

CHAPTER 2: "Guardians of the Galasi"

By Peter Tu

Sidousai @ Celestial Peak

[Level 10 Rare Ogre Soul acquired. Do you wish to absorb or summon it?]

"Just as I thought. Green text meant Rare rarity from the game." Adam made his way over to the southern entrance after the attack was finally over, to the corpse of the ogre leader he had killed. Luther was nowhere to be seen. It was too difficult to keep track of a single individual during the confusion of a siege. Across the rampart the defenders were cheering at the sight of the retreating invaders. Grown adults were hugging each other, some of them crying, over the hard-earned victory.

"Absorb or summon it?" Adam was seriously contemplating the option. By now he had fashioned some amount of understanding of the summoning mechanics. The summoned unit retained all of its levels and stats, so chances were high that it would return as a Rare unit under his command as well.

"On the other hand, it might give me another soul fragment if I absorb it." Adam glanced at his current stats.

[Adam Usher; Human]

[Attack: 3]

[Life: 6]

[Defense: 4]

[Magic: 3]

Over the course of battle he had discovered another Life fragment, which brought his Life total to 6. He specifically remembered that it came from a Level 3 ogre. This meant that it was also likely that the drop rate depended on the level of the enemy...

"How come I don't display a level like everyone else? Is it because I'm not a part of this world?" Adam wondered. He was in his analyze mode, a common habit that the two Adams had picked up during their training/studying in the academy/college. "Absorption only gives me one soul regardless of its level. But a summon would immediately give me a more powerful minion. So the only question is whether it's worth the shot to bet on the chance for another soul fragment."

Any Gems of War players worth their salt would always choose personal stat over the acquisition of another troop, no matter what rarity it represents. But this wasn't a game anymore. He had real life obligations to consider. He combed his memories and recalled Adam Usher's original purpose in coming to Broken Spire, and of the possible challenges ahead.

“Summon it.” Adam finally decided. He didn’t want to risk it. Soul fragment was too much of a hit-or-miss, and it’s not like he badly needed the one extra soul.

“What demonic sorcery is this!?” Adam heard someone shouted just as he completed the summoning ritual. He turned around to see a fully plated man walk up the rampart stairs, followed by a small band of personal guards.

“For Crisis’ sake! Why are there still ogres here? And right above the gate too! Men! Put these creatures down!” The knight bellowed.

“Are you kidding me? Who the hell are you?” Adam suddenly found himself and his ogres surrounded by the newcomer guards. The older knight was wearing the Sword’s Edge colors, but Adam did not remember seeing him on the wall tonight. In fact, the pristine conditions of the man’s armor spoke much of his lack of participation.

The guards were approaching Adam’s ogres threateningly with weapon brandished, looking as if they had every intention of carrying out the order. Adam would have none of that, of course. He snapped his fingers and ordered, “Subdue them, but leave them alive.”

Counting the newly summoned troop, it was eleven ogres against twelve of the personal guards. What ensued was depressingly one-sided. In matter of heartbeats all of the knight’s men were down and groaning, each with varying degrees of broken limbs and bones. It was sheer domination.

The armored knight gasped. He backed away and shouted to the rest of the soldiers on the wall, “Why are you all just standing there? Attack!”

No one moved. Troubled silence permeated the rampart until a lieutenant stepped up beside the knight and whispered something to his ear. Adam took the brief hiatus to examine the man. A tall man, to be sure, middle-aged, with an impressive suit of obsidian armor and a fancy bastard sword dangling by the side. One would even call him imposingly handsome, if not for the somewhat pompous flair of air around him. Adam was also surprised to see the man’s information displayed in blue, Ultra Rare text:

[Lord Tharm]

[Knight Coronet of Sword’s Edge; Level 17 shadow-influenced Human]

[Attack: 9]

[Life: 11]

[Defense: 16]

[Magic: 6]

[Core Power: <Shadow Cleave> Unerringly strike any two targets, dealing at least 7 damage to each, boosted the power of surrounding shadow.]

“Level 17? Shadow-influenced.” Adam frowned, recalling the Sword’s Edge storyline from his gaming days. The knight coronets of the Royal House were bad news. Many of them were supposedly secretly controlled by a Shadow Dragon. From Adam Usher’s memory, he also

learned that in the absence of Queen Ysabelle, the country's administration had been jointly governed by a council of elder knight coronets, each representing a respective political family in the background.

