go into any detail about the state of the Nightmare Court after Faolain's corruption and eventual death and

disregarded Mallyck's origins completely. For all its failings though, it did provide us with a fascinating bit of dialogue between Faolain and the player character. When we discover Eir and Faolain locked in a vine cage by the Mordrem, we ask: "Why is Mordremoth locking up so many Nightmare Courtiers?" The implication is that both Mordremoth and the Nightmare Court are evil. The Elder Dragons are gluttons for magic, consuming or destroying anything in their way to obtain it. The Nightmare Court performs dark rituals and unspeakable acts of cruelty to try to taint the Dream and urge the Pale Tree away from the influence of Ventari. Some in the Court also try to forcibly subvert sylvari to join their cause by placing them in conversion pods. Both Mordremoth and the Nightmare Court are bad seeds, so they would naturally mesh, right?

Faolain snaps back at the player character, insisting, "You know nothing of the Court. We seek freedom, and Mordremoth's yoke is even more onerous than the Pale



Tree's." It can be said that the ultimate goal of the Court is merely to release the Pale Tree from the tethers of Ventari and Ronan, urging sylvari to create their own destinies instead of performing the goals given to them by the Dream.

In Siren's Landing, a group of sylvari are attempting to study the roaming Risen, unchained and seemingly without purpose after Zhaitan's death. In particular, an NPC named Rose, inspired by the courage and willpower bestowed upon them by the Pale Tree, sets off on her own in hopes of befriending the intelligent Risen, the kingpins. We meet one of these kingpins face to face while searching for Rose and converse with it. The kingpin says he is "free to continue dispensing Zhaitan's wrath to the world" because it is already lost.

Both Mordremoth and the Nightmare Court are bad seeds, so they would naturally mesh, right?

So what would happen to the sylvari themselves if they were not Soundless, not questing on their Wyld Hunts nor tapped into the group network created by the Pale Tree, not taking part in evil acts with the Nightmare

Court, and not turned into Mordrem? In theory, we've only seen two characters like this: Scarlet Briar, who eventually went mad from staring into the Eternal Alchemy and discovering that the sylvari were creations of Mordremoth, and Malyck, who we know very little about. In fact, the last time we heard about Malyck, he was off to his home in the Heart of Maguuma to tell his fellow sylvari about the Pale Tree. Was his tree what eventually became the Blighting Tree in Verdant Brink? Were all his fellow sylvari converted to Mordremoth's cause when the Elder Dragon rose because they lacked the Pale Tree's protection? These are the unanswered questions *Heart of Thorns* left behind, along with the idea that perhaps all the big bad organizations of each race aren't so bad after all.

What about *Path of Fire*? The developers had a lot more time to work on this expansion and it's been lauded for its storytelling, which many players claim is better than *Heart of Thorns* by far. The most interesting choice you might discover is the continuous one Vlast must make. He is the offspring of Glint, who was originally Glaust, a champion of Kralkatorrik. Glint was purified by the Forgotten and, as we've seen with both Vlast

and Aurene, her scions are free from the Elder Dragon's influence. This makes them neither good nor bad at the start but grants them a certain free will, contingent upon their upbringing and socialization.

The most interesting choice you might discover is the continuous one Vlast must make.

Socialization was something Vlast severely lacked. The Forgotten and the Exalted attended him but it's difficult to know how to bond a dragon to the mortal races of Tyria, especially when dragons equate to destruction in the minds of most. Thus he was kept secluded, growing up with a strict destiny, a piece of a larger grand plan to protect the races from the Elder Dragons. But how could he develop empathy or compassion for those races if he never encountered them and never watched them grow or interacted with them at all? Despite this major flaw



in his younger years, he stuck with the plan set for him by his mother, trusting in her judgment if nothing else, and to pass on hope and wisdom to his younger sister when her time came.

The question this leaves with us is obvious: if we treat Aurene better and continue allowing her to explore the world, will she be more convinced of her purpose than Vlast? Currently, she seems to be assisting us as necessary with help in battle and visions of things and places we can't see. She doesn't stick by our side like a lap dog though. Maybe she's found a good middle ground between the freedom Vlast craved and the wanderlust that haunted him in his later life, and the prophecy and goals set forth by her mother. Unlike the sylvari storylines hung out to dry in *Heart of Thorns*, the mystery of Aurene appears to be gradually unfolding with Living World Season 4.

These are but a handful of the choices made by NPCs that keep popping up in the story. Consider also Balthazar's Forged - the developers revealed that the Herald of Balthazar was actually Devona, a warrior from the original *Guild Wars*. On her deathbed it's clear she's retained some of her free will, requesting we dispatch Balthazar. How about the still-

living and Awakened trying to resist Palawa Joko's influence: people like Koss who found a loophole in his undeath or Tahlkora who retained her will after Awakening. There's also the Sons of Svanir, another classically evil organization like the Inquest or Nightmare Court, but they are tolerated in the norn's individualistic culture. Maybe we'll see more about their story if a future expansion brings us north.

Wherever you look, I guarantee you'll find plenty of instances of characters in *Guild Wars 2* dealing with hard choices, especially with ArenaNet's improved storytelling and the loss of the "Elder Dragons bad, mortal races good" dichotomy that we had previously. Next time you run into something stereotypically evil or think about an apparently easy choice in-game, maybe you'll think twice about its true nature.

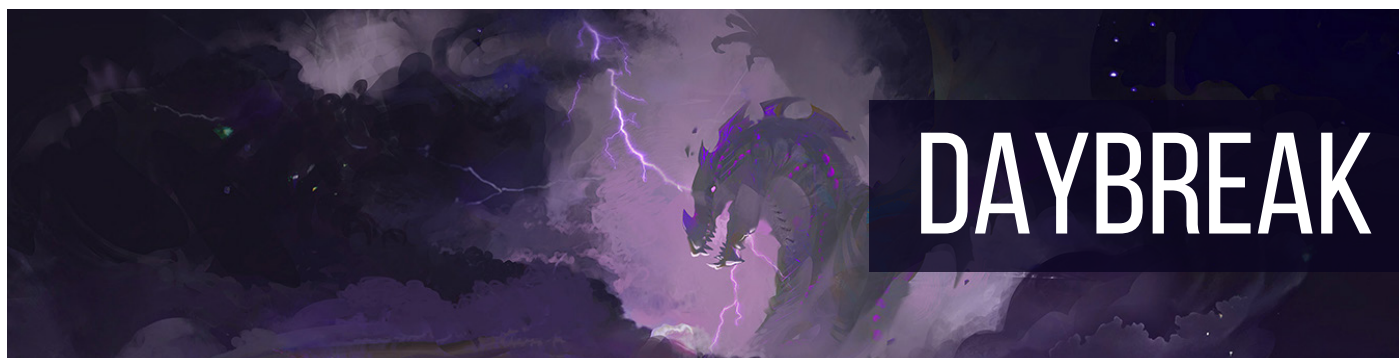




BY STARCONSPIRATOR

PESTILENCE & PLAGUE

S4 RECAP: EPISODES 1, 2 & 3



The Living World continues to expand the game, bringing us new heroes, new cultures, a pair of sympathetic scientists, and a looming catastrophe. At the beginning of the *Path of Fire* expansion we set off for the Crystal Desert intent on stopping a god. Through our journey, Elona opened before us, giving us access to Vabbi and Kourna. When the story picks up in Season 4, we continue into Istan and the nearby islands intent on uncovering, and putting a stop to, Joko's plans.

BRANDSTORM AT DAWN

With Kralkatorrik awake and Aurene missing after the fight with Balthazar, several members of Dragon's Watch remained near Amnoon, repairing Taimi's golem. Meanwhile, Jory and Kas have tracked Kralkatorrik to a far-off mountain range. Yet, despite being so far away, the Elder Dragon is far more powerful, having absorbed the power of a god, and is able to touch off a devastating brandstorm in Amnoon! Like all good heroes, we hurry to the rescue, discovering a

city full of people trapped in crystal, branded, and turning on their friends and allies. These fights against the Branded bring into play an empowering crystal mechanic where we must first shatter all the crystals in Amnoon before we can destroy the Branded that is being shielded. Aurene joins us for the final battle against a Branded wyvern and, once we are victorious, Taimi and Scruffy appear along with Shadows Agent Kito.

In the aftermath, Aurene shares a vision with everyone showing the Forged and undead Branded along with an unknown city. Agent Kito recognizes it as Fahrnanur,

the First City, ancient seat of power in Istan. In order to find Fahrnanur, we must make contact with the Sunspear, which won't be easy. The few remaining members of the ancient order are in hiding; Palawa Joko, undead king of Elona, has hunted them nearly to extinction. Agent Kito suggests looking for them in the Astralarium and we quickly secure passage to the southern island of Istan.

ISTANI TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

Stowing away on a ship, we soon find ourselves in the Domain of Istan. Joko has placed a price on our head



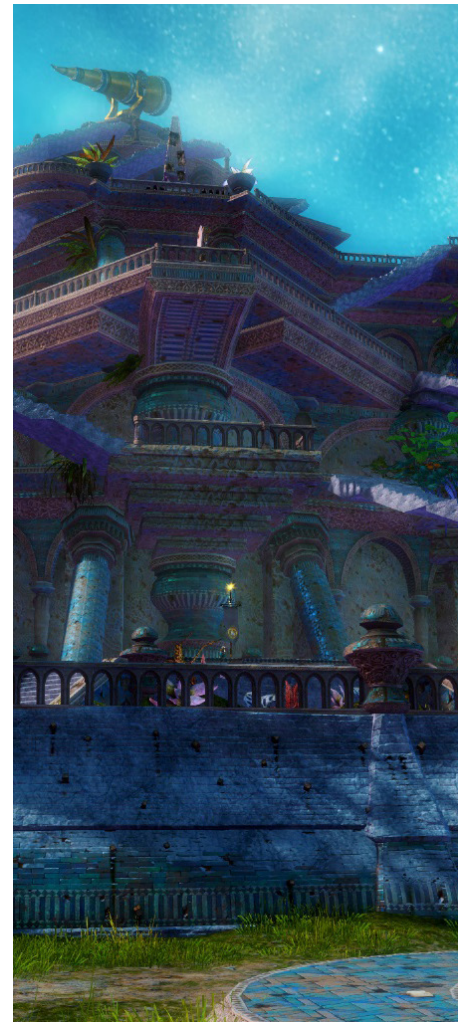
and his forces in Istan are incredibly hostile. There are few safe places for us as we search for the Sunspears. The Mordant Crescent holds power here, supported by Joko's Awakened and loyal human servants. We land at the Chalon Docks and, for players of the original *Guild Wars*, the nostalgia begins anew. There is little here, but directly to the south lies the great city of Palawadan, Jewel of Istan (formerly known as Kamadan, Jewel of Istan). As this section of the story encompasses a rather open exploration of the new map, it is possible to spend a great deal of time exploring. To the north of the Chalon Docks, along the coast, we discover a corsair flotilla of both airships and sea-going vessels. Just to the southwest of the flotilla we find the Astralarium, which has become an enormous library in the intervening centuries since *Nightfall* players visited this area.

The Astralarium bustles with scholars researching stars, history, and the flora and fauna of the area. Palawa Joko's forces work tirelessly to revise history but Scholar Rhadha suggests that we aid the scholars as they attempt to preserve the truth. By impeding Joko's influence in the area, we can convince Scholar Salwa to allow us entrance into the secret archive, which will give us access to the hidden Sunspear base. Once the Renown Heart is filled, we are

directed toward Salwa who allows us entrance. There, we speak with First Spear Hakima and ask if she can let us into Fahrnanur. Sadly, she cannot as only the Spearmarshal Zaeim knows the way into the ancient city.

War rages across the land of Istan. Joko's forces hoard supplies in Palawadan and his armies reach out to take control of the island's towns and cities. They have most recently taken the city of Champion's Dawn and Spearmarshal Zaeim has gone south to retake it. Since only the Spearmarshal knows the way to the ancient city, we decide to head south in search of him. Besides, beating up Awakened and Mordant Crescent has become an enjoyable pastime!

This chapter is beginning to feel like a really long game of hide-and-seek. The storyline helps open even more of Istan and each place we visit is spiked with nostalgia for those who played the original *Nightfall* campaign. So long as the journey through Istan is your goal, these quests to find various people are simply a natural outgrowth of your exploration. However, running through the story as quickly as possible means criss-crossing a small portion of the overall map, chasing green starbursts back and forth as you search for yet another person or quest item.



SPEARMARSHAL RETRIEVAL

A quick run south of the Astralarium along the Bone Wall takes us to Zehlon Breach and the outskirts of Champion's Dawn, a farming village. Here, we witness Joko's treatment of those who do not worship him: Villagers are starving, surrounded by hostile forces and propaganda. Many have been taken prisoner and are caged throughout the village. Zaeim is nowhere to be found but we do find Priest Sazeer, who tells us that the Spearmarshal has been captured by the corsairs. In order to strike a bargain with his captors it's

necessary to find a legendary coin that once belonged to the infamous corsair Margrid the Sly. However, retrieving the coin will not be easy as it is in the possession of an Awakened Sunspear! Luckily, the coin's fabled hiding place is not far south and the battle with the Sunspear Koss isn't overly difficult. Of course the heroes Margrid the Sly and Koss are another scrumptious morsel of nostalgia for *Guild Wars* players. Koss' fate, however, is a sad one indeed: Awakened by Joko after being defeated, Koss retreated to the abandoned cave to escape the Undead King's orders as he would rather be alone forever than harm his fellow Sunspears. With his blessing, he gives us the coin, asking us to hurt Joko so badly he will never Awaken another person again.

With the coin in hand, we return across the island to the corsair flotilla and parlay with Sayida the Sly for the life of Zaeim. As expected,

Sayida would love the coin! Unfortunately, she has already traded Zaeim in for his bounty. Agent Kito appears and offers a plan: In exchange for the coin, Sayida will help us gain entry to the Mordant Crescent's Great Hall, where the Sunspear is being held. She can claim the bounty on our head and credit for capturing us. Once we escape with the Spearmarshal, we will hand over her family's heirloom.



