

16 - Gear Replacements

Before arriving to the store that could make specialised Staves and Foci, I stopped by a jewellery store, in front of which was posted a guard with a tall lance, whose aura was a vague red.

Within the store were great display models and cases full of every imaginable type of jewellery, but there was also a second for the types of spectacles I'd seen Æmos wear. My visit to him earlier in the day had given me an idea for a problem that'd been bothering me for some days now.

"What can I help you with?" the pale and black-haired man behind the counter in the back of the room asked. Nearby were his tools for measuring and cutting jewels, as well as many other specialised tools that I had never seen before. From his appearance, it was clear that he was not a Native to Lundia, though judging by his weak vaguely-orange aura it was clear that he was still a Native to this world, though perhaps hailed from a different country.

I took off my Spirit Goggles and laid them on the stone counter before him. He immediately picked them up to admire the lenses.

"I'd like to have a pair of spectacles made with these lenses."

Master Owl who was behind me scoffed. "Nothing wrong with goggles," he muttered.

"I see. Spirit Quartz is not difficult to work with, but it is rare and expensive. I could no doubt fix this left lens and make a durable frame to hold them, but I would have to make adjustments to the lenses, and they may lose a bit of thickness, is that okay?"

I looked to my Mentor, who just shrugged. "Thickness doesn't alter their effect, but they should be durable."

The Jeweller nodded. "Purpose-built. Of course. Exorcists like you two no doubt see a lot of up-close fighting."

"You're familiar with what we do?"

The man nodded. "I have worked on Spirit Quartz for another Exorcist in the past, before I came to Arley," he explained. The mention of coming to the Principality we were in made it clear that he was not originally from this part of the world, but I guessed that people might have his appearance in other parts of the Hallem continent. After all, it was supposed to be quite vast, perhaps comparable to the Americas of Earth.

"What sort of frame would you like? And what sort of metal?"

"How much would the work cost? And could you have it finished within a day?"

“Within a day?” he asked, seeming to consider it for a moment. “It can be done. The price varies greatly depending on the sort of metal you want the frame made out of, but if you were to say, go with steel, I could make them by tomorrow for eighty silver coins.”

I swallowed hard. That was a lot of money. Once again I looked to Owl for guidance.

“It’s a good deal,” he commented.

“I’ll go with a steel frame then,” I said. “Also, do you have something I can sketch on? I have an idea for how the frame should look.”

After handing over a gold crown and getting two ten-silvers in return, the Jeweller told me that I should return after dawn tomorrow to pick up my Spirit Glasses.

Owl was grumbling as we went to the store I’d originally been heading towards.

“Why didn’t you like the Goggles?”

“For starters, one lens was broken... and they were uncomfortable, and I think I may have a skin allergy to brass...”

“Your eyes are surrounded by green rings,” he stated, “and they do look puffy and irritated.”

I sighed. “So why did you ask if you could see that clearly?”

“You’re gonna end up dropping your glasses,” he said, ignoring my question. “That’s why goggles are superior.”

I sighed deeper.

What a weird hill to die on.

“I have a strange question,” I said.

“About goggles?”

“No...”

“Then what?”

“Do any of your familiars ever speak to you?”

Master Owl halted on the spot, with a nearby civilian nearly bumping into him. Around us in this part of the Commerce Ward, where the Market Ward only lay a few streets away, were a heavy throng of people, but he had stopped in the middle of the pedestrian path and ignored the people who glared at him in annoyance as they moved around us.

“Do any of yours?” he asked with narrowed eyes behind the lenses of his Goggles.

“**He is looking at me very intently.**”

Can he hear you? I asked Armen.

“Only you can hear me, as I am speaking directly to your soul.”

“Yes,” I admitted, wondering if I was about to be punished for some sort of delinquency.

Master Owl shook his head frustrated.

“He says that you are observing him.”

“Familiars that can speak are abnormal and generally a bad sign, as in sentient-demon-who-will-most-definitely-eat-you kind of bad. Most of what we summon and form Pacts with are barely-formed remains of those who are long dead or the offspring of absurd deities, with a rare few being spawned out of concentrated energy in the world or belonging to other worlds.

“The majority are of the long-dead category and basically never retain their personalities or will, but the few that do are what we define as demons usually. Looking at your Guardian Wraith, it clearly doesn’t seem demonic in nature, but if it retains a sentience then it is a rare thing indeed.”

“My Guild Card lists him as a ‘Greater Protector’,” I admitted.