Lord Tharm recomposed himself after receiving the latest update from his lieutenant. Confidently, he pointed to Adam and barked, "You there! What division are you in? How dare you assault a superior officer! I shall have you court-martialed for this insolence!"

"Seriously? This is your response? People like you actually exist?" Adam breathed in amazement. "I am not under your command, Tharm. You can think of me as..." Adam paused, trying to formulate an appropriate word. "... as a good samaritan. Yes. That's it. I was just helping out."

"Ah ha! So you admit it yourself! You're not even a member of the defense force! That makes you even more suspicious!" Lord Tharm said triumphantly. He declared aloud for all to hear, "This young man here is clearly consorting with the ogres. For our own safety I have every reason to detain him for interrogation. It is protocol!" He drew his bastard sword, thrust it on the ground with both hands, and looked coldly at Adam. "Now, comply. Or resist." He growled.

"Something's not right. Where is this hostility coming from?" Adam was suddenly alarmed. Lord Tharm was glaring at him with almost open disgust. This felt personal!

"If you wish to talk protocol, then perhaps you care to explain why a vice commander of the fortress was missing in action during its own siege?" Someone called out dryly, and the battle-tattered forms of Luther and his ogre helper emerged from behind the spectators.

"Luther!" Tharm hissed at the old general's sudden appearance. "You shouldn't be here. You are no longer in charge!"

"Aye. 'Tis what the lad said. I was being a good samaritan. Just passing through and decided to help." Luther grinned, "He travels with me, Tharm. I can vouch for him. Unless you plan to accuse me of consorting with the ogres too?"

"I could. I might!" Lord Tharm snapped back. "How else do you justify keeping company with these... abominations?"

"I don't need to. His identity justifies it all!" Luther laughed. "Come now, don't tell me he doesn't look familiar to you. Doesn't his face remind you of someone we both know?" Luther turned to the young man and said, "Adam, introduce yourself."

Adam straightened immediately. Out of trained reflex he began to recite, "I am Adam of the House of Usher. Son of Sir Gwayne and Princess Viana. Sixth in line to the Throne of the Kingdom of Sword's Edge. And thirteenth-generation descendent of the Grand Historian, the eminent Akowar Usher!"

Comotions ruffled through the fort soldiers at the formal announcement. Adam could hear murmurs of “Oh.. no wonder...,” “summons,” and “Sir Gwayne’s son...” adrift in the air. He was just as much surprised himself. Adam Usher was sixth in line to the throne? He didn’t think much of it until he had spoken it out loud. Apparently Adam’s mother was a princess of the royal line, Queen Ysabelle’s aunt, to be exact. This certainly would explain Sir Gwayne’s reputed “unswerving loyalty” to the crown.

“That would make Queen Ysabelle my cousin. I wonder who’s older?” Adam privately mused. He searched his memories real quick. “Oh, I am. She’s only 16? Bona fide jailbait age...”

“Enough!” Lord Tharm roared, silencing the clatters. He stared intently at Adam for a moment, and finally said between clenched teeth, “Keep your pets leashed. I shall hold you personally responsible for their actions.”

“What was that about?” Adam asked Luther as he watched Lord Tharm storm off the wall. The knight coronet didn’t even bother to wait for his battered guards to recover.

“It’s not you. It’s your father.” Luther chuckled, “Two years ago Sir Gwayne was investigating him for embezzling from the treasury. It took Tharm’s family a great deal of effort to get him a position here in order to escape the charges.” Luther shrugged. “Of course, to someone who’s grown accustomed to the capital’s luxury, coming to Broken Spire must have felt like exile for him.”

“I bet...” Adam nodded.

“Friend Luther. Welcome back,” an almost musical voice approached. The speaker was an elf, with a dwarven companion grinning widely next to him. It appeared they had made their way here from the other sections of the rampart wall.

“Aiem! And Gorbic!” Luther stepped forward and clasped their hands with genuine affection. “I didn’t think the two of you would still be here! Your rotations should be over by now.”

“It was. But you understand. Silverglade is too peaceful for my particular set of skills. I need a place to keep my instincts honed.” Aiem smiled coolly.

“Elspeth?” Luther raised an eyebrow, not believing a word of what the elf had said.