She agrees, but before our ruse can begin she asks us to collect a keg of grog from the local brewer, Mehdi. In the spirit of all grand adventure RPGs, this requires a fetch

quest for the six ingredients. Three are on hand in the flotilla and the other three are near previously visited waypoints so collecting them isn't arduous. Happily, the devs also made it possible to simply barter for the three ingredients found outside the flotilla. Those with enough kralkatite ore can easily bypass the fetch quest while those with less, or a desire not to spend it, can round up the ingredients fairly painlessly. Luckily, Mehdi already has a batch in storage so we don't actually have to wait for it to brew, and once the quest is over we return to Sayida to get on with the story.

With grog in tow, we meet Sayida just outside the Mordant Crescent-occupied Great Hall, which is in roughly the center of the Istan map, just south of the flotilla. Reluctantly, we allow the corsair to shackle us and are given over to the Mordant Crescent. With our hands bound, there isn't much we can do but watch events unfold. Taimi picks an inopportune time to call, and Warden Amala of the Mordant Crescent knocks us unconscious. When we awaken, we are in the cells with Zaeim and a handful of drunken guards. It doesn't take long to find our way out of the cell and rescue Zaeim. Together, we make our way out of the dungeon and up to the Great Hall.

Upon our escape, we hear



through the communicator that Taimi has been captured and is being held in Fahrhanur! Outside, we join forces with Kito's posse, Rytlock and the other Sunspears, freeing the Great Hall from the Mordant Crescent. The Sunspears then take the fight to Joko and hurry to free Champion's Dawn. We ask Aurene to go with them and protect them while we turn our sights on the ancient city of Fahrhanur, hurrying off to save Taimi.

THE SCARAB PLAGUE

We follow the Spearmarshal to the ancient Royal Docks, which lie east of Champion's Dawn across Issnur Bay. He lets us in and then collects Rytlock and Canach to accompany us. On our way to the city, we learn that it was once the seat of the Primeval Kings who ruled Elona. Then came the Scarab Plague, decimating the land. Joko has been using the threat of this disease to scare his enemies.

In the city, we come across a couple dozen dead Inquest, the first we've seen of them in Istan. However, they don't stay dead for long; Joko traps us and Awakens them. While Canach attempts to free us, we fend off first the Awakened Inquest followed by an Awakened Abomination. We are suddenly joined by Braham and Rox in the middle of the battle. They bring news that Joko's forces have invaded central Tyria, using portals from Fahrhanur.



Rox and Braham had entered one of the portals in Tyria hoping to end the invasion at its source. Together, we continue deeper into the First City, hoping to rescue Taimi.

We find Taimi inside Scruffy 2.0 in the center of the royal chamber. Here, several Inquest devices are being used to power gates - presumably to other parts of Tyria. This is where Joko's army is coming from! We are able to overpower the Awakened asura and attempt to save Taimi, but Scruffy goes berserk and begins attacking us! Trapped inside her golem, Taimi begins suffocating and we are forced to overcome the golem's defenses in order to save her. While our friends hold off the invading Awakened Inquest, Braham helps us destroy Scruffy and remove Taimi from it.

After stopping the golem, we learn that Joko and the Inquest are experimenting with bugs! Given the history of Fahrhanur and the Scarab Plague, this does not bode well for our young hero. Rox says that they were in another Inquest lab before reaching

Fahrhanur. Feeling that the lab is most likely in Elona, the guild decides to search for it.

The battle with Scruffy 2.0 marks the end of the first chapter of Season 4, Daybreak. A satisfying chapter, in my opinion, despite the fetch quests. With Kralkatorrik taking a backseat to Joko and his Awakened, we begin exploring Istan. There are corners of the kingdom not yet uncovered and several treasures left to unlock. Many of the events work on a day-night cycle, which players will be familiar with, and represent the Sunspears' attempts to retake their homeland. However, the foreshadowed threat of the Scarab Plague hangs over everything we do and it isn't too long before we move on to chapter two.





With a name like that and given the ending of the last chapter, it's certain that this instalment will focus on the Inquest in some way and perhaps bring us closer to the release of the Scarab Plague. The first thing I noticed about this chapter is how quickly the story parts followed after one another. Rather than having to travel across the map to start each instance, the story moves seamlessly from one section to the next. The pacing is tight and the sections are short and rather direct. From the moment you receive a letter from Shadow Agent Kito, the story launches you into the next series of events.

BROTHER SCIENTISTS

Rytlock and Canach have returned to Amnoon in search of intelligence. While they're away, Agent Kito has requested we join him at the Lifeblood Waterhole in the Desert Highlands. Braham and Rox accompany us as we travel there and meet with Kito. He tells us that the Inquest are using a nearby transport facility, shipping goods and personnel daily.

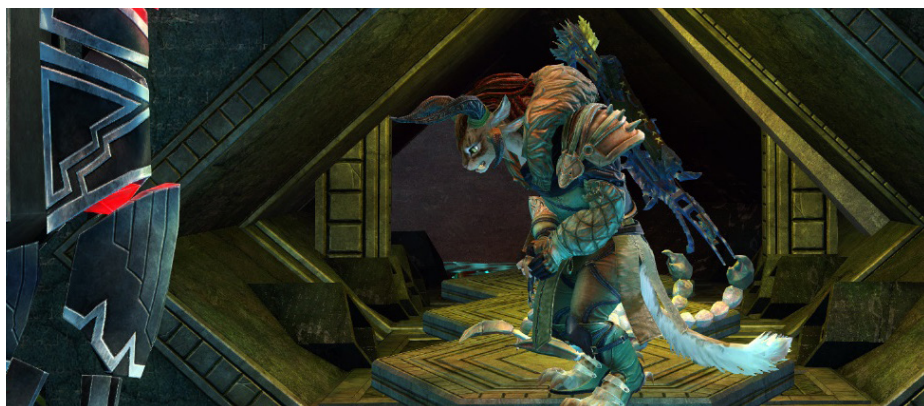
Kito believes that if we infiltrate the facility and check the Inquest's network we will find the scientist whose experiments are being commandeered by Joko.

We soon find ourselves once again employing the "captured prisoner" ruse in order to sneak into the Inquest transport facility, with Rox and Braham the unlucky "prisoners." Sooner or later the bad guys are going to catch onto this ruse! However, this time we're lucky and manage to fool everyone.

While infiltrating the Inquest transport facility we learn that they are working on a matter that requires extermination weaponry and quarantine areas. Taimi admits to knowing the gate scientist we are searching for, Blish, from being friends in college. Sadly,

he is now a member of the Inquest. We are able to use the transportation system to learn that Blish is stationed at Rata Primus. Because the gates are faulty, we are not able to transport to him directly and instead find ourselves in a warehouse-like area where various animals and people have been imprisoned.

From the Inquest computers we learn that they retrieved a sample vial of an unnamed pathogen from Fahrnanur and they have orders to reproduce it for further study. We also learn that Joko's minions have infiltrated Rata Primus; this suggests that the Inquest are not purposefully teaming up with Joko but that he is simply Awakening them to do his bidding. Further investigation of the computers reveals that the Inquest have been experimenting with "parasitic



insectoids.” The insectoids infect hosts and either kill them outright or lay eggs inside them, causing death. Yet another console informs us that the Awakened have attacked the main complex and that Blish’s brother Gorrick, an entomologist, is stationed there.

THE OLMAKHAN

Within the test subject containment area we meet a mysterious charr. She and a number of her fellow villagers were captured by the Inquest, but before they can infect her with the insectoids, she frees herself. Her escape is timed perfectly with Joko’s attack on the main complex and we are able to escape in the confusion. Once we are free of the Inquest complex, the mysterious charr decides to take us back to her village to speak with the elders. Her name is Boticca and her tribe is the Olmakhan, a splinter group of charr who moved south after they broke away from the Flame Legion. The Olmahkan village is located on the shores of the Sandswept Isles of Dajkah north of Istan.

Although Boticca urges the elders to fight, they are wary of becoming involved in a war. While our new friend talks to them about what she saw in the Inquest base, we obligingly agree to watch the cubs at play in the ritual circle near the sea. While tending the cubs, the Inquest assault the village and, with Braham

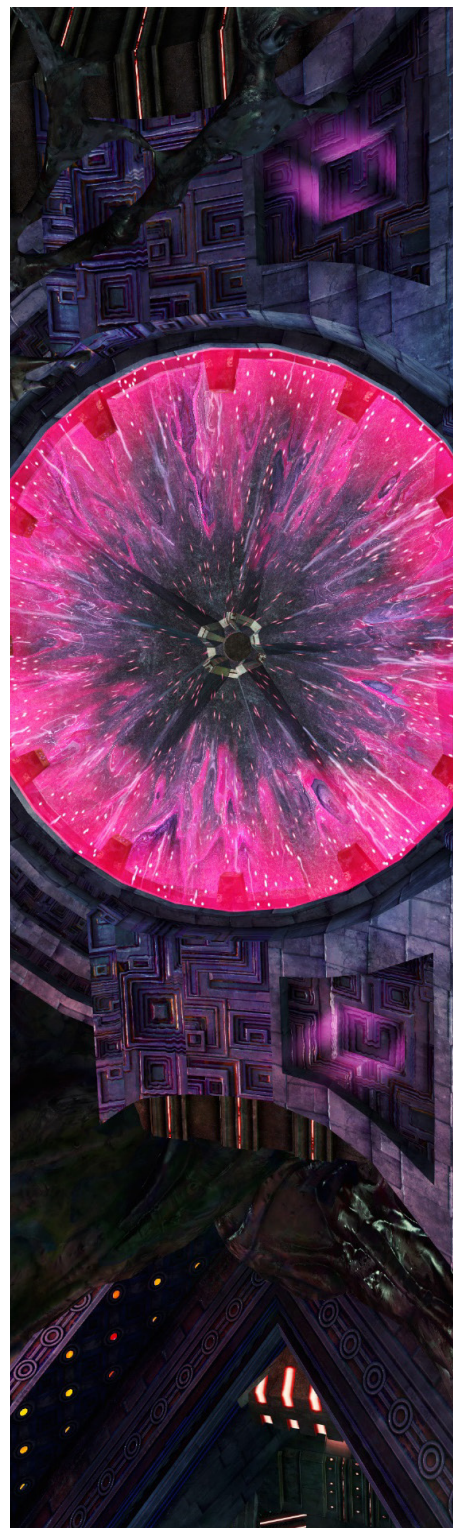
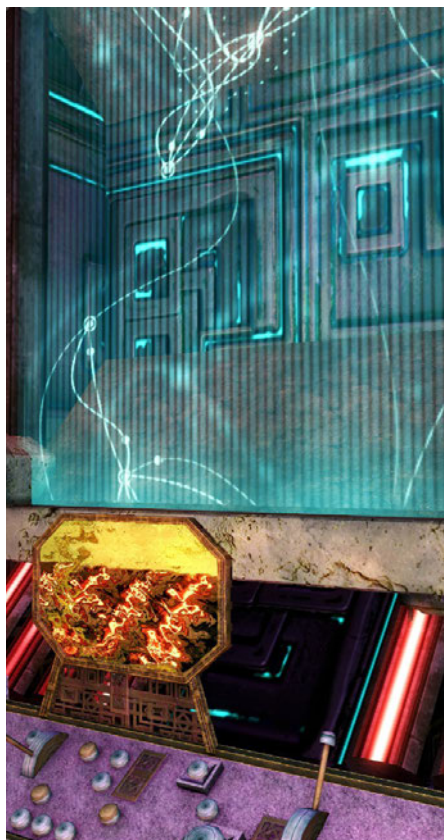
shielding our charges, we make our way to safety. Then, diving back into the melee, we rush to save the elders from an Inquest golem attack! One of the elders, Narn, sacrifices himself in order to shield the others during the battle and his death ensures that the Olmakhan will stand against the Inquest and they ask us and our allies to join them.

INFILTRATING RATA PRIMUS

With Aurene’s help we are able to scout the area and devise a plan to use Sayida’s airship in order to enter the floating asuran city. While Taimi contacts Sayida, we decide to take out the Inquest’s communication tower in order to slow their attacks. Before we disable the

tower, we find a distress call from Gorrick. He’s trapped in the lab in the main complex, surrounded by Awakened. We promise Taimi that we will do our best to save him.

With Sayida nearing Rata Primus, we turn our attention to the three shield generators.



Once we destroy them, Sayida is able to launch an attack on the main complex and we are able to enter the structure. The three labs that are holding the shield in place, along with the communication tower, are protected by puzzle locks, which are a nice change to the fetch quests of earlier.

With Sayida's ship we breach the main complex and make our way down into the lab where Gorrick and his brother Blish are hiding from the Awakened. Gorrick has disabled most of the gates in an effort to stop the Awakened from entering and is surrounded with several trained insects and a small golem who we learn is actually his younger brother, Blish. We also learn from Gorrick that Joko is attempting to retrieve their samples of the Scarab Plague. Luckily - or not - Rata Primus begins a self-destruct system and we have to hurry to retrieve the Scarab Plague samples and escape the city before it explodes. Yet the containment vault is open and the samples are missing.

Taimi suggests hurrying to the gate hub.

At the gate hub we find Joko and Commander Lonai. Joko leaves with the Plague and we are left to face Lonai. After a long battle, we triumph over the enemy Commander and she transports us to a far off asteroid-like land where she is able to die peacefully, safe from Joko's grasp. Taimi is



able to bring us back to Istan and, together with Gorrick and Blish, we escape Rata Primus on Sayida's ship. After our return, we introduce Taimi to the new Blish. She finds him quite beautiful and accepts the newcomers as lab partners. With their work lost,

the two scientists agree to join Taimi.

PESTILENCE AND PLAGUE

As this chapter ends, we stand on the brink of a horrendous attack by Joko. There are so many unanswered questions! Will Joko really unleash the ancient plague on Tyria? Taimi's new lab partners are old friends but she seems contemplative because of their presence. Could she be considering a golem body such as Blish's? Might Rox, who has been fascinated by the Olmakhan throughout the story, stay with them? For now, Braham appears to be back on our side after keeping us company throughout the story, and it's good to see him back. Jory and Kas are still keeping an eye on Kralkatorrik in the far-off mountains so it seems likely that we will not have to worry about the Elder Dragon quite yet. However, it isn't long before we set out to discover some of the answers to these questions.