“I noticed,” Owl said.

Of course he’d spied on my Card... damn hypocrite.

“But Greater familiars are nowhere near as rare as ones with an intact consciousness.” He narrowed his eyes even further, such that they were like tiny slits that glinted with the ever-shifting hue of his lenses. “Are you sure you have an F-tier in luck?”

I was becoming very conscious of all the people muttering obscenities as they had to walk around us and I deliberately pushed Owl to the side of the narrow path. “Maybe it isn’t based on luck?” I suggested. “My Pact Attribute is A-tier after all.”

“Mine is S-tier,” he replied dryly. “None of my familiars speak. A few of them gibber maybe, but that’s about it.”

“My apologies that my existence is a nuisance to your mentor.”

It’s not, I assured Armen. He’s just being petty and jealous.

“Pipsqueak. Bring out your Watcher for a moment and observe me through its eye.”

Sumi, come forth.

The ink-stain bubbled forth out of the thin air and I poured my energy into our Pact-formed bond to gain its vision with my left eye. As I covered my right eye and my borrowed sight washed the world in grey, I saw Master Owl as he wished me to see him.

It was terrifying to behold.

A large six-armed headless and legless torso held on to Owl’s shoulders with two of its massive arms. I recognised it from the primitive drawing in the Encyclopaedia, though the drawing did not

capture its sheer size and abhorrent features. It was a mix between a decayed corpse and a ghost, since it was see-through but not in the blurry way that Armen embodied, such that all its surface details were clearly visible. This was the Protector Armen warned me about in the little cabin in Hamsel's Rest. It was a type of Shade known as a Corpse Warden. As a Haunter, it sounded like a horrific Shade to deal with, because it always dismembered its victims and reanimated their disfigured bodies. Even as a Protector, it had easily torn one of the four robbers in half when the man had attacked Owl.

Alongside this Protector was the enormous Fighter that he'd used to devour the three remaining robbers, though I did not know what it was called, but figured it was one of the many entities in the Encyclopaedia that did not have a drawing, but then again, how did you go about capturing such an abomination's appearance on paper? As when I'd seen it in the tavern, its eyes were flickering around and a few people nearby let out gasps as one of its eyes transfixed them and it became visible to their mortal eyes.

Master Owl patted the large monstrosity on its frost-blue back and Banished it before it caused chaos to spread in the street. "Can you guess what type of Fighter Familiar that was?"

"I have no idea," I replied, my eyes shifting to the familiar by his right hip.

"It's called 'Spawn of Nwetrou'. They've got bottomless stomachs and an endless appetite, but fortunately I've never had to exorcise one. It's supposed to be impossible, although you can learn the names they were summoned by and Banish them that way."

I now remembered the entry. It was one of the ones marked with the trident-symbol in the first half of the Encyclopaedia, meaning they did not appear in this world unless deliberately summoned.

"...and that *thing* by your right hip?"

It was like an Axolotl mixed with a Komodo Dragon, but instead of the frills that an Axolotl would have protruding from its neck, it had tongue-like tentacles that swished around. It had no eyes on its elongated face, but it was covered in holes on its long top and bottom jaws, which were constantly opening and contracting at distinct intervals, almost like sniffing nostrils. Its mouth had no teeth in it, but there was a long tongue within that kept running saliva onto the dilating holes covering its head. The rest of its body was covered in leaf-shaped scales and its four legs were adorned with thick claws, meaning it could climb well, just like the Komodo Dragon. Along with its powerful tail, I felt sure that it could track any prey, whether on land or in water, whether across plains or up into the canopies of forests.

“This is a Tracker Familiar called ‘Scenting Tongue’. It’s in the peculiar category of familiars which are summoned from another world, in this case the world of Merriddia, where this fella is native to.”

I couldn’t stop staring at its unsettling face, but Owl dismissed it as well, then pointed his thumb to his left eye. “And in here is a Watcher Familiar like yours.”

It took me a second to realise what he meant, but then, as I saw him through Sumi’s vision, I realised that his fake eye housed an ‘Eye of the Observer’, though its inky mass was contained inside the glass sphere. The pupil and iris that moved around within that glass orb moved independently of his real eye, but seemed to still be controlled by his mind.

“You p-put it in your eye!?”

“There are plenty of ways to utilise familiars,” he commented.

I frowned. It was hard not to be a bit disgusted by the extreme he had taken *that* line of thinking to. “Like Possessed Weapons?” I then asked.