“Elspeth.” Aiem sighed.

“I went back for a year,” said the massively-built dwarf. “But I got bored and came back. There was nothing to do back home but eat, drink, and make babies. And look at you! You don’t age well, do you? I saw that fiasco earlier! You’ve gotten weak, human! Slow and feeble!”

“I may be a tad out of shape. But I can still drink you under the table.” Luther grinned back.

"Ha! Not on your best day! But you're on!" Gorbic bellowed.

"You have your mother's eyes." Aiem said to Adam. "Introduce us? Luther?"

"Of course. Adam, this is Aiem of Silverglade and Gorbic of Khaziel. They're friends of your parents. You're in good company."

"How do you do." Adam bowed politely. He studied them carefully.

[Weapon Master Aiem]

[Weapon Master of Silverglade; Level 16 Elf]

[Attack: 11]

[Life: 10]

[Defense: 13]

[Magic: 4]

[Core Power: <Blade Dance> Utilizing the enemies' own strength against them, Aiem is able to find opening even in the most impeccable defense. Deals at least 4 damage to all in melee range, boosted by the differences in martial skills.]

[Lord Gorbic]

[Dwarf Lord of Khaziel; Level 14 Dwarf]

[Attack: 6]

[Life: 9]

[Defense: 9]

[Magic: 6]

[Core Power: <Ancestral Axe> Channeling the power of the ancestors to inflict 10 damage to an enemy. The lingering presence also forms a temporarily protective aura of +8 to Defense.]

Gorbic made a sour face. "Oh no! Don't turn into another formal stiff like Gwayne! He used to be so much fun until he got himself married. Adam, right? I remember you. Last time I saw you you were a wee lad running around naked chasing butterflies."

"Ugh..." Adam slumped slightly. "I don't like you anymore."

"Ah ha ha! That's the spirit! Much better!" Gorbic laughed.

"Don't mind him. A dwarf's idea of good fellowship is built on insults and mutual disrespect," Luther said. "Remember this. If a dwarf is being polite, it means he's either after your gold or he's planning on planting an axe to your face."

"Sometimes both." Gorbic nodded.

Luther then turned to his two friends, his expression suddenly serious. "What happened tonight? Why were you all defending on separate walls?"

Adam had also noticed it by now. There were three main walls to defend, with the 4th side facing out toward the sea. But the humans had stayed exclusively on the south wall.

“Tharm happened.” Gorbic scoffed. “We don’t trust him. The commander’s seat is still empty since you left. Tharm wanted the position for himself, and he voted down all other candidates we suggested. It’s been a stalemate. So it’s every army for themselves here.”

“There were a lot of unnecessary deaths. I plan to write an indictment against him. It was inexcusable for him to leave his post like that. Very fortunate we were here tonight...” Luther looked toward Adam. “Very fortunate *you* were here tonight.” He added.

Adam smiled but said nothing. He was glad he didn’t have to make up an explanation for his summoning power. Everyone just naturally assumed it to be a part of his heritage. Then again... who to say that it wasn’t?

“Good luck with that!” Gorbic said, “We’ve made plenty of official complaints to your court. But nothing. He must have friends in high places.”

“So do I, my friend. So do I.” Luther’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t over. His incompetence is jeopardizing our troops here. Something needs to be done.”

Adam frowned, recalling the stats he had glimpsed from Tharm. The man was the highest level knight he could see so far! Adam truly wondered just how much of Tharm’s behavior was pretense incompetence.

“We still have the wounded to attend to. Let’s reminiscence another time. Old place? Tomorrow?” Aiem said.

“Same time.” Luther agreed.

“Bring the kid. He’ll sub in for his old man.” Gorbic added. “Forget Gwayne! We’ll form the new Guardians of the Galasi without him!” The dwarf winked at Adam. “Bet your old man never told you huh? The four of us used to hit all the galas we can find! Wherever the parties were the hardest and the wenches the hottest, we were there!”

Luther coughed. “Ok. That’s enough. You need to leave now.”

“What does Galasi mean? Don’t you mean galas?” Adam was sincerely curious.

“Same thing. *Galasi* means gala in elven-speak.” Gorbic shrugged. “We just decided that *Guardians of the Galasi* rolls better off the tongue for some reason.”

Adam watched them return to their stations on the wall. There were so much new information to digest. It was also at this point that he finally realized just how real this world was. With real people. Real interactions. And real stories.