Our first order of business as the third installment opens is “rescuing” Gorrick, who has been quarantined in Amnoon for growing a beetle under his skin. As horrifying as that is, the asura has discovered that the Scarab Plague only infects humans. After attending the entomologist’s trial and gaining his freedom, we head to the docks to find Blish and Taimi’s other supplies. There we meet Lord Faren who has been sent to Amnoon by Logan Thackeray to meet a ship full of supplies for Amnoon. Yet, when the ship docks, we discover that Joko has commandeered it and infected everyone aboard with the Scarab Plague! Joko’s forces attack the city but we quickly repel them with a little help from Aurene. The undead lich invites us to join him in Gandara as his projection departs. Seeing the destruction of his countrymen, Lord Faren vows to seek revenge against Joko despite our warning that the Plague only infects humans. My sarcastic side can’t help but think that Lord Faren eaten by beetles might be an interesting way to end his

story.

The battle at the docks of Amnoon has shown us the horrors of the Scarab Plague and the importance of hurrying to contain it and stop Joko...but first we need a plan and an army.

PATH TO GANDARA, MOON FOTRESS

Before rushing off to Gandara, we seek the aid of the Primeval Queens in the Tomb of the Primeval Kings, hoping that they can help us confront the Scarab Plague that ravaged their lands millennia ago. The two queens, Dahlah and Nahlah, agree to join us in battle against Joko, leading their ghost army. We then hurry to the unstable portal outside the tomb that Blish has created as a path to Gandara. This saves us from having to march to Kourna, although the Legendary Cartographer in me is disappointed that we don’t have to explore a large number of maps in order to get there.

As the golem asura works to stabilize the portal, we scout ahead, discovering and

securing a base of operations from which to attack Joko’s fortress. With the base secured, we greet our army and squad leaders: Rytlock and Rox with the Olmakahn, the Primeval Queens and their ghosts, Zaeim with a group of Sunspears, a group of sylvari, and Lord Faren and his raw recruits. Once the army has safely arrived at the base, we prepare for the attack on Joko’s fortress!



With our base secure and our army patrolling the area, we are free to explore the new map that opens up with this episode. One of the first people we meet is Lady Camilla Einshorn, our herald. She offers us the opportunity to craft a banner and explains that she has been chronicling our exploits all this time. With the map open for exploration, all that is missing is a reason to leave the relative safety of the main encampment. Zaeim informs us that there is trouble outside the walls and that Gorrik has something important to tell us. Hunting down Gorrik gives us access to the first collection for the new roller beetle mount, where we are tasked with finding items to help grow his pet beetle Petey into a worthy specimen. We are also tasked with helping shipwrecked corsairs and making allies of the local heket tribe, on whom the Inquest are experimenting. Finally, we have to investigate rumors of a Scarab Plague infestation in the Arkjok Farmlands. There, we discover Joko loyalists spreading the Plague, plus larval stage scarabs living outside of a host organism. Gorrik informs us that this is stage two and that Joko isn't far from realizing his stage three pestilence; scarabs that can freely infect humans around the world.

OF HEROES AND VILLAINS

Human vulnerability, however,



does not stop Lord Faren from disobeying a direct order to remain behind the lines where he won't be infected. When the assault on Gandara stalls and Rytlock needs more explosives, Faren takes it upon himself to leave the safety of his guard duty and bring supplies to Rytlock on the front. Alone, Faren is injured while trying to commandeer some explosives from the enemy camp but Rox rescues him and returns to Rytlock with the needed explosives. Calling on Canach and our other non-human allies, we are ready for an assault on Joko's fortress.

Fighting our way to the front door of Gandara, we discover third generation plague carriers blocking the main entrance! While the ghosts hold them off, we sneak around to the sewers, following Braham. Together with the norn we go looking for Joko, determined to kill the undead lich. Along the way, we come across a series of corpses that look exactly like ourselves! All of them are dead, some of them even tortured. In our exploration, we come across an ancient

signet ring that dispels illusions and, using its power, we can see the truth - that the corpses are just ordinary humans. We can also use the power of the ring to find hidden doors and use its power to venture further into the fortress. The ring proves an important mechanic for the upcoming battles as Joko uses several illusions and hidden lasers in an attempt to stop us from progressing. However, after a number of puzzles and battles, we find ourselves standing face-to-face with the real Joko. Fending off illusions, the Will of Joko, Awakened, and plague-carrying scarabs, we finally beat the lich into submission. Just when we think we've won, however, he places a stasis spell on us and rises once again.

Stuck in stasis, we are forced

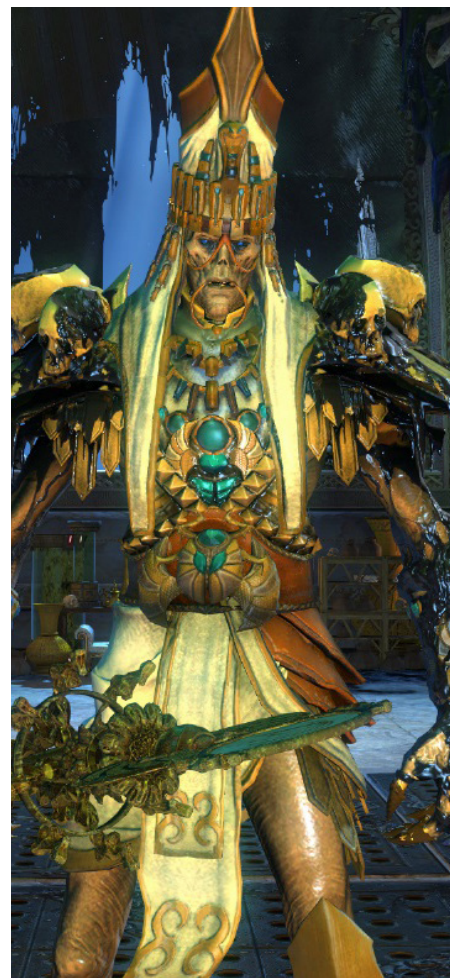


to listen to Joko's monologue. The undead lich scoffs at our heroic acts, belittling our hard-won battles against the Elder Dragons and Balthazar. Just as he is about to land a killing blow, Aurene appears, leaps on the lich and devours him, ending his immortality! However, Joko's words are troubling. We have been responsible for plunging the world into chaos by killing two Elder Dragons, Zhaitan and Mordremoth. Our actions have disrupted the balance of power and reshaped the land. Braham points out that we are indeed chaotic, but despite that, we are not the villain. Chaotic good is still good, after all. This final battle against Joko feels anticlimactic, as if the story should go on, and as if we are waiting for the teaser ending after the credits roll that shows us Joko smiling from the Mists, a portal powering up behind him. The fight itself is simple enough as are the mechanics for victory. Yet, Joko being defeated by a baby dragon, which has nothing to do with our actions, leaves something to be desired. A final meta group event, as with the death of Mordremoth, would have felt more in line with the powerful evil that Palawa Joko represented.

With Joko's demise, this final quest comes to an end. The Scarab Plague has been averted and the land of Elona has been freed from Joko's rule. We'll explore what happens next in our

next magazine, so make sure you've subscribed on our website (guildmag.com) to ensure you don't miss it!

There are, however, still plenty of questions to answer. For example, what will we do about Kralkatorrik? Will Aurene finally fulfil her destiny? After Joko's speech regarding the consequences of our actions, I am looking forward to seeing if our characters and the actions of our friends become more circumspect. Finally, part of me, even now, is hoping Joko returns just because, as he says himself, having a worthy nemesis is a rare treat.



THE SCARAB PLAGUE

How Fahrnanur and the Primeval Kings came to an end.

BY FEARAN

Almost nine hundred years ago the Scarab Plague appeared out of nowhere, ending the reign of the Primeval Kings and causing the destruction of Fahrnanur, the First City. Who knows what could happen if it strikes a second time.

It all began a long time ago, in the amazing city of Fahrnanur. For hundreds of years, Istan and Elona had been ruled by the Primeval Kings whose capital was once this illustrious city. The Queens Nahlah and Dahlah had reigned over Elona for several years, ordering the construction of two massive statues off the coast of Mehtani Keys, but

no one could have foreseen that they would be the last of the Dynasty, finishing their monument right before disaster struck in 652 DR.

It was once the seat of power of the Primeval Dynasty; Fahrnanur, the shining quintessence of Elonian life. Just imagine it as a thriving city, filled with life. The Vestibule of Faith would have been completely different from how it is now, its massive defenses hovering motionless in the air, ready to become active when needed the most. You would see people walking, feeling safe, knowing they were guarded by the Sunspears who did their duty as usual. The scent of spices

would fill the warm air of Istan, while everyday sounds would mingle with exotic Elonian music or the melodic voices of Istani people. The market stalls in the outskirts would be tightly arranged, merchants selling everything from jewelry to fruit to clothing, with everything the city needed on sale - even dolyaks or exotic monkeys in their improvised shelters and cages. Children would be playing there, their voices and laughter adding to the noises of the market, overlooked by the Sunspears who would keep guard as a merchant could be seen chasing a silly cat that escaped with a fresh fish.





People who would walk down the great stairs at Nadijeh's Assembly must have stood silent for a brief moment, overlooking the scenery in front of them. The noblemen and women of Istan would have been there, chattering, welcoming their far relatives from all over Elona. Guests from Cantha or Kryta would have been greeted and offered small bits of food and drinks. The scent of warm coffee would have been strong, and the reaction of guests, who never had tried that dark treasure before, would have been priceless. In Elswyth's Gallery, people would be sitting, talking together, having lunch or dinner; aromatic stews, fresh salads

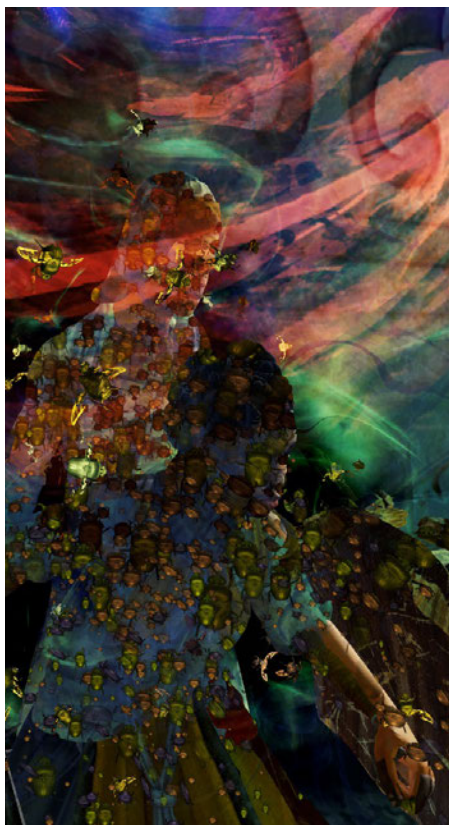
accompanied by a fruity drink, Vabbian Red or Djinnspit. Life would have been vibrant!

How different would it have been for those people who were invited to meet the Queens. They would have waited anxiously in the Hall of Hadoon until finally asked to enter the Royal Chamber where they would come before their joint rulers Nahlah and Dahlah. It would have been quiet there, the only sounds coming from birds in their cages, and reasonably cool. The monarchs would have been sitting on their thrones, surrounded by their most trusted advisors, waiting till the newly arrived person bowed as deeply as possible. They were loved and revered at that time, the beloved Queens of Elona. That is, until the Scarab Plague happened.



You can still read it, the plaque of Dahlah's statue in Fahranur, proudly stating: "Blessed by the Five is Dahlah, daughter of the king. May her life be full of love, contentment, and good health. May the newest royal daughters together rule Fahranur and lead us to a brighter future." The contrast with the people's esteem of the Twin Queens after the events of the Scarab Plague couldn't have been larger. While you could argue that the statue has since weathered down due to time, it also serves as a metaphor for how the Istanis treated their royalty afterwards, destroying their image, blaming them for their losses - for the plague itself.

The first case of the Scarab Plague appeared in Fahranur from an unknown origin, and it didn't take long before it started spreading, the first new cases happening in less than a day. It must have been terrifying, seeing the victims of the disease dying in agony. Maybe it appeared as just a minor cold at first, a small fever with some muscle pain, but within days the symptoms would have changed to gruesome pains in the abdomen, pulmonary area and occasionally the brain. Bumps would have formed on the skin, lumps of flesh that started moving on their own, until, after a few days, the flesh would tear and they would start to come out. Scarabs.



"

It took 64 years before the first colonists came back to the island, seeking to rebuild Istan, but without the Dynasty of the Primeval Kings it never was the same.

The Scarab Plague ravished the lands of Elona for four years, spreading throughout the entire country, though the place that was struck hardest was Istan. The island was abandoned, leaving behind

fallen city were enough to keep everyone away, except those very few brave enough to enter. One of those few people was Kormir herself. It has been told that she woke the Apocrypha, there in the flooded halls of Fahranur. The Apocrypha had stood for ages, a Graven Monolith, one of the last remnants of Abaddon that had remained in Tyria, silent. Nothing but a mysterious stone tablet, that is, until she woke it.

It didn't discriminate. It didn't care if the person was a man or a woman, young or old, from Istan or abroad - no one was safe. People panicked, blaming whatever they could; the water, the air, the food. People even went so far as to burn down their houses, hoping to cleanse the plague's dire corruption. The first people that would have fled Fahranur would have been the locals from Istan. They would return to their villages spread across the island, but they weren't safe from the plague there - they just took it with them. Some people - those lucky enough to afford it - managed to escape Istan and seek refuge somewhere in the Elonian mainland, leaving their homes, family and friends behind. But the plague continued to spread there as well.



Fahranur, the First City. The Dynasty of the Primeval Kings came to an end, and the queens Nahlah and Dahlah were blamed for the pestilence.

