

CHAPTER 3: "Storylines? What Storylines?"

By Peter Tu

Sidousai @ Celestial Peak

Adam had a dream.

In it, he was having a conversation with another young man. They were so alike in facial appearances that they might as well be twin brothers: the same sharp face, the same blond hair, even the same split eyebrow above the left eye. But that's about where all the similarities crossed. One of them was dressed in jeans and shirt, with a pair of glasses and a mischievous smirk that never seemed to leave his face. The other was literally a knight in shining armor; his serious demeanor and disciplined stance added a few extra years of confidence to his apparent age.

Adam Rook touched his left eyebrow. "I got this cut in middle school," he said. "Jacob Morrison from 6th grade beat me up during recess because I refused to give him my lunch money."

In the same parallel motion, Adam Usher touched his left eyebrow. "I got this cut when I was ten," he said. "An assassin had snuck into the house. I was taken hostage. A dagger was pressed above my eye the entire ordeal until I was rescued."

"That's rough." Adam Rook said sympathetically.

Adam Usher did not stop. He expertly disassembled the armor pieces on his left arm and rolled back the underlying sleeve. A portion of his exposed skin above the elbow was discolored and wrinkled, evidently the result of post-healing from a severe burn.

"This burn extends all the way to the back of the shoulder," he explained. "I received the injury when I was fifteen, during the annual Royal Hunt. A fire lizard had somehow made its way into the hunting ground and attacked me and my friends." He paused briefly before adding, "I was the only survivor."

"Wait..." Adam Rook frowned.

Adam Usher continued, pointing to the center of his own chestplate. "There is a puncture scar right next to my heart. It came from the bolt that was intended for Queen Ysabelle." He shook his head. "But the attack was a ruse. The real poisoned stab came from the back. A traitor amongst her personal guards!"

"See. Now you're just showing off." Adam Rook pointed out.

"No. I am not," said the other Adam. "I am simply trying to tell you that these were real events in my life. And I possess the scars to show for them."

There was a long contemplative silence. Both of them just stood there looking at their counterparts, eyes to eyes.

"You are right. I apologize." Adam Rook finally spoke, "Game world or not. It doesn't change the fact that this is your body. And I'm just a stranger here." He had been suppressing the Usher's side of memory, allowing only small bits to leak through when needed. Deep down, he was afraid that the rich experiences of Adam Usher would... dilute his own...

"I was afraid of losing myself," Adam Rook admitted. "But I didn't realize how unfair this must be for you."

"It does not have to be this way. There does not need to be a distinction between 'you' or 'I'." Adam Usher said. "I have looked into your memories of your parents in your world. Have you looked into mine?"

"Yea. Gywane and Viana. Wayne and Diana. They're the same. They look exactly the same." Adam Rook said.

"And you had a cousin, Yvette, who passed away when she was very young?"

"Yes. Car accident. The driver was DUI. If she were alive now I guess she would look alot like Queen Ysabelle too."

"Do you see? There is a connection. Not just between you and me. But others too."

"Like a parallel universe, you mean? But why am I here? How did I get here?"

Adam Usher shook his head. "That is beyond the scope of our understanding. Let's just focus on the matter at hand," he said. "From my perspective, it is as if I have awakened the memories of an entirely different lifetime. A past life, if you will. We can continue to resist each other until it rips our mind to shreds. Or we can learn to acknowledge each other. Cooperate."

"Agreed. I think there is a lot we can benefit from one another." Adam Rook said, "My academic knowledge of another world, along with this 'summoner system.' It's the perfect complement to your practical skills and political background."

"Some men are born for greatness, while others die in obscurity." Adam Usher echoed Luther's words.

"It's a deal." Adam extended his hand outward. "Let's go make you the greatest knight in the history of Krystara."

"And we shall build the greatest Wonder of the World. Right here in Krystara." The other Adam shook on it.

The dream scene faded in a falling curtain of darkness. This time it was a tranquil kind of darkness, curative, as if all the stress of the world had been lifted in one magnificent sweep.

Ding

[You have peacefully assimilated both of your personas. All physical skills fully restored. +2 Attack. +2 Defense]

Adam opened his eyes at the allegorical sound of the system message. Immediately he sensed something was amiss. He was lying upon cold rock and dirt. And both his hands had been shackled together in plated manacle!