"Where do I go from here? How do I get back home?" Adam whispered.

"Homesick, Adam?" Luther patted Adam on the shoulder. He had been observing the kid, and frankly was quite concerned with Adam's lack of remorse over all the killing tonight. Were all summoners this heartless? At least now, Adam finally acted like his age. Still human.

"Oh, you have no idea." Adam shook his head. "But right now I'm more tired than anything else. I could use a bath, a bed, and *a lot* of food! Not necessarily in that order."

"You and me both." Luther agreed wholeheartedly. "But I still have business to take care of here. Can you find your way back to the inn? "

"I think so," Adam said. The fortress itself was actually protecting a civilian establishment behind its walls, a collective gathering centered around the only sea port of the entire island.

Luther gestured toward Adam's pack of ogres. "Can you unsummon them? Their presence could cause some confusion in town, especially right after the attack. Let's not give Tharm an excuse to make trouble."

"I'm not sure. I really don't know. This is all still new to me." Adam said.

"I see. Too bad I can't offer any advice on this. Summoning is more your father's field." Luther said, "In that case tell the innkeeper we'll rent out the whole building for the duration of our stay. He knows me. Tell him we'll pay double."

"I will. Thank you, sir."

"I will say this, Adam. Take the next few days to explore your power." Luther said in earnest, "Learn its strengths. Know its weaknesses. Discover its limits. This is something that will identify you for the remainder of your life. And from what I've seen so far. It is a powerful signature indeed!"

"You're not going to give me a lecture on how 'With great power comes great responsibility.' Are you?"

Luther blinked. "Not in those exact words. I was going to remind you how some men are born for greatness, but many often die in obscurity. Do not let your talent go to waste. Troubled time is coming. Sword's Edge will need your help. Sir Gwayne will need your help."

The sky was displaying an ominous daybreak when Adam quietly returned to the inn. He and his band of ogres did not encounter any trouble at all. Words had travelled fast. And the town patrols learned to steer clear of him from afar. After making all the appropriate arrangements with the innkeeper, Adam chose the largest room available and ordered all the ogres to enter after him.

Now that the battle was over, Adam had retrieved all of his units with him. The room was large with its own living lounge, but it was still feeling cramped with twelve hulking ogres standing pose. Adam was beat. Dead tired. His whole body ached and his arms felt as if they were about to fall off. But he forced himself to stay awake. There was a hostile Level 17 knight prowling around in the same town with him, and Luther's hint about the future was a strident reminder of the troubles ahead.

"Luther must have detected the Knight Coronets' abnormal activities." Adam said. Only through Adam Usher's memory did he finally understand just how monstrous the political machine the corrupted knight order represented. They were the ruling class of an entire kingdom! Their influence controlled at least 70% of all the resources of Sword's Edge! From a modern 20th century Earth perspective, they were the equivalent of a dominant political party equipped with their own private army and commercial network. It was a coup waiting to happen.

"All the hints from the storylines also suggested they poisoned Queen Ysabelle. That should speak volume of how powerful they are in the court." Adam was getting a headache. This was different from the game, where he could just barge in with infinite do-overs and simply clean house!

"It's like playing Warlord IV difficulty with only one life. And my account gets deleted if I lose even once! And the only cards in my hand are... common ogres." Adam sighed. The prospect seemed overwhelmingly daunting.

"Daunting. But not impossible. At least I have my summoner advantage!" Adam tried to be optimistic. He clapped his cheeks to pump himself awake. "Alright! System! Or whatever you are. Tell me everything I need to know!"

Again, there was no response.

"Of course. Because that would be too easy." Adam said flatly. "Fine. Let's try this." He pointed to the ogres. "Are they really just going to follow me around all the time? Or can I stash them.... somewhere?"

All the ogres de-materialized on cue and instantly reformed as a pile of cards in Adam's hand.

"Oh perfect! That's convenient." Adam was surprised. He pulled out a card for closer examination and immediately noticed a series of numbers displaying at the top of the ogre card; the text was showing: 2270:04:36. Adam drew another card. This one was the level 10 strike leader Ke'jii. And it read: 0:25:14.

"I wonder..." With a mental thought Adam summoned Ke'jii again. He silently counted to ten before returning the ogre to his hand. The card now showed: 0:25:04.