Not many people have visited Fahranur since those days, not even when people settled Istan again half a century later. The Vestibule of Faith and the wandering corpses and skeletons haunting the

The first scholar who tried to uncover the secrets left behind in Istan was Chago, who did so two and half centuries ago. He, with the help of an unknown adventurer, searched the island for clues and found, among other things, the writings of Yomindhe, an Istani scholar. Yomindhe's writings were about the days of the plague, in the form of some notes to a friend which he left behind, encouraging his friend to follow him away from Fahranur. Yomindhe took care of his friend's wife and son, leading them on a journey towards mainland Elona, hoping to escape the plague. He was convinced the plague had something to do with the grain that was harvested and turned into bread and ale, so he advised not to eat or drink while in the city. In his final note, found near Kamadan, Yomindhe

wrote that they managed to find a corsair willing to take them to Kourna for a small fee (there was a small craft waiting for his friend, if the captain hadn't fled yet) and that he had enclosed research on the plague with that message. Unfortunately that research had failed to survive time, and was nowhere to be found. Yet the most terrifying evidence of the Scarab Plague was found in a skeleton found in the ruins of Fahrhanur. The bones had spherical indentations and cracks on the surface as if something hard and round grew against them, twisting them. Around the bones were the remains of some sort of small eggs or cocoons, scattered.

So that is all we know about the Scarab Plague. Until now that is. Word has it that some Inquest scientists have been working hard to unravel the secrets of the plague, and they seem to have succeeded. In their laboratory in Rata Primus was a special research section dedicated to the Scarab Plague, where the Inquest analyzed samples taken from Fahrhanur. And this isn't the worse news concerning the plague.

Not long ago Palawa Joko heard the rumors about the Inquest and their research, and decided he could use the Scarab Plague in his plans to gain control over Central Tyria. At the same time when the Commander decided to investigate Rata Primus,



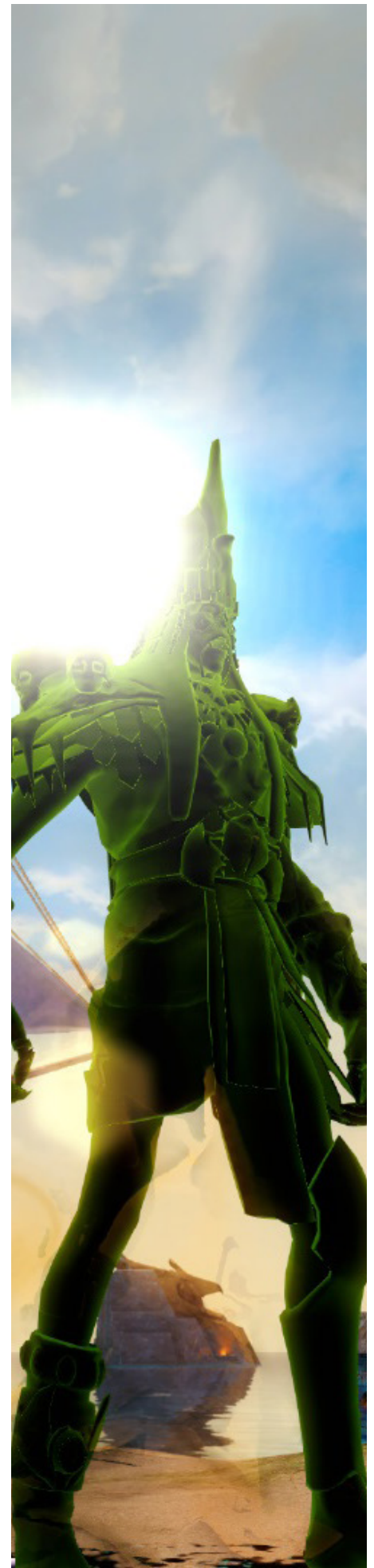
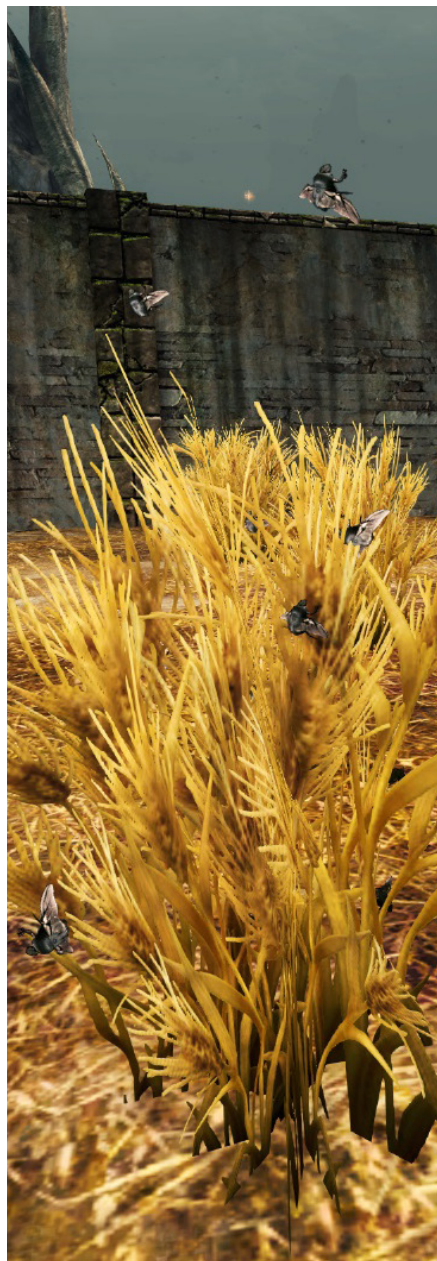
Palawa Joko and his Awakened attacked the Inquest facility. Even though the Commander tried to stop him from taking the Scarab Plague samples, Joko succeeded in his plans and is now in possession of the plague. He already brought the plague to the Free City of Amnoon, and it would have already started spreading throughout the city if it wasn't for the Commander and Aurene. The undead Lich even invited the commander to his research facility in Gandara, in southern Kourna. The Commander went there, but with the help of some unexpected allies: the ghosts of Queens Nahlah and Dahlah

and their loyal Sunspears, who were more than eager to grind their axes with Palawa Joko and prevent the disease, which they witnessed firsthand, from happening once again.

It was the Commander's and Taimi's mutual friend Blish who created a portal into Kourna, close to the Moon Fortress, and managed to bring a small army of Sunspeaker ghosts and Olmakhan charr to the campsite. They helped the Commander in the charge against the undead lich, while the human members of the party scouted the area to prevent them from being

contaminated by the plague. Gorrik, the younger brother of Blish, had previously discovered that only humans could catch the Scarab Plague or, as he said it, "it's technically not a plague; it's a pestilence." The small asuran entomologist, who had been working with the Inquest in their research on the Scarab Plague before he and his brother joined Taimi and the Commander, was probably the only one excited to see the evidence of Joko's plans with the plague. The Awakened Inquest had already manage to recreate the first generation of Pestilentix Termitroxus, the Scarab Plague, where they could infect people and use them to spread the disease, similar to what happened to the sailors aboard the ship in Amnoon. If Palawa Joko could cultivate a third generation, which could be a matter of days, a full-scale pandemic would be possible. It was in the vicinity of Gandara that

Gorrik saw the effects of the plague: the crops infested with scarab larvae, ready to be harvested by an ignorant farmer and to be used in bread, pasta and other types of food - an easy and sure way to spread the disease.



TWISTING TIME

BY DRAXYNNIC

On the origins of chronomancers

As part of our continuing series speculating on the possible origins of the *Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns* elite specialisations, we have thus far investigated the possible origins of the berserker, tempest, and reaper (see Issues 19, 20, and 21 respectively). This issue, we look at the specialisation that focuses on the manipulation of time itself: the chronomancer!

The concept of the chronomancer goes back a long way in the development of *Guild Wars*, predating the decision to develop *Guild Wars 2*. Concept art for *Guild Wars Utopia*, the planned fourth campaign that was cancelled to make way for *Guild Wars 2* and the bridging *Guild Wars: Eye of the North* expansion, included concept art for the chronomancer as a new profession, with at least one possible appearance being similar to the Watchknights today.

However, this background is probably not relevant to the lore background of the chronomancer we have now. Since *Utopia* was never completed and published, the concepts that were developed for it were never made part of the official *Guild Wars* canon. In fact, it is possible that the behaviour of the chronomancer we have now bears little relation to those

original concepts besides a general association with time.

This association is nothing new to mesmers. From as far back as *Guild Wars Factions*, skills such as Stolen Speed and the current Time Warp have carried a theme of manipulating time to speed up the mesmer's allies and slow down their enemies. The chronomancer, therefore,



can be viewed as a true specialisation, expanding on something that was already in the mesmer's toolkit rather than taking the profession into an entirely new direction.

With this overview out of the way, let's have a look at the equipment and collections associated with the chronomancer.

The Chronomancer's Shield appears to be a simple sundial, carrying little of interest beyond hour markers (probably in New Krytan) in identifying which culture it may come from. A flowing design is present on the gnomon (the raised portion that casts a shadow) of the dial, although it is difficult to identify if it is intended to represent anything specific or whether it is simply an abstract decoration.

The epaulettes are more interesting. A sundial theme is maintained, albeit as a fairly subtle element, with the disk floating at the center

of the epaulette with a spike from the outer piece crossing over it to act as the gnomon. More interestingly, however, is that the shape of the outer piece resembles the head of a crested bird, with wing-like shapes dominating the piece. While this could simply be coincidence, this appears to present an abstract, birdlike design to the entire piece - an artistic theme most associated with Tyrian humans (in the griffon symbol of Kryta and the hawk symbol of Ebonhawke), but which is also seen among the asura and norn.

Horologicus, as befitting the Ascended item at the end of the chronomancer collection, is the most intricate piece. The shield is backed by numerous gears - an aspect most associated with the industrialised charr, but also seen in the technology of other races and associated with clockwork in general. Mounted on the face are various symbols associated with time: two clocks, an

hourglass, and, interestingly, a crescent moon partially eclipsing a sun disk. The theme of a crescent moon incorporated into a shield design is seen among the sylvari (both Tiachran and Canach wield such shields), but these moons are simpler in design and lack the facial elements of the Horologicus shield. Conversely, a moon of similar design is present in the orrery hanging over the central garden of Divinity's Reach, indicating a possible human connection.

When looking at the collection to gain Horologicus, most of the non-generic items in the collection appear to be generally representative of the theme of time, without any other overarching theme that points towards a certain origin. Mesmer magic is





uncommon among modern centaurs, so the presence of the Centaur Sundial in the collection probably does not indicate that the specialisation originated from the centaurs, although it might arguably point towards the human enemies of the centaurs. The Steam-Powered Timepiece, acquired by looting the remains of a destroyed steam creature, has a mixed pedigree. The steam creatures, having been constructed by the rogue sylvari Ceara (later Scarlet Briar) from engineering skills learned from charr and asura, were then dumped in norn territory, and finally reverse-engineered by humans to create the Watchknights, at least some of which were enhanced using mesmer magic.

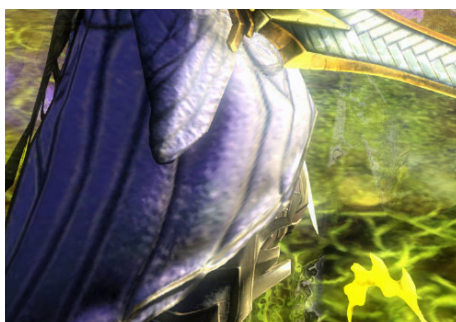
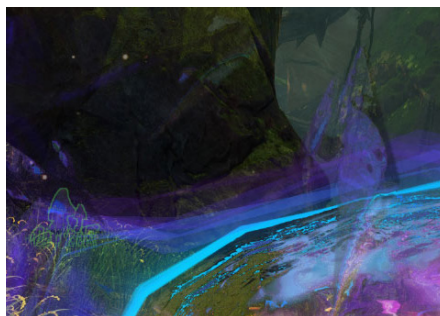
An interesting parallel arises, however, between the collection of various timepieces by

chronomancers, and the clock face appearance of many chronomancer skills. While this could simply be a matter of ArenaNet continuing a theme, it is plausible that this goes deeper than simple visuals. It's possible that this indicates that these timepieces are important foci in employing chronomancer magic, the visual effects of the skills reflecting the timepieces used to invoke them.

The Corpse Flower that is part of the collection makes for an interesting exception. Real corpse flowers are flowers that give off a scent like rotting meat in order to attract carrion-feeding insects - either as a pollinator or to feed a hungry plant. The most famous of these, Titan arum, possesses a large central part surrounded by a large leaf which has the potential to essentially act as a natural sundial (although the real thing grows to about three

metres, so a corpse flower as an accessory rather than as a massive backpiece is clearly not a full-grown Titan arum). It's not clear whether this is the kind of corpse flower intended to be represented by the item's artwork, but it does appear to be similar enough that this might be the intended connection between the corpse flower and the chronomancer. Alternatively, it is possible that the intent was simply to reflect the general association between flowers and time, and a 'corpse flower' was chosen to add a touch of the macabre to an item being harvested from Mordrem.

Having looked at the items associated with the chronomancer, another possible avenue to look at is this: Where, besides the chronomancer itself, have we seen magic that interacts with time before?



The most obvious place to look is the Infinity Ball, one of the possible 'past projects' for asura characters intended to look forward into the future. Further experimentation, however, revealed that the Infinity Ball was not actually looking forward in time; it was, instead, accessing alternate realities (possibly fractals) that contained potential futures. Thus, the Infinity Ball does not appear to be related to chronomancy.

Another place to look, fitting with a general theme of the B-iconic characters leading into the elite specialisations, is Kasmeer. During the defence of Fort Salma, Kasmeer deploys repeated Time Warps, granting Quickness

to the hero with greater regularity than could be achieved by player characters at the time - albeit falling well short of the permanent quickness that would become available to chronomancers. While she does not use true chronomancer skills, the skills that she does use have a defensive focus (favouring skills such as Feedback and multiple Phantasmal Defenders), which could be foreshadowing the defensive focus that chronomancer skills would show in the future. Furthermore, Kasmeer has always been associated with a feathery aesthetic (when wearing more than a bikini, anyway), which may present a link with the possible stylised avian appearance of the

chronomancer epaulettes. A connection between Kasmeer and the chronomancer is particularly interesting because, unlike many of the other NPCs that are close to the player character, Kasmeer is not a lone wolf - she is a member of the Mesmer Collective, a secretive order of mesmers which, among other things, hoards aspects of mesmer magic that the Collective feels would be detrimental to mesmers if the existence of such magic was to become widely known. In this context, Kasmeer's use of rapid-fire Time Warps might have been a 'prototype' form of chronomancy that was developed by the Collective, which Kasmeer was granted access to.