Adam frowned. The original Adam Rook would have shot up reflexively in surprise. But now he remained calm and unmoving on the ground. He tried to control the rhythm of his breaths to appear normal and quietly examined the surrounding.

He was in a badly-lit cell. It was unquestionably underground, and felt more like a cavern structure than man-made architecture. There were no traditional jail gate that he could see, but the manacle that had kept him bound was chained into the ground. A flickering light source, probably a torch, was out of his field of view around the corner.

"The area is by the sea. And should be close to the surface." Adam deduced. He could still smell the faint scent of salinity in the air. "Not near the Broken Spire fortress though. Not with these red rock and dirt." He tried to recall his Mineralogy class from college. Most red dirt and soil usually obtain their color as a result of excess presence of iron oxide, which implies high concentrations of iron minerals in the vicinity.

"Tunnel. Cave. Iron. By the sea." Adam searched his memories of the Broken Spire geography. "The Tousler Mine?" The abandoned mine was the only thing he knew of that fit the criterias. It was an exhausted iron mine, and with a fast horse it was an afternoon's ride away from the fortress.

Adam closed his eyes when he heard murmurs from a nearby part of the tunnels. Someone was talking. He tried to focus all his attention to sort out the words.

"... yet? It's been two days. What is wrong with him? What did you do to him?"

"Tharm?" There were too much interference from the rebounding rocks to be sure, but the particular condescending tone certainly reminded Adam of Tharm.

"Nothing. We found him like this," said another man. "Physically he checked out fine. The problem must be in the mind."

"So isn't that your speciality? Fix it! And make sure to keep him fed even if he's unconscious. He is too valuable an asset to starve."

There was a brief pause before the other man growled, "The Warlocks of Karakoth are *not* your babysitters, Tharm."

"That was not a request. It was an order." The voice identified as Tharm scoffed. "Have one of your pet demons do it then. I don't care. I wanted him awake and ready for questioning *yesterday!*"

"... .. If you insist. There are methods I could resort to. If you don't mind the side effects."

"As long as he is kept sane and alive, then do it." Tharm said, "And you're certain his summoning power won't give you any trouble?"

"Don't insult me. He is just an amateur summoner. That manacle is designed to keep even Archmage Tassarion powerless. You are being overly cautious."

"One can never be too careful. It will be at least three days before I can come here again. Luther and his men are tearing the port apart looking for the kid. I pray that you'll have something useful for me by then."

Adam waited awhile until he was certain the speakers had departed. He sat up carefully, making sure not to rattle the chain, and studied the manacle clamped around his wrists. It was made of black steel and riddled with runic glyphs, with a link of chain extending into the solid rock beneath.

"I guess there's an anti-magic charm on it? But does it work on me?" With his wrists still bound, Adam turned one hand over and tried to summon his cards. Unexpectedly, he was assailed by an infusion of visions instead. They were flashes of the cards and their separate locations. Two cards were resting atop a long table, alongside various alchemical apparatuses, while the rest were stashed inside someone's pocket. Adam also discovered that if he concentrated on any one of the card, he could begin to see and hear from a clairvoyant vicinity with the card as the origin. Gradually, Adam could hear the faint mutterings of the man carrying the cards.

"Keep him fed, Vair. Keep him sane, Vair. I swear, if he wasn't such a big supplier of souls I would love to hear him scream on my altar!" The speaker was a bearded, robed man, whose right hand appeared to have been completely replaced by a silvery, mechanical gauntlet. Soul Gaze was also functional through the vision, and the man's display showed:

[Coven Master Vair]

[High Warlock of Karakoth; Level 13 Human]

[Attack: 8]

[Life: 12]

[Defense: 5]

[Magic: 4]

[Core Power: <Backlash> Imbue a single physical touch with ritualistic might, adding 9 points of Damage as well as draining its victim of all magical energies.]

"Purple description? He's Epic?" This was now the third Epic individual Adam had encountered so far in this world: Luther, Aiem, and now this Vair.