Master Owl began fiddling with his right earlobe for some reason. “That’s not exactly the same.”

“Seems the same to me.”

“Well, it isn’t. Possessed Weapons are dangerous. You have to make a different sort of Pact to accomplish the creation of such a weapon and without the proper precautions they’re no different than releasing a dangerous entity into the wild. I know more than a few Exorcists who perished because of such damned weapons.”

“Is that why you need such a high rank to rent one from the Guild?”

“Yes, but even at the Rank of Eminent there are a lot of morons. Every year some new Exorcist gets themselves killed thanks to a Possessed Weapon, and then people like me have to go clean up the mess... so don’t even think about it.”

“Your Fighter Familiar didn’t seem much different.”

“Well, it is. I can control it directly. Maybe I should have you summon one so you understand.”

“I’m not sure I want to,” I told him.

“If you’d had one this morning then you wouldn’t have gotten beaten up, I promise you that.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone though.”

Master Owl shook his head disappointedly. “Pacifists don’t live long.”

We eventually reached the story that specialised in magical weapons like Staves, Foci, Spell-Tomes, and Enchanted Weapons, and I let Master Owl guide me through the selection of the best-suited weapons for me.

In the end he selected a metre-and-a-half-long bamboo-like Staff that was almost like a spear, thanks to a sharpened glass-like stone recessed into one end. Apparently it was a type of staff that excelled in harnessing ambient magic to boost the spells I used. It seemed a great beginner staff, though I wondered why the For-Rent Armoury hadn't possessed such a staff, but figured that maybe it was just so popular that they were rented out permanently.

As for Focus, he recommended a dagger-like talisman, similar to what he wielded, but I knew that I didn't want to focus on offensive power, when I only had Repel, although he argued that it would be a boon for when I had an offensive familiar like his Fighter. I recalled the image of him stabbing and slashing it through the air to send his terrifying Spawn to eat the robbers, and, honestly, *that picture* alone was enough to make me want to choose something else.

After some back-and-forth with the proprietor of the shop, who was, like the Jeweller, pale of skin and dark of hair, I ended up choosing a Focus that had a steel ball in the centre, within which was some sort of bell, and around which was a torus-shaped opaque glass ring. As I settled the strange Focus in my palm, the bell within the centre ball began to ring gentle, while the other ring began to spin around.

Once again it was a type of weapon that hadn't been available in the For-Rent Armoury, but which was called a Barrier Ring. It was quite literally the opposite of the type of Focus that Master Owl had advocated for, but, for once, he did not complain about my choice.

As I took the two weapons to the counter, the proprietor said, "That'll be four-and-a-half gold crowns."

I let out a sigh. It was far too expensive for the roughly two-and-a-half I had left. But then Master Owl came to the rescue.

"This kid is an up-and-comer and he'll no doubt come back here for when he wants an upgrade."

I nodded enthusiastically.

"Best I can do is four gold," the man replied.

"Maybe we'll just take the staff then," Owl replied and took the Focus as though he was about to return it to the shelf we'd found it on."

"Alright, alright! You can have it all for three gold crowns!"

Business must be slow, I thought.

I looked to Master Owl, who place one gold coin and five ten-silvers on the counter, then I placed the same amount.

"Thank you," I said, as we left.

"You still need to buy some clothes, right?" he asked. "How much do you have left?"

"About one gold crown."

He nodded. "That's what I thought." Then he looked to the sky which was darkening already. "Better hurry up though, your girlfriend wanted to see us by *that* restaurant when it got dark."

I blushed. "She's not my girlfriend."

Master Owl grinned and said, dismissively, "*Sure, I believe you.*"

The sky was void of light and the lanterns were the only source of illumination in the darkness, as we left the Commerce Ward and arrived by the restaurant in the Residential Ward, near where Rana's apartment lay. Neither she nor Lukas were waiting for us outside like she'd said they would, but based on the sounds emanating from within, it seemed obvious that they were already being treated nicely by the owner.

Owl and I came through the door, and the chatter of the few patrons, the owner, and our awaiting companions came to a halt, then after everyone had taken a good long look at us, they all resumed what they'd been merrily talking about.

"You're late!" Rana complained, aiming at me with a chicken spear, upon which had also been impaled some tomato-looking vegetables and mushrooms.

"Pipsqueak here is such an indecisive one," Owl commented.

"At least I now have some new weapons," I said, patting the bamboo staff on my back. It hung over my new robe-like coat that I'd bought for twelve silver crowns.