In the previous analysis, human aesthetics and influences have been a common thread through the items associated with the chronomancer: while most individual items have multiple cultures that they could have come from, all of them have a possible connection with Kryta. If chronomancy was, indeed, developed by the Mesmer Collective, this might explain this common thread. While we know little of the structure of the Collective (including whether it is a multiracial organisation), what we do know points towards the Collective having close links to Kryta: all known members are human (Countess Anise is supposed

to be a high-ranking member). The one time we are aware of when the Collective took action on a matter, it was a matter relating to Krytan affairs - namely, the investigation of the Tower of Nightmares near Kryta's southern border. Therefore, while the Collective - and therefore the development of chronomancy, if this theory is correct - may or may not be a specifically human organisation, human influence is strong enough to be seen in the trappings of chronomancy. This would also give the Collective access to anything that Krytans - possibly more specifically, Countess Anise - would have access to, including sundials taken as spoils from the centaurs and steam-powered timepieces left over from the reverse-engineering of steam creatures to build the first generation of Watchknights.

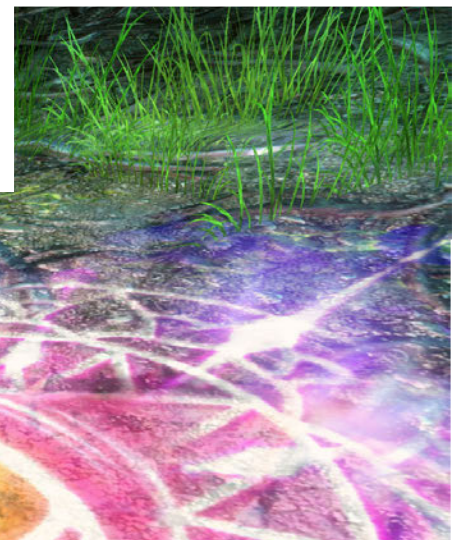
Such a development path

would also explain the generally defensive nature of chronomancy. We've been told multiple times that humans in modern Tyria are largely set in a defensive mindset, explaining the development among humanity of more defensively-oriented professions such as the guardian. If the chronomancer was developed by an organisation run (or strongly influenced) by humans, this would also fit with the generally defensive nature of the skills associated with chronomancy.

While the Collective has been known to keep some aspects of mesmer magic hidden from the general population (we've been told, for instance, that they hide the existence of illusion magic that can only be seen in the mind of a specific target), it is likely that there are circumstances in which the Collective authorises the dissemination of techniques that had been formerly kept hidden to the wider mesmer community. The rise of Mordremoth and

the destruction of the Pact fleet might have triggered such a move from the Collective, possibly as a move of desperation to reinforce the shattered Pact as much as possible before the Jungle Dragon could capitalise on the disaster and conquer all of western Tyria. Alternatively, it is possible that the public resurgence of the White Mantle was a factor, with the Collective seeking to provide those fighting against the Mantle with an additional edge... possibly one that had been kept in reserve until that moment, to prevent the White Mantle from stealing it for themselves.

Regardless of whether chronomancy was a recently developed magical field or one that had been kept secret for generations, it is evident that its keepers felt that the year 1328 was the right time to release it into the general mesmer community.



The background of the entire page is a dark, atmospheric underwater scene. Sunlight rays filter down from the surface, illuminating various aquatic plants and structures on the seabed. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, greens, and blacks, creating a mysterious and immersive environment.

THE NEW UNDERWATER EXPERIENCE

BY DRAXYNNIC

The announcement that the balance patch released on the 8th of May would contain a revamp of the underwater combat system came as a bit of a surprise to much of the player base.

This was because the underwater combat system has felt like it has been all but abandoned by ArenaNet for some time. Feedback from a significant portion of the player base from early on in *Guild Wars 2*'s lifespan has been that, simply put, many players didn't like it, and ArenaNet appears to have listened to that feedback. Over the game's history, the



underwater PvP map, Raid on the Capricorn, was removed, and changes have been made to World versus World maps to reduce the potential for underwater combat in that mode. In the PvE setting, little in the way of underwater content has been added since the initial release of fractals - while swimming areas do exist in the newer maps, they are generally present primarily as a means of travelling around the map and are generally lacking in interesting events or other features in and of themselves (the underground river in Tangled Depths is a good example, primarily acting as a low-danger means of travel for players with the appropriate Exalted mastery). It is, therefore, understandable that underwater combat has been a low priority for the ArenaNet team.

I consider this to be a bit of a shame. The fundamentals of the underwater combat system have always struck me as being fairly good; the controls are fairly intuitive, the underwater skills are (mostly) easy to learn but with additional depth that can be achieved with further experience, and it provides an interesting change of pace from the terrestrial combat which the engine is likely optimised for. While there are certainly some problems with the underwater combat system, it always seemed to me that it just needed a bit more polish and balance

in order to overcome these issues, rather than being abandoned due to the poor reception it received out of the gate. As a result, I was quite pleased to see the news that ArenaNet intended to give the system another look.

There have been a couple of goals that ArenaNet has identified with the revamp. The first is to address the pace of underwater combat. Originally, this was deliberately made slower than the terrestrial combat,

addressed was the awkwardness of using “detonate”-type skills in a 3D environment where distances are more difficult to judge. This one actually came as a bit of a surprise to me, as I haven’t really found these skills to be any more difficult to use underwater as on land - at Australian latencies, they can be hard to time accurately either way. However, the problem was likely exacerbated by the higher presence of such skills in the underwater environment.

“ While there are certainly some problems with the underwater combat system, it always seemed to me that it just needed a bit more polish and balance.

and this has only been exacerbated with time; new capabilities introduced through elite specialisations and tweaks to core traits and skills have accelerated the pace of terrestrial combat, while underwater combat has been left behind. While this was not a consideration I had initially, it is one that seems obvious in hindsight - underwater combat definitely did feel slower than terrestrial combat, causing battles underwater to feel like they’re a bit dragged out and, for players concerned with the efficiency of loot acquisition, less rewarding for the time invested than combat on land. Rebalancing the pace of combat is, therefore, a welcome improvement.

The second problem

In most cases, this has been resolved by reworking those skills so that the projectiles instead trigger on impact with a suitable target or obstacle. While this does mean that advanced players have less control over what their skills do, in most cases this is a quality-of-life improvement that makes it easier to make



good use of these skills.

For this patch there were three areas that I was hoping to see improvements in:

The first was the way that the blocking off of certain skills means that certain capabilities of a profession are unavailable underwater - classic thieves, for instance, can have trouble dealing with conditions underwater, since they lose access to Shadow Return, and having less stealth options reduces the usefulness of Shadow's Embrace. This can certainly be frustrating, and probably contributes to some people's dislike of underwater combat.

The second is in the lack of some skill types underwater (such as symbols and traps) that render traits or other build options that rely on those skill types useless in the underwater environment. This is especially awkward in zones where such transitions might happen regularly - such situations require players to

choose builds that minimise this issue, reset their build when making the transition, or simply accept that they will have dead traits when fighting underwater.

The third is the situation with revenants. Underwater combat has, for a long time, felt incomplete for Tyria's newest profession. Having only two Legends available underwater leaves them with little choice when it comes to choosing underwater builds, and the presence of only a single weapon type on a profession with access to weapon-swapping (a consequence of weapon-swapping being added late in the revenant's development) adds to the "incomplete" feeling, especially since that weapon was obviously doing double duty as a ranged condition weapon and a power melee weapon.

So, how has the patch addressed these issues?

On the first, the improvement



is somewhat limited. Only a handful of utility skills have been made available underwater: Lightning Flash for elementalists (now teleporting directly to a target), Null Field for mesmers, Rocket Boots for engineers (something that had been available previously, but was disabled due to problems it was causing; now, though, being able to launch oneself out of a body of water using Rocket Boots is probably less of a problem since gliding and mounts are available), Blinding Powder for thieves, and in the 10 July patch, Flesh Golem for necromancers. This most recent addition is very welcome for necromancers - not only does it provide another alternative to Plaguelands underwater, it also means that flesh golems intended for use on land should stop dying (and being put on cooldown) every time a necromancer dips below the surface.

Of the other additions, Lightning Flash seems



like a relatively minor addition (mobility options were already built into the elemental trident) and Null Field is welcome, but the underwater mesmer did not seem particularly lacking in what Null Field offers. More significantly, Rocket Boots offers engineers a valuable mobility tool. Making Blinding Powder available underwater, however (in addition to adding a stealth effect to Smoke Trail, one of the few 'detonate'

number of traits that relate to symbols, including all of the minors of the Zeal line, this is a significant improvement - previously, the underwater guardian could only generate a symbol through triggering another trait such as Protector's Impact or the misnamed Zealot's Speed. Now, symbol-related traits have the opportunity to be just as valuable underwater as they are on land. Most other cases of traits being

the surface.

This leaves the revenant.

The addition of the trident clearly rectifies the issue that revenants have regarding weapons, converting the spear into the short-range weapon for the revenant while the trident provides an interesting set of long-range skills. I've seen some players regarding this as a nerf, which is technically true in that the extreme potential damage output of the spear (compared to what other professions could output underwater) has been reduced - however, I think this is to be expected. It did feel to me that the spear was deliberately made a little overpowered as a kind of apology for ArenaNet's failure (until now) to provide an alternative weapon, on the basis that underwater combat was, by then, marginalised enough that balance didn't matter. With the provision of a second weapon with a new set of skills, this is no longer necessary, and the revenant

" The second problem addressed was the awkwardness of using detonate-type skills in a 3D environment where distances are more difficult to judge.

skills remaining) is a major boon to underwater thieves. Previously, with no weapon skills available that granted stealth, the underwater thief's only means of this was to lock in Hide in Shadows for their healing skill or to spec into the Shadow Arts line for Merciful Ambush and Hidden Thief. This was quite problematic, since many thief mechanics and traits are based on first gaining stealth.

rendered useless due to the unavailability of the linked skill type remain, although thief stealth and guardian symbols are probably the most glaring cases. Most other skill categories that are unavailable underwater only have a single major trait (per profession) based on that skill category, and can relatively easily be swapped out when venturing beneath

This addition of more access to stealth for the thief also touches on the second issue, of certain traits being rendered useless by skill types being unavailable underwater. Another significant change to address this problem was the reclassification of the area-of-effect skills on the underwater weapons of the guardian to have the 'symbol' category. Since the guardian has a large



spear can be brought in line with similar weapons of other professions.

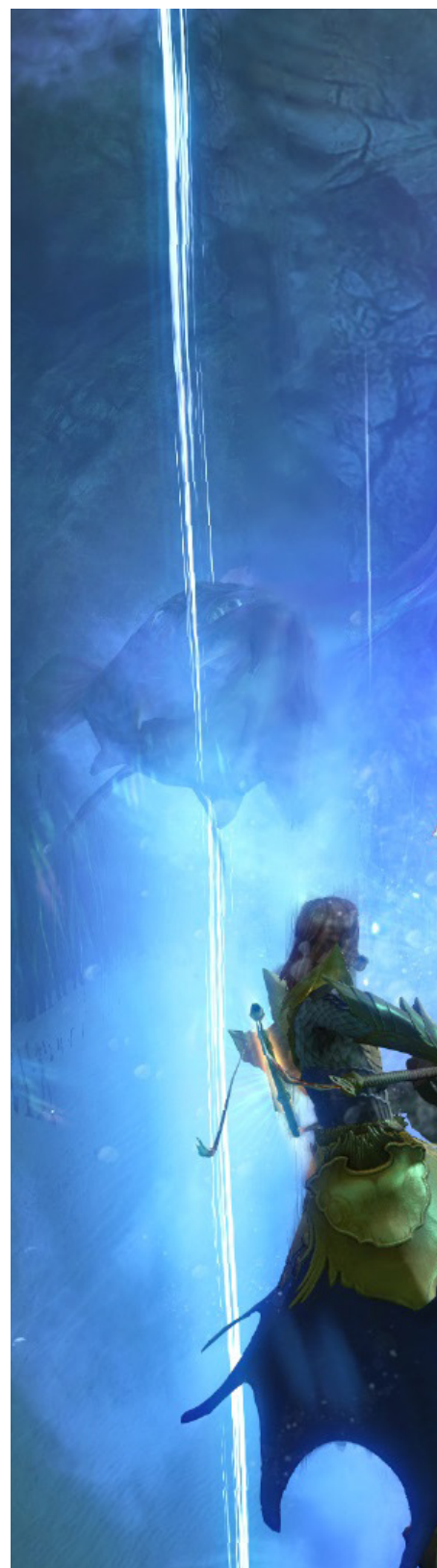
The second issue has been partially addressed with the introduction of the Legendary Dwarf Stance, and further addressed with the later addition of the Legendary Dragon Stance in the August update. Introducing the Legendary Centaur Stance is understandably problematic, possibly requiring that the tablet stick with the player rather than being able to be repositioned. While more difficult to resolve, this does present a major issue with the Salvation line, much of which assumes the use of Centaur Stance or at least the availability of significant outgoing healing (something which neither the underwater weapons nor the stances currently available are designed for, although the herald rework does allow for more outgoing healing when channeling other legends).

Overall, I think the underwater

combat revamp in the May balance update was a significant step in the right direction, and with many zones and events still requiring underwater combat in the core game, the improvements should certainly help improve the quality of the experience for newer players exploring those zones (as well as more experienced players going for another world completion). This was probably one of the major driving factors behind deciding that it was time for the revamp. While underwater combat has been downplayed in post-release content, the first experience of most new players is likely to be in zones where it is still present. As a result, leaving the underwater experience in a state that has clearly been left behind has the potential to hurt the image of the game in the eyes of new players.

Nevertheless, there is certainly still a lot that could be done to help the underwater combat system reach its full potential, and the revenant in particular, despite having been substantially improved, could still use a bit more attention. In the meantime, one improvement that might be easier to implement than converting skills to be available underwater might be to allow players to set different trait setups for underwater compared to their terrestrial build. There is precedent for this in the current switching of utility skills when venturing underwater - adding an

automatic switching of a character's trait setup while underwater would allow players to avoid most of the remaining problems associated with traits that provide no benefit underwater.