"So the cards can be taken away from me? That's worrisome." All of Adam's belongings had been stripped from him, but he wasn't expecting his troop cards to have tangible manifestations in the physical world too. "On the other hand, they do have potentials for surveillance purposes... I wonder if there's a range limit?"

Vair entered the stone chamber where the other two cards were being kept. It had the setup of an alchemy lab tidily arranged inside a small pocket cave.

"What is sanity, anyway? But madness put to good use." Vair opened a drawer and one by one took out color-labeled vials. "Want him ready for questioning? Fine. A dab of concentrated Zhul'Karian dream weed mixed with mist nut extract, that'll keep him happy and babbling for days. He'll tell only the truth. That counts as sane, right?" Vair chuckled as he went about creating his concoction. He then walked across the lab and opened a cabinet shelf of jars and containers, and deftly retrieved a glass orb with some kind of bodily organ sealed within it.

"Lamia ovary gland. If a whiff from this doesn't wake him up, then I'm going to have to start questioning his gender preference. He'll be masterbating nonstop for at least six hours. But he's young. He should survive." Vair cackled.

Done with his preparations, Vair sat down on his recliner chair and mentally reviewed all the topics Tharm wanted him to interrogate out of the kid. The Usher House's political allies, secret armies, financial incomes, et cetera, et cetera. The kid probably won't know all the exact details, but as the son of Gwayne he should at least have some ideas.

"However, what I'm really interested in is this." The warlock flicked his wrist and produced one of Adam's cards between his fingers. At first he had thought them to be mere playthings. Their fancy graphical designs certainly matched the common nobility's sense of aestheticism. But then he noticed their inscribed details.

"Ogres. Twelve of them." Vair said to himself. The exact number of ogres Adam controlled according to the reports. "And then there's this one." He drew another card. Unlike the other cards, its image was entirely grayed out.

"We had to destroy that lone ogre standing in the room with him. Is there an association with this card? What happened, anyway? Did someone else attack him before we arrived?" Vair studied the card carefully. He had discovered that it was not made of any materials he recognize, which further piqued his interest.

"And that ogre. Such power coursing through its body!" Vair breathed at the memory of the encounter. Two warlocks. Three demons. Against one ogre. Yet the surprising result was one

dead demon despite the overwhelming odds! Vair didn't want to admit it, but it was fortunate that they only had to face one instead of all twelve that night.

"You can fool the others, but you can't fool me. That ogre was literally oozing with soul power! Summon? More like Necromancy!" Vair hissed. He had been immersed in the dark arts long enough to recognize the difference between mindless undead drones and bound minions. That was no conventional summon!

"Is that House Usher's deep, dark secret? Spelled as Summoners. But actually Necromancers? Oh Myyy..."

Vair stood up and spread all twelve cards over the lab table. "But how do they work? By words? By sorcery? Or by blood! I must possess this knowledge!"

A pulse from one of the cards startled Vair. He watched in wonderment as it scattered into scintillating light and rematerialized as a giant ogre next to him!

"What happened? Did I activate it? How? What did I do differently?" Vair stepped back to view the giant creature in full. He looked to his fingers, some of them still had residual powders from his earlier handling. "The herbs? Or perhaps it's responding to the ovary gland!"

The excitement was short-lived. Vair became uncomfortably concerned when two more ogres appeared. And then three more! He backed away carefully, his eyes darting as he mentally tried to gauge the distance between him and the alarm rope...

... ..

... .. Vair suddenly found himself coughing and gasping on the ground when he regained his consciousness.

"I'm still alive?" He gasped, unconsciously pressing his chest. His memories were running wild and hazy. It felt like mere moments ago, but somehow also a lifetime away! He remembered being knocked out. And then in the darkness there was a sharp, piercing pain to his heart!

Vair looked around. He was still in his lab. Except now there was an impassive ogre standing watch over the entrance and a young man in rags sitting in his chair! It was Adam Usher! The prisoner had escaped! But why was the kid looking at him with that surprised look on the face?

"You... can talk?" Vair heard Adam ask the ridiculous question.

"Of course I can talk!" Vair shot up in full combat position and leapt for the alarm rope again! No ogres stopped him this time. And just as his hand wrapped around the rope while he prepared to shout for the guards, Vair stopped fully in his track.