"You're not the only one with new clothes and gear," Rana replied, nodding towards Lukas who was busy stuffing as much chicken into his mouth as possible. The way he ate reminded me of a starving dog. It made me wonder what sort of food he was normally used to.

Master Owl plopped down on the bench next to Lukas, almost sending the youth airborne. Then he flagged the owner down and asked for some deep-fried chicken and a bowl of steamed vegetables, along with the largest mug of beer they could muster.

I sat down next to Rana, who was already deep in the drink, though her faculties yet under control, but who knew how long that'd last?

"Have you been here before?" I asked Owl. He seemed to know the menu well enough.

“Sure, a few times in the past. Surprised the place is still around.”

When the owner returned with a beer for Owl, I asked to be served the same, although with a cold tea instead of a beer. The man gave me an odd look, then returned with a pitcher of tea and told me to just let it cool down before I drank it. I realised that the cold tea store might be the only place that sold *that* drink. But I wasn't too bothered, tea still suited me better than sweet mead or beer.

As I ate with the people around me, I got a good look at Lukas' new equipment. His basic and threadbare clothes given to him as a servant were replaced by a form-fitting off-white shirt over which he wore some leather padding, which covered the base of his neck, the front of his torso, and his flanks. His pants were also rather tight, but looked of high-quality thread, with a durable belt fastening them to his waist and from the back and side of which hung three pouch-like bags like the first one I'd gotten myself. As for weapons, he seemed to have gone for a long slender knife and a shortsword. It surprised me that he hadn't picked a bow as well, but maybe I'd ask him about it later.

I was quite happy with my own purchases, as my new robe-like coat sported man small pockets on the inside, but was still breathable to the point that it didn't feel too different from the clothes I'd had before, despite looking like I should be sweating to death while wearing it. I'd gotten two pairs of pants as well, plus two identical white shirts, some sturdy socks, and three pairs of underwear. I'd thrown out the original pair that I'd worn since coming to this world, but hoped that I could find a way to properly wash my clothes later, so I wouldn't have to constantly buy replacements. Lastly, I'd gotten another belt-pouch, such that I could separate my quest fliers and Guild Card from my Exorcist Tools like the Black Candle, Energy Stone, and such.

I smiled to myself as I observed the chatter between my companions. This was such a comfortable moment, the four of us sharing a meal while trading stories, that I honestly wished it would never end.

After eating enough for my stomach to feel on the point of bursting, and listening to Lukas telling rumours and stories he'd heard in the Margrave's Castle from the other servants, which greatly interested Owl amusingly, I accompanied Rana to her apartment. To my surprise, Master Owl grabbed Lukas and told him about the inn he was staying at, then brought the boy along with him.

Rana seemed to have learnt from our last visit to the restaurant, since she was only sporting a minor buzz this time. After we went up the stairs to her apartment and she let us in, I headed straight for the couch. The lack of sleep was hitting me particularly hard after such a nice meal and cozy atmosphere. Of all the days in this world so far, today had been the craziest one of them all.

Surprisingly, she followed me to the couch as well and sat down next to me. It only just now dawned on me that she wasn't wearing anything other than her arming jacket and hide pants. Apparently she had left her armour in the apartment along with her weapons.

"You never told me what you want me to do for you."

I blinked uncomprehendingly for a moment, then realised she was talking about our wager. "I thought we changed that to just betting money."

"That was just for the old man's sake," she answered. "So, what are you gonna ask of me?"

My heart began to beat in my chest like a steam engine about to explode.

"I erm, I... I want you to be in my party! Not just as a hired guard, but as a comrade."

She grinned. "That's not what I expected you to ask," she said, then leaned in closer, making my poor heart beat even faster. With only a handspan separating our faces, she then said, "Do you know you have green rings around your eyes?"

The surprise made me burst out laughing.

Then Rana put both hands on my face and pulled me in for a kiss.

My vision was filled with the dark freckled skin on her face and that red curly hair. Her eyes were closed, but I kept mine open as I wanted to absorb it all, while getting lost in the sensation of her warmth and the touch of her lips.

She got up from the couch and pulled me with her to her bedroom. Armen was floating nearby and I tried desperately to signal him with my eyes. He seemed to catch my drift, because he came to a halt in front of the door, which Rana closed behind me.

"**I will stay out here and keep guard,**" he announced, though I could tell there was a slight mocking tone to it.

I don't think I'll sleep tonight...