COLLEGE OF AESTHETICS

BY AMALA

Asura have so much potential when it comes to fashion. Do you want to look like a badass sci-fi warrior? Easy. Maybe you want to accommodate your inherent cuteness before you drop that unassailable argument on a rival. Ha! Just imagine the discomfiture. With these two looks designed for heavy armour you're sure to impress your krewe and frenemies.

Apparently, only light armour classes get the dresses. Pffft. There's clearly been an oversight in the design department, but never fear! With asuran ingenuity, we will create a dress made solely from heavy armour. Here's a perfect outfit for those after lab mixers.



WHITE GOLD (WG)

TARO (T)

BLOODSTONE CORAL (BC)

INDIGO (I)

MIDNIGHT FIRE (MF)

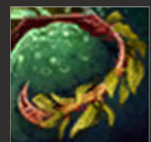
MAROON (M)

WINE SHADE (WS)

HEAD

WG

T

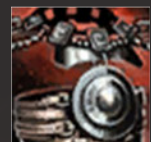


CHEST

WG

BC

I

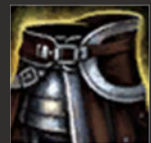


LEGS

MF

BC

I

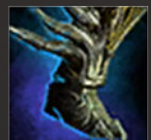


FEET

M

WS

WG



DANCING PRODIGY



Headgear: Wreath of Cooperation
400 Gems

It's like the crown you deserve, but not as ostentatious. Roughly 115 gold.

Chest: Gladiator Chestplate
Crafted - 49s 20c (Level 80 Valkyrie variant)

This forms the top of your dress and the collar even resembles jewellery. Crafting with a level 375 armorsmith is the cheapest method of acquisition, but remember, you usually save gold by buying the insignia straight from the trading post.

If you wish to save your valuable time and have others do the crafting for you, the trading post has the skin for about 75 silver.

Leggings: Vigil's Honor Tassets
1g 76s

Clever use of Vigil armour forms the bottom half of the dress. To get this skin, you'll need to visit Vigil Keep in Gendarran Fields and find the merchant, Crusader Eira. However, she will only sell to you if you're a member of the Vigil. Nobody at the Keep will ask you why you're requisitioning the armour, but if they do, I suggest lying.

Boots: Warbeast Greaves
Crafted 9g 66c

It's hard finding dress shoes in heavy armour, so here, have some quirky boots! You could be lucky enough to get the recipe for Warbeast Greaves from looting the corpses of the Forged, but if not, you can purchase the recipe at the trading post for about 6 gold. You'll also need a level 425 armorsmith.

Dyes

Well, glitch. Indigo here looks different there. Outfits with pieces from so many different sets are tricky to dye, especially when it involves something like that strange tint on Warbeast armour. With some experimentation, I settled on these dyes to create a consistent and appealing colour palette:

White Gold - 1g 74s

Taro - 23s 2c

Bloodstone Coral - 7g 46s 99c

Indigo - 58s 90c

Midnight Fire - 80s

Maroon - 24s 17c

Wine Shade - 25s 82c

SUBJECT ASTRAL

Headgear: Resplendent Curtain
Free

This metal blindfold emits three lines of light at its centre and is absolutely perfect for a sci-fi themed outfit. You can get the Resplendent Curtain by selecting it in the character creation process when making a revenant.

Shoulders: Zodiac Heavy Pauldrons
800 Gems

These beautiful shoulders create a blur of another dimension around them. While writing this, the gems required to buy the Zodiac Heavy Armour set are worth approximately 230 gold.

Chest: Zodiac Heavy Warplate
Acquired with shoulders

The centrepiece of the outfit. For those of us who can't get the Celestial Infusions from the Fractals of the Mists (Destroyers take that Arkk), here's an alternative way to become one with the cosmos and the Eternal Alchemy.

Gloves: Chaos Gloves
500 Gems

These gloves merge so beautifully with the arms of the Zodiac Warplate, it's like they were made to be together. Right now, they're worth about 145 gold.

Leggings: Electromagnetic Leggings
25g

The most amazing sci-fi heavy armour, the Electromagnetic set, is exclusive to asura. You can buy this at the Tier 3 Cultural Armour merchant in Rata Sum.

Boots: Electromagnetic Boots
12g

If you're getting the legs, you need the boots. Nothing else matches, so you're stuck with them, but hey, they look awesome and complete the outfit perfectly. Result!

Dyes

Robin – 12s 93c

This dye matches the undyeable blue torso of the Zodiac Heavy Warplate.

White Gold – 1g 74s

A soft gold colour to add some divine goddess to your cosmic hero. I think I'm channelling a bit of Dwayna, who you may note, is an actual cosmic being.

White – 2g 99s 89c

You can dye the aura around the chaos gloves, but it will always emit a strong white light. Make the most of this by using a white dye for the lights going through the Electromagnetic Armour



Yes, the experiment will probably kill you. But it will also advance your march toward total fashion domination.

Ahem. No, I assure you, the pieces required are well within safety parameters. Your appearance may appear shocking to some, but you'll definitely make an impression. Inspired by cosmic beings from beyond the Mists, these pieces... Well, no, I haven't actually seen a cosmic being from beyond the Mists, but there's a high probability that they look as awesome as this outfit.



ROBIN (R)

WHITE GOLD (WG)

WHITE (W)

HEAD

R

WG

W

SHOULDERS

R

WG

CHEST

WG

WG

HANDS

R

LEGS

R

WG

W

FEET

R

WG

W



NB: This outfit does not provide enlightenment.

GUILD SPOTLIGHT

BY VALIANT

BLACK LION EXPEDITIONS



In this issue of GuildMag we're turning the spotlight on *Black Lion Expeditions*, an NA-based guild that encompasses three ideals: benevolence, loyalty and encouragement - or BLE for short! We've spoken to four prominent members of the guild, including co-captain Magnus Sigmundsson and guild officers Poinsetteia and Serra Silverwind, so if you're looking for a new community to call home in

Guild Wars 2, then this may just be the place for you.

Founded at the release of *Guild Wars 2*, [BLE] is now approaching its sixth birthday. In that time the guild has grown from small beginnings with a focus on light-hearted roleplay to something larger with many more active members, but all the while seeking to retain the close-knit feeling of its smaller roots. Members are affectionately referred to as "Lions", with

one such Lion, Doom Raisin, perfectly describing the guild atmosphere: "it's really more than a gaming guild; it's a community who understand that we're each more than a blue name on a screen." In fact, Raisin has even undertaken road trips to meet several other Lions she's become good friends with during her time in the guild. Add to this that guild officer Serra joined in the wake of other members of her family, and that Magnus is approaching his sixth year



Black Lion Expeditions [BLE]

Leaders: Magnus Sigmundsson;
Mister Dibb

Server: Tarnished Coast (NA)

Size: 250+ members

Preferred game mode: PvX

In-game contacts:

righteousdude.3974; Haon.2301;
SilverShadow.8639

Website: www.ble.guildwork.com

Quirk: To us, BLE stands for Benevolent, Loyal, Encouraging. We place great emphasis on making sure our guild is supportive of each other and we keep our guild chat and Discord channel clear of politics and other controversial topics.

with the guild, and it's easy to see that this is a larger guild where its members are truly part of a caring community.

That isn't to say that new additions to the community aren't welcome, however - far from it. Applications to join [BLE] are handled through the guild website, www.ble.guildwork.com, where an officer will review your submission and get back to you as soon as possible. The guild boasts that it caters

to players of all skill levels, interests and experience, and whilst the focus is currently on PvE, roleplay, and guild activities, there are plans in the works to expand into competitive modes like WvW in the future. The current offering includes weekly raiding groups (both training and experienced), guild missions, open world content that includes world bosses and map metas, regular guild-wide festivals, and contests. Poinsetteia is the organiser

behind *Black Lion Expeditions'* screenshot contests (prizes included!), whilst other events have included so-called Flower Festivals and Wintersday Parties that are made up of guild trivia, scavenger hunts, costume contests, and much more.

For Lions who are interested in end-game PvE content, Serra oversees the guild's raiding rosters. Whether you have raiding experience or not is irrelevant; the guild runs



periodic workshops for new and learning raiders, always following the mantra that activities should be fun and open to all. Even in potentially stressful environments like raids, the officers are keen to ensure that all participants enjoy themselves. Poinsetteia notes that “when we go into a raid it’s much more important to us that our members feel comfortable with the encounter and their fellow members than clearing as fast as possible”, making [BLE] a great place to start your raiding journey if you’re yet to find a suitable group.

It is this focus on enjoying *Guild Wars 2* - not just playing it - that [BLE] feels sets it apart from many other guilds. “Our focus is less on tangible in-game goals and more about trying to get each of our members comfortable with the game in their own

right”, says Poinsetteia. She continues, “if you’re tired of doing anything alone, or even if you think it’d be more fun with someone else, we’ll come with you.” With members from around the globe, there’s sure to always be people online to join in your activities - and even when there’s not, the guild’s similarly active Discord server is a great way to reach out to current Lions who aren’t in-game, or just socialise!

“It’s really more than a gaming guild; it’s a community who understand that we’re each more than a blue name on a screen.

So, why should you join? Ultimately it all boils down to a true sense of community. As Serra eloquently puts it, “[BLE] is like family. When I first joined I immediately felt love, support and community.”

Combined with the efforts of Poinsetteia and Magnus, the guild’s leadership team works hard to ensure there’s a stream of support for those who need it and that there’s always something going on, whether that’s a guild-sponsored activity or simply an active guild chat so there’s always a place to join in on a conversation. Of particular highlight is the dedication several officers put into planning fun events; in praise of them, Doom Raisin said “the party and event planners really blow me away with the shenanigans they come up with!” And to top it all off, *Black Lion Expeditions* also prides itself on having a fully upgraded guild hall - just as you’d come to expect from a top-tier guild.

If *Black Lion Expeditions* sounds like your sort of guild then make sure to visit their

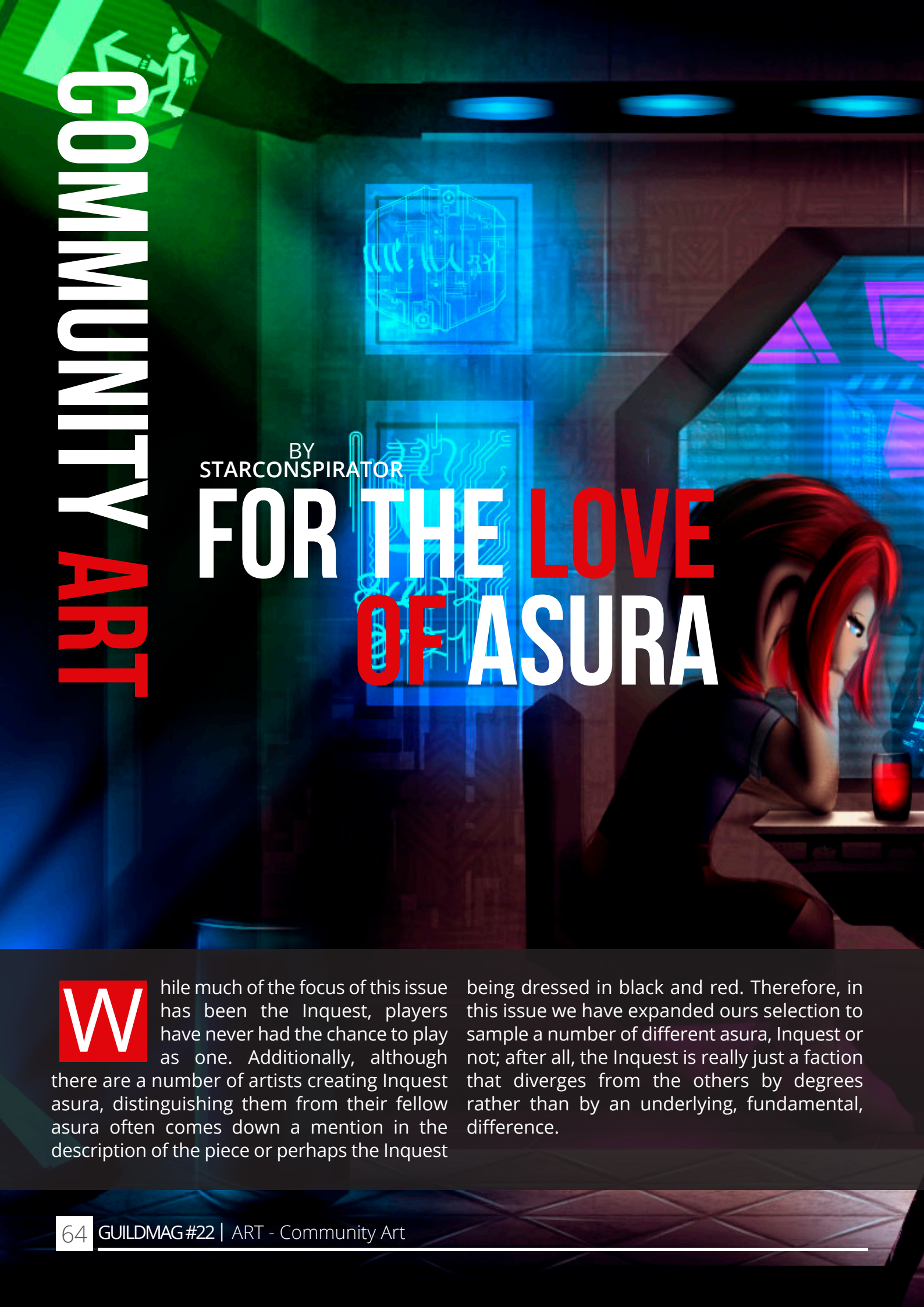
website for the application form. We'd like to thank those involved in this guild spotlight for answering our questions, particularly Magnus Sigmundsson for organising the guild's efforts.

open to suggestions - simply send an email to contact@guildmag.com. Until next time!

If you know of any guilds who would like to be featured in the future, we're always

“ Our focus is less on tangible in-game goals and more about trying to get each of our members comfortable with the game in their own right.