The warlock blinked several times as strange notions and realizations entered his mind. He let go of the rope and turned around, his face confused with chagrin. "M...Master?" Vair said in disbelief.

"Oh! So you understand! Good! Move away from that! Oh man, you almost gave me a heart attack!"

Vair did as instructed. His mind whirring as he tried to make sense of the situation. Apparently he had been magically enslaved? Logically he knew he probably should resist. But the most absurd part of it all was that he doesn't want to! As if this relationship felt natural! And he simply could not raise any negative thoughts against his master! What was happening!

"And you remember everything? Your whole life?" Adam asked.

"Yes, master." Vair looked up and nodded, uncertain of the point of the inquiry. What kind of question was that? Of course he remember. The ogres didn't hit him in the head *that* hard...

"Why is that? How come you're different from the others?" Vair listened to Adam continue to make nonsensical monologue. "Is it because you're Epic? Or something else? Wait. Your name is Vair? Warlock of Karakoth? Take off your hood."

Vair complied and folded his warlock hood back, revealing his rugged, bearded face. He saw light of recognition in his master's eyes.

"You're Ferit! Before he lost his memories! No wonder your name looked familiar!" Adam gasped.

Vair frowned at the remark. Again with the memory thing. He was beginning to wonder if he had indeed forgotten something important in his life. Who's Ferit?

"Any Epic will do? Or only Storyline Epic? That's certainly useful to know. It's nice to have someone who can make his own intelligent decisions. I was worried I'd end up with an army of zombies."

That part Vair understood at least. So he had been turned by the very necromancy he sought after? And from the sound of it he was able to retain his mind in the process. So was he an undead now? But he could clearly feel his beating heart and breathing lungs. Even his body temperature felt normal. Such amazing disguise!

"Alright. Tell me about this place. And what is your involvement with Tharm?" Adam ordered.

Vair dutifully explained everything to the best of his abilities. This was the outskirts of the abandoned Tousler Mine. Vair and his coven represented a branch of the Karakoth warlocks temporarily under Lord Tharm's contract. The vice commander of Broken Spire Fort would

supply them with large quantity of slaves for sacrifice, and in return he would acquire their services to repair an artefact he had excavated. At an extra fee, they would sometimes help Tharm handle other shady businesses as well, businesses that cannot be tied to him in any ways.

“And there are a total of six warlocks in my coven, including myself. We also have ten acolytes, twelve apprentices, twenty-four cult guards, and eight demons. Aside from the contract with Tharm, our mission was also to establish a foothold base here in Broken Spire.” Vair finished his report.

Adam had been listening quietly in a reclining chair, processing in all the information. Ferit’s presence in Broken Spire finally made Adam understand that his knowledge of the Gems of War Storylines no longer offered any edge. Was Vair supposed to be in Broken Spire before the Karakoth Storyline? He might. Who knows? Then again, were there supposed to be elves and dwarves here too?

“Those were crappy storylines anyway.” Eventually Adam opened his eyes, but paused sheepishly. He looked around, wondering if there were any powers-that-be observing him right now.

“I mean... those were *great* storylines! It’s too bad they were so short! I would love to know more details about those background stories!” Adam said aloud. He then coughed conscientiously and quickly turned to Vair. He asked, “So Tharm will come back in three days? And he is usually by himself?”

It was understandable. Consorting with warlocks and trafficking in souls were heinous crimes even for a corrupt noble. Tharm couldn’t trust anyone with his secret, not even his own personal guards.

“Let’s have a surprise party for him when he comes back then. I have an idea... But first!” Adam clapped suddenly, looking around the alchemy lab. “What do you have here that’s safe to eat? I’m famished!”

About an hour later an aged warlock arrived and stood respectfully outside of Vair’s lab. “Coven Master Vair, you sent for me?” The warlock spoke aloud.

“Yes! Collègue Wyed, come in! Haste! I have need of your expertise!” Vair called out from inside the lab.

The warlock Wyed entered as beckoned. Almost immediately there was a muffled grunt followed by light scuttling, and soon Vair walked out of his lab. Quietly he tapped the magical communication glyph on the tunnel wall and said, “Guards, call Master Heinfield to my lab too. Tell him Master Wyed and I have need of his expertise...”

[End Chapter 3]