“The troops run on a timer!” Adam soon understood. “But how do I charge it?”

Ke’jii was a Rare unit, which meant his max level should be 16. Adam immediately corrected the situation. After channeling 1730 Soul, Ke’jii’s stats now displayed:

[1730:25:04]

[Ke’jii of the Bloodskull Tribe]

[Strike team leader; Level 16 Ogre]

[Attack: 7] → [Attack: 11]

[Life: 12] → [Life: 17]

[Defense: 6] → [Defense: 9]

[Core Power: <Boulder> Throws a boulder, dealing 1 to 9 Life damage.]

“Only 1 hour per soul then. But at least it stays stasis in card form. Funny, almost as if this system is encouraging me to turn homicidal for soul harvest.” Adam mused darkly. The one-directional Gems of War storylines had always been morally ambiguous. The actions of the player hero are not what one would call traditionally good, in a holy-crap-what-have-i-done kind of way, such as destroying whole centaur tribes just to help a busty woman extract revenge on the death of her *pirate* crew, or kidnapping an emperor to protect him from assassination, and then handing the unconscious fellow off to the said assassin herself... to name a few.

Adam felt eminently safer with a high level ogre around. The ogres of Broken Spires were notorious for having unusually high physical stats, so even if Tharm outclassed Ke’jii in rarity, the knight coronet was still physically inferior to the ogre in more than one ways.

“Let’s see. What other options do I have?” Adam sat down. “How about chests? Can I purchase chests for random draws?”

Unlike his college student counterpart, Adam Usher was a member of the nobility. With a princess for a mother and the Queen as his cousin, money was never a concern for the young Usher. He patted himself down and found a bag full of gold and gems inside his chestplate. Instinctively Adam also recalled possession of treasury notes worth 20,000 gold in value hidden inside his left boot. With his personal seal, he could even go to any Sword’s Edge official money lender and take out at most 100,000 gold in loan on request! For the first time in Adam Rook’s life, he got a taste of how it feels to be filthy rich!

Adam raised his money pouch in the air and called out, “What do you take? Gold? Gems? I don’t know how Glory works in this world, but if I have any you can take those too! So how about it? Give me a troop chest, or two?”

No response.

“Right...” Adam lowered his arm. He glanced down at the cards in his hand and asked once more, “How about ascension? Can I sacrifice extra troops to ascend troop rarity?”

[Ascension Feature is not yet available]

“Oh!” Adam straightened. “Not yet available? Meaning it will be? When?”

[Soon™]

Adam leapt off from the couch at the trademark logo joke. “Who is this! Sirrian? Or Nimhain?” He yelled excitedly, “Goddamnit, it’s gotta be one of you! Who’s messing with me like this!”

Adam spun around wildly, looking for any hint of unusual presence in the room. He swung open the window, kicked over the table and chairs, even summoned an ogre to help him destroy the bed and closet! But there was nothing. Nothing but the turmoil of his flailing imagination.

“Oh my Gard, I am going crazy!” Adam took a deep breath and dropped to the floor, but suddenly paused, his eyes widening. “Did I just say Gard?”

Adam suddenly clutched his head in pain! The identity crisis was something destined to happen. It had simply been indefinitely delayed by the urgency of the siege. Now, like the opening of a floodgate, the two sets of memories were merging and colliding, each trying to assert dominance over the other.

Adam screamed when the cumulative flashbacks of two lives exploded inside his head. Adam Rook, who had spent countless overnight hours in the workshop lab drawing sketch plans and checking geometric calculations. Adam Usher, who had trained tirelessly on the sparring field and strategy room under the tutelage of the best teachers the academy could offer. Both aspired for great deeds. Adam Rook dreamt of building a new Wonder of the World. Adam Usher vowed to become the greatest knight Krystara has ever known.

But which one was the real Adam? Adam Rook sincerely believed this reality to be just a fantasy game, a figment of imagination. But to Adam Usher, this was his whole life! So was he a college student stranded on an alien world? Or was he a knight-in-training struggling to fend off the invasion of an alien mind?

Adam coiled into a ball and thrashed around on the floor. He must have yelled, and cried, and begged, and screamed, but he remembered none of it. In time, his sobbing gradually subsided as darkness overtook him, and he finally lost his consciousness.

[End Chapter 2]