COMMUNITY ART

BY
STARCONSPIRATOR

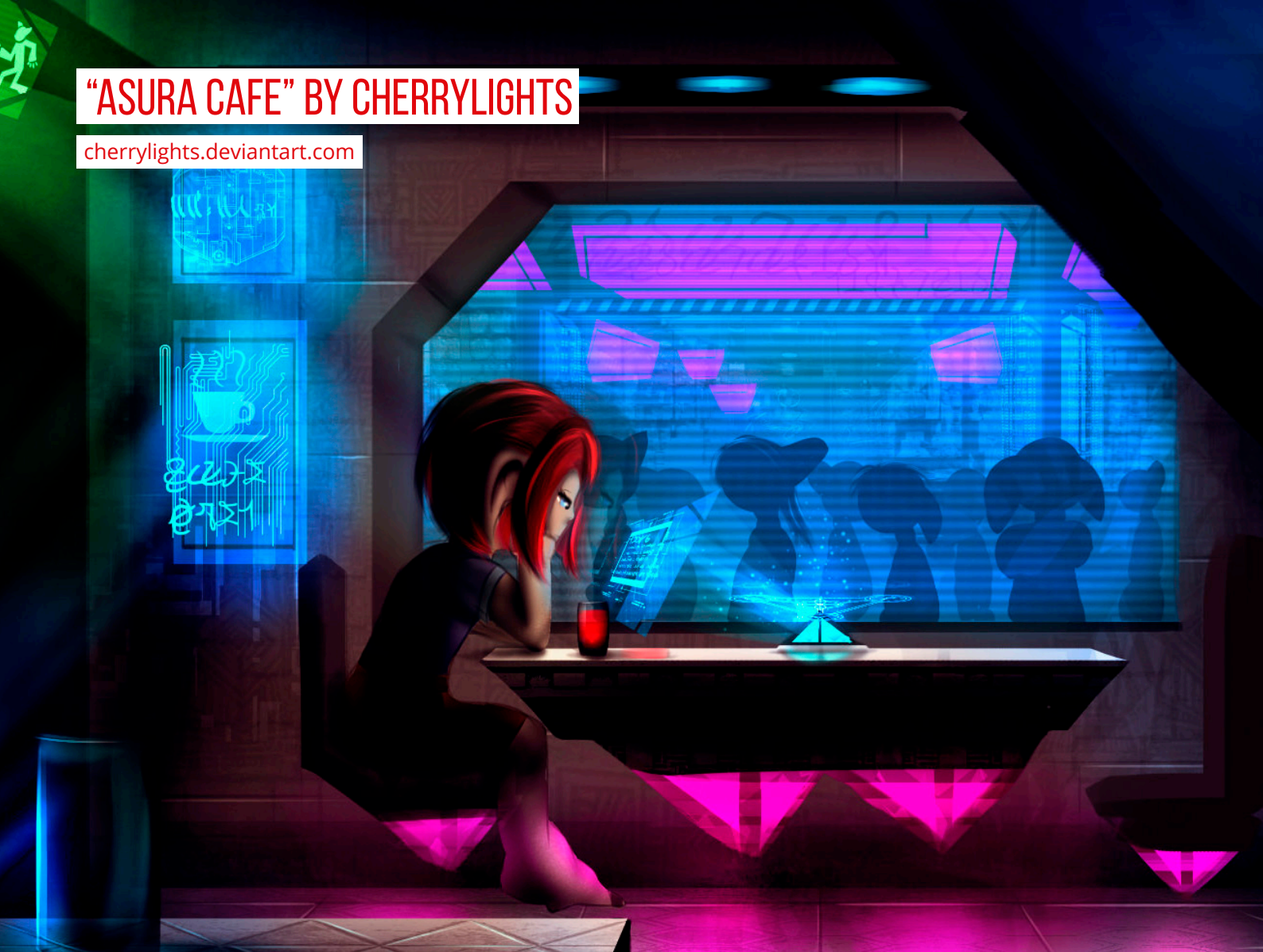
FOR THE LOVE OF ASURA

While much of the focus of this issue has been the Inquest, players have never had the chance to play as one. Additionally, although there are a number of artists creating Inquest asura, distinguishing them from their fellow asura often comes down a mention in the description of the piece or perhaps the Inquest

being dressed in black and red. Therefore, in this issue we have expanded our selection to sample a number of different asura, Inquest or not; after all, the Inquest is really just a faction that diverges from the others by degrees rather than by an underlying, fundamental, difference.

"ASURA CAFE" BY CHERRYLIGHTS

cherrylights.deviantart.com



Asura nightlife surely is a thing to behold; their magitech illuminates their world in neon splashes of color and the once-subterranean creatures are perfectly adapted for living in the dark. Asura Cafe by Cherrylights on Deviantart. com captures the asuran city. Through the cafe window, faceless crowds stream past as a lone asura pours over her research. Holograms light the corners and everything glows neon. This piece captures the aloof asura perfectly. Working tirelessly toward her next great invention, she guards her secrets, unwilling to share credit with even her krew.



ASURA- A SCIENCE AND INTELLIGENCE
FOCUSED RACE... UNTIL YOU STAT THEIR
GEAR AS BERSERKER...

"ASURA BERSERKER" BY NEBEZIAL AKA SHINIEZ

nebezial.deviantart.com

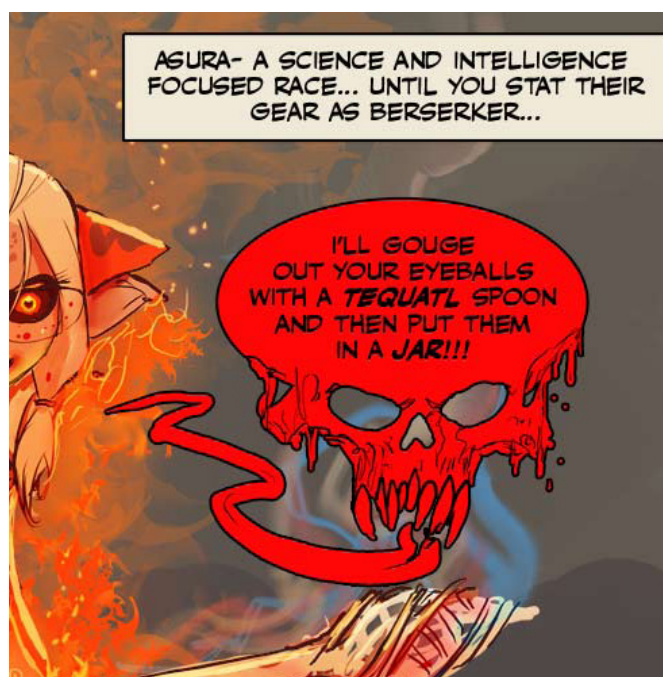


"PIXLAM" BY LAREAKEI

lareakei.tumblr.com



I believe one of the reasons the asura are popular is their tiny stature and oversized egos. Adorable “bunnies” armed with razor-sharp teeth and advanced weaponry; anyone who misjudges them based on their size or cuteness is in for a rude awakening! Nebezial’s panel beautifully captures this dichotomy: a cute, bespeckled asura covered in the blood of her enemies. Add science and magitech to that ego, divorce it of moral and ethical standards, and you have the Inquest.



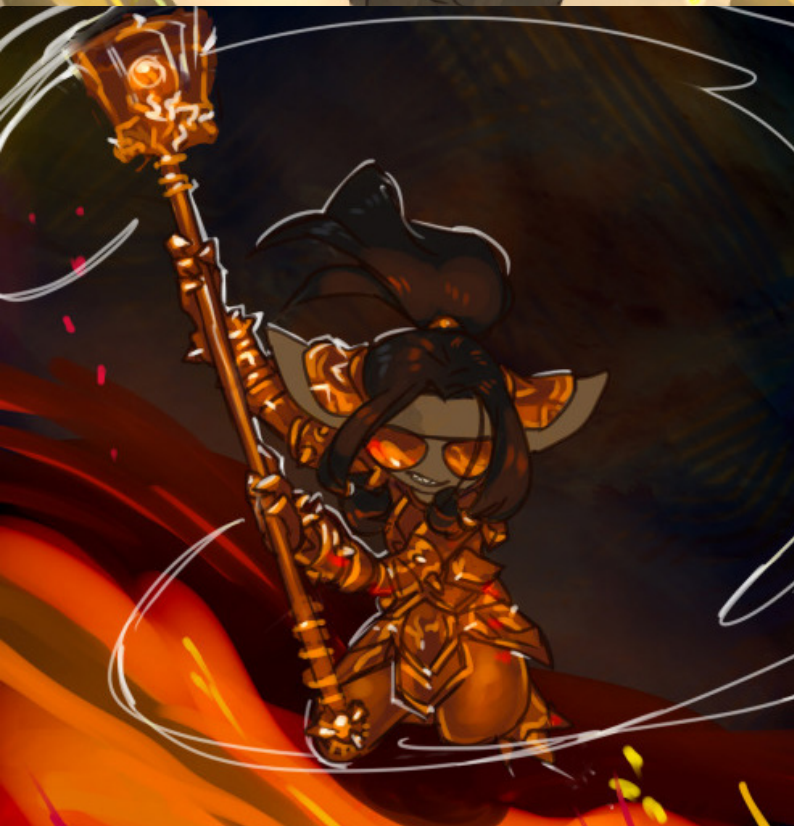
In addition to their large egos and unswaying dedication to their work, asura are rabid explorers. Larea’s image of her friend Pixlam brings to mind the initial meetings we had with the asura many years ago. Players of the original game’s *Eye of the North* campaign first came upon the asura Vekk in a series of underground tunnels. There, we faced the Destroyers, Primordus’ fiery minions. Through *Eye of the North* we fought the destroyers at every turn as we made our way deep into the heart of the North, to the Elder Dragon’s resting place. In another time, Pixlam may have been standing on the edge of the Great Destroyer’s lava pool, rather than Mount Maelstrom. Here, though, he captures the fire that burns inside every asura.





"CHARACTER SKETCHES" BY 47-ASURA

47-asura.tumblr.com/



I have noticed that a number of community artists create character studies of the asura, focusing on their features and emotions, making portraits and comic panels quite a bit more prevalent than scenic pieces. One such artist, 47-asura, offers several pieces that run the full gamut of emotion. Each one of her characters holds a very human emotion: fear, contemplation, joy, and many others can be found in her work.

"MEOW" BY MATSUBAKI

matsubaki.deviantart.com



Even though the evil asura is quite prominent in the community, there are examples of asura art encompassing all aspects of the human condition. Quiet, intimate moments, like that found in the sketch *Meow* by Matsubaki, capture the comedic and warm nature of the bookworm scientists. In this piece we find a hardened, skilled warrior in repose, her helmet laid aside while she eats, who is then startled by a hungry cat. For me, this piece perfectly captures some of the surprising and quirkier moments in *Guild Wars*.

While exploring the many fabulous examples of asura fanart for this month's article, it occurred to me that the asura have the amazing ability to capture an incredible amount of emotion. They have inspired artists to create their own stories, detailed backstories for their in-game characters, and even characters beyond the

game itself. All this, combined with egos that outweigh their bodies and brains twice as large as that, and the possibilities for artistic exploration are endless!

Unlike some of the other races, the asura give life to the tension many of us feel in our day-to-day, modern, and urban lives. We live disconnected from the natural world, although most of us believe in some form of interconnectedness. We strive for emotion and meaning in anonymous, unnatural settings, and finally, many of us struggle to achieve recognition from superiors for the good work we do. And, like some asura, perhaps a number of us have our dreams of glory dashed, our egos bruised, our accomplishments ignored or belittled... or stolen by a power-hungry superior.

The background image shows a dark, atmospheric scene with ancient ruins. In the foreground, there are large, ornate columns. In the background, there are glowing blue energy sources and structures, possibly part of a futuristic or magical civilization. The overall tone is mysterious and high-tech.

RESISTING THE AWAKENED FETTERS

BY PHOENIX

The first thing he remembered was those eyes. They were redder than the optical sensor of a Mark VII Centurion Golem, but where the golem's crystal glowed with a soft light, these "eyes" were solid, opaque, bottomless. There weren't eyes there at all, he knew, just blood red orbs of light that filled the sockets where eyes would have been prior to the Awakening.

The second thing he remembered was Dreta, his companion and coworker. As the mummy pounced, he could see her body splayed on the ground at the adjacent terminal. The Awakened had taken her first. He told her they should've accepted the outsourcing to Rata Primus, but she insisted they remain in Fahrenur. He had to admit, the ruins were beautiful in their own way, but they were also ancient and being here gave him an itchy, uncomfortable feeling, much like a sparkfly constantly brushing up against his skin.

He looked down, half expecting to see one of those annoying insects buzzing around, but what he saw instead terrified him. His skin had always been the color of cinnamon, or maybe a perfectly baked pear tart, but it was now the color of wood ashes. He put his hand to his forearm. It had the same texture as a burnt tree too — thin, papery, like you could try to lift up a layer but it would break apart at a touch and drift to the ground in flakes.

They didn't know if it was possible to Awaken a race aside from humans. Dragon minions were one thing to deal with — dangerous, but single-minded in their loyalty to their master, with stripped memories and kill-or-be-killed personalities. The hippocampus of an Awakened, on the other hand, showed remarkable short and long-term memory retention, especially if the process occurred shortly after death. And while the majority of the Awakened were loyal to Palawa Joko, some maintained free will. There were just too many variables to consider when working with the Awakened; the dragon minions were somehow simpler, neurologically at least.

"Swakk?"

He looked up, realizing he was so focused on the memories of his death coming into clarity and the current state of him that he had neglected his surroundings entirely.

"Swakk!"



A name? His name? He must've had a name, and yet...

"Swakk, you're ali- well, you're here. You're... sentient."

Yes, Swakk was his name. He was finding additional pieces of his memory now. He also realized that he recognized that voice. He spun, seeking the source. Dreta? Yes and no. Her skin was the same color as his and where she had had frosty pink hair in life, her head was now bald. There were chunks missing from her floppy ears and her eyes, once the color of a barely ripe peach, were ghastly white, but it was undoubtedly her. "Dreta."

"It takes a while for the electrical signals to get firing again, but it's coming back to you now, isn't it?" She quirked her mouth like she always did, but the skin of her cheek hung in tatters.

"I, yes, I think. Where are we?"

Dreta gestured to her right. They were at their terminals in the gate hub of Fahranur. Their research was focused on creating gates with no receiving gate — one simply had to input coordinates and walk through. It would make it much easier to "share" research with scholars and prodigies around Tyria. The distinct problem was that there was no quick way back once you got to your destination, but if you were smart about it, which they naturally were, it wasn't a big issue. Rumor had it that they were perfecting translocation technology that didn't necessitate a gate at all in Rata Primus. Now those were some designs Swakk would have loved to get his hands on, but alas.

"Why though? Why were we Awakened at all? And since we are, shouldn't we be groveling at Joko's..." He cut himself off mid-sentence. He experienced an unnatural tug as soon as he said the word. He felt flooded by pleasure, no, purpose.

As if on cue, a voice rose up from the platform above. "Greetings, mortal rats. You have all been blessed by King Palawa Joko, Scourge of Vabbi, Eternal Monarch of All, Beloved by His People..."

The asura all looked up at the same time. The undead ruler himself stood there, addressing the asura as though they were his subjects, which, Swakk supposed, they now were. Normally Swakk's mind would have wandered off, but he found himself hanging on every word.

"It has come to my attention that you have a way to transport my undying army into any city, fort, or town in Tyria. This suits my purposes as Joko the Inevitable, First and Last of His Name, Rider of Junundu, Destroyer of Turai Ossa, Vanquisher of Oswald Thorn, and Father of Undeath. That will be my future styling. Doesn't it sound good?"

"Yes, your Majesty," said the Awakened to Joko's left. Aside from her sunken face and necrotic scarring, she had been left mostly intact, ringlets of shocking red hair still erupting from her scalp.



"I hope you will prove more intelligent than the other miserable lumps of shriveled flesh I have surrounded myself with."

Swakk noted the other formerly human Awakened seemed not the least bit insulted by this.

"I must take my leave but you will compile a list of high-profile locations and begin sending my army to those places immediately. Shortly I will require that list to be sent to your headquarters in Rata Primus. Carry on, my faithful minions. My loyal lieutenants will stay behind to keep you in line."

"Praise Joko." The words came unbidden from Swakk's mouth before he could stop them: loud, clear, and in perfect time with the chorus of voices from Awakened asura surrounding him. Even Dreta said it, though she had been notorious in college for interrupting their professors, usually to correct their teaching or announce her own conflicting theory.

Joko walked out of the room and Swakk's head was overloaded with emotion; the first and most prominent was a sense of loss. His master was leaving him but he wanted to serve, to genuflect, to touch the hand of the magnificent Palaw- no! A part of him struck back at the enamored, eager-to-please voice that erupted as soon as Joko's back was turned. Swakk was an asura, an Inquest, the most advanced krewe of the most intelligent race destined to discover the mysteries of the Eternal Alchemy, and no rotten-breathed bookah could tell him otherwise, lich lord or no!

Still, there was something influential, even majestic, about watching Joko stand on that platform and speak. Bookah he may be, but he still held thousands of other people in his thrall. Swakk was essentially immortal now as well; he could continue working on his projects for as long as he wished. He shook his head back and forth, ears flopping around. His brain felt foggy, like he had been submerged several seconds too long. He didn't know what to think.

He felt a sharp thwap on his back and turned to find one of Joko's Awakened overseers glaring down at him.

"Our beloved King has given you a gift and asked you to be a part of his grand plan. You should be grateful and get to work."

Swakk's eyes burned momentarily as he stared off into middle space, contemplating the command. His survival instinct, if he still indeed had one, won out in the end, telling him to turn to his console or else risk being struck with the Awakened's staff again.

A long list of coordinates already lit up his screen. His terminal controlled gate three; next to him, Dreta was already deftly swiping her fingers along the screen, sending directives to gate two. He looked up, his gaze

trailing after lines of Awakened shambling along through the portals. The Awakened directly above him were waiting for the characteristic magenta light to fill the gate, indicating it was travelable. They didn't seem impatient though. They didn't seem anything but obedient.

The least he could do was check his screen to see where his fellow Inquest, or Joko, wanted to send the army. The first location was outside some agrarian Hamlet in Gendarran Fields; that didn't seem so bad. How many could be living there after all? It was close to Lion's Arch but with how many times that pirate haven had been besieged, you'd think they would have excellent defenses in place. He input the coordinates on the number pad and his finger hovered over the activation button only momentarily before he pressed it. Just like that, the gate sparked to life and the first contingent of Awakened walked through. A wave of happiness washed over Swakk; he felt productive and fulfilled. One more wouldn't hurt...

Swakk barely stopped himself jumping back, but he couldn't prevent the horrified look that crossed his face. The next location was right in the middle of Mabon Market. Hadn't Widd been stationed there? They'd gone their separate ways after college, but still, he always considered Widd a good guy to have around, if not a friend. Instinctively seeking that previous high, Swakk started typing the coordinates, but then stopped partway through. What if he adjusted them eastward just a bit? Made the Awakened go through, say, the middle of Ventry Bay in krait-infested waters? He smiled to himself, disappointed he wouldn't be there to see whether or not the Awakened could swim and if they could, who would triumph in that deathmatch. He continued typing, switching just two numbers.

Dreta narrowed her eyes. "Those aren't the right coordinates."

Swakk slowly turned his head to face her, finger planted just above the activation key. "I know." He pressed down. "But they don't," he said, gesturing over his shoulder at the Awakened lieutenants. This time he was greeted with a sharp stabbing sensation in his brain. He winced, but the pain subsided to a dull throb in moments. Somehow this felt better than when he had input the coordinates perfectly. The first time was pleasurable, no doubt, but this, this felt right, like what he should be doing.

He scanned the list. Next was just north of Hexane Regrade, but wasn't that an Inquest complex? No, that would never do. He knew of a troll den a little to the east, not to mention the droves of overgrown mosquitoes in that swamp. He didn't want to imagine them getting even bigger, but why not send the lumbering blood bags there?

Next came a homestead in Taigan Groves of the Wayfarer Foothills. At their best, the norn were often as dumb as a skritt in an isolation

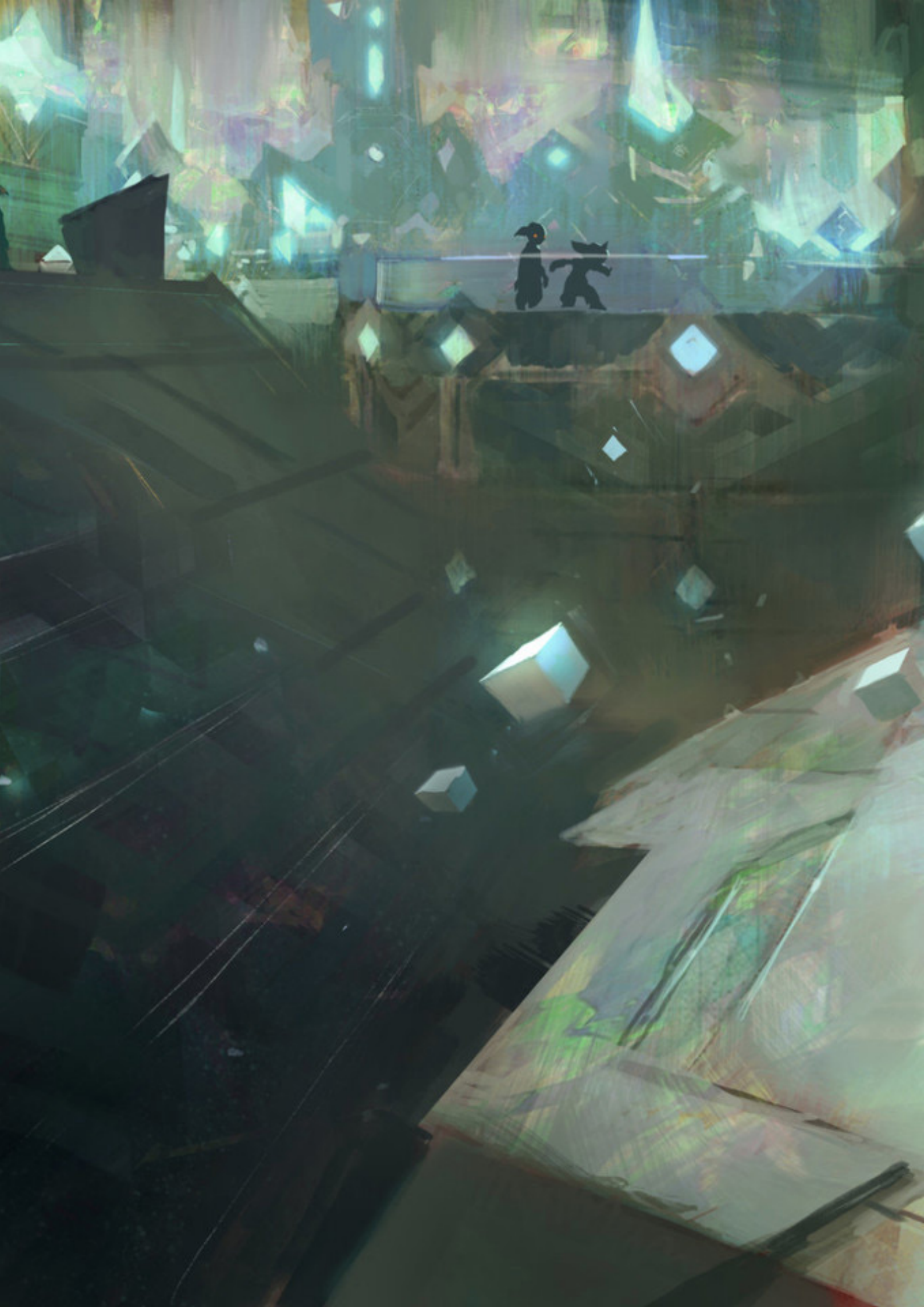


chamber, but dumber still were the Sons of Svanir. Even the most unskilled members of the Inquest knew you couldn't simply beg for and accept a dragon's magic, you had to find a way to harvest and control it, or else you just transformed into a mindless minion. He'd have to alter more numbers than before, but he could send the next set of Awakened to the Frozen Maw...

The sharp pain continued to plague him every time he entered the wrong coordinates, but Swakk was an Inquest. Discipline triumphed over fleeting comfort every time. Swakk's mind swam with laughter and delight. Hadn't Joko learned from the Sunspears he couldn't hold in his grasp? The trouble with finding decent unthinking underlings was that they had to be deliriously dimwitted to begin with.







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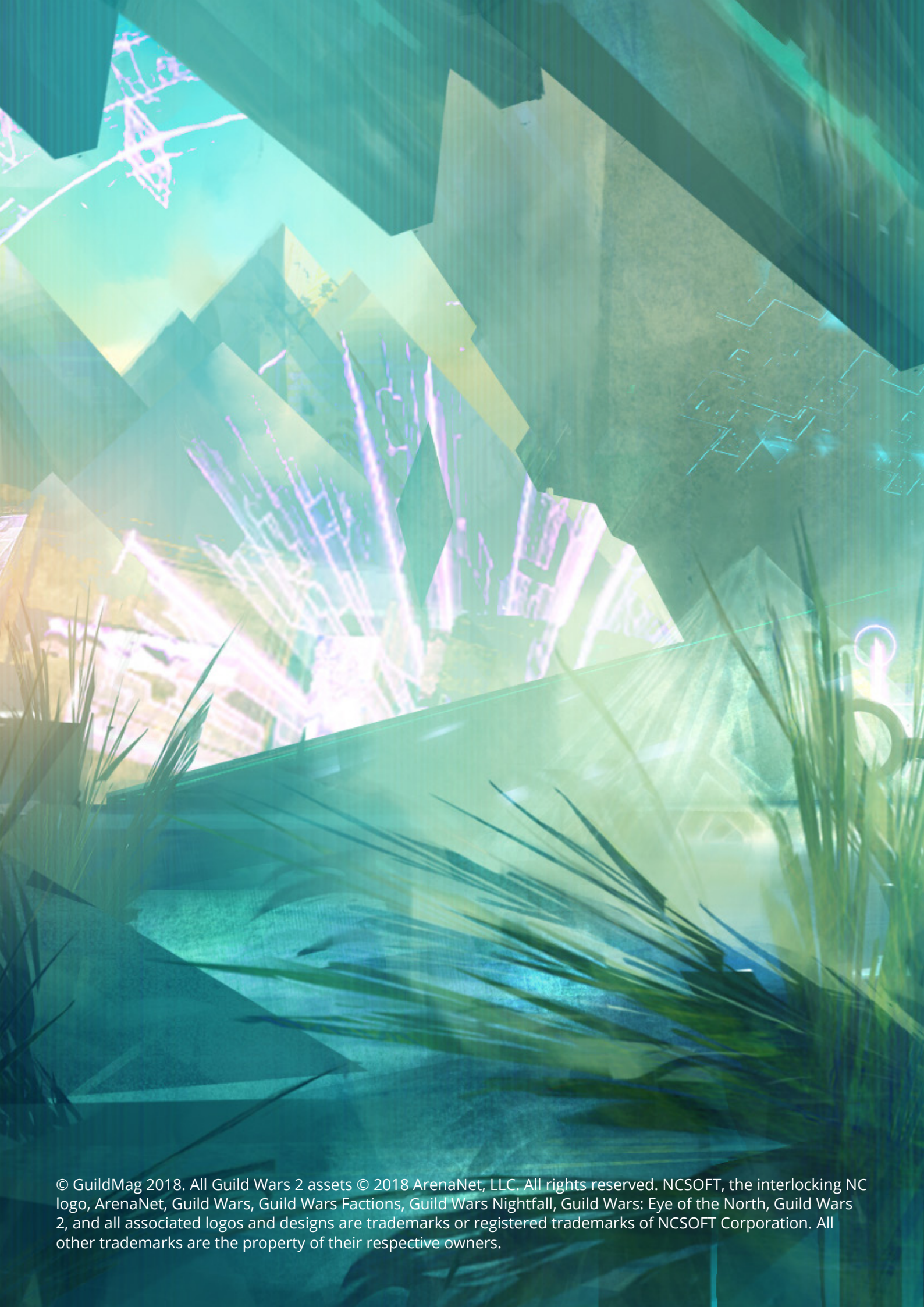
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