

134 – Unlucky Touch

The guy, who was maybe twenty-five or perhaps older, fixed me with a glare. The way he narrowed his eyes seemed at first quite hostile, but then I realised that he was doing it to activate his Spirit Sight.

He didn't have Spirit Glasses like me, but as he narrowed his eyes, I saw his blue-green irises shift through a multitude of hues.

“You're new to Evergreen, right?” he asked. His tone was neutral, bordering on unfriendly.

“That's right.”

“What's your disposition?”

“Disposition?”

“You know, of your F-tier Luck. How does it make itself known?”

“Ah,” I said in realisation. “I guess it makes it so I can never sit still, as though misfortune follows me.”

“My mentor had that too,” he replied. “Mine is more overt. Basically, everything I touch seems to break.”

“Is that why you don't have Spirit Glasses?”

The man started massaging his eyes. “Yep. I've broken more pairs than you can imagine. At some point I switched to a monocle, since it was less expensive to replace, but I'm not exactly drowning in Crowns, so I've held off on replacing my last pair.”

“That sounds troublesome.”

“Yea, well, not like your plight sounds any better. At least I can take a holiday if I want, my beach chair will just break when I sit down in it.”

I chuckled politely. Though he seemed stern and unfriendly, it was perhaps just a façade. His face already had deep furrows in the forehead and crow's feet near the eyes, but from his aura I could tell that he wasn't actually hostile. He was slightly taller than me, but sported a bit of a paunch and his dark-brown hair was thinning, with a moon forming at the back of his unruly mane. Appearance-wise he wasn't super fortunate, but he had an air about him that probably got him a lot of attention from women despite that.

He reached out a hand. “I'm Potts.”

I shook it. “Nice to meet you.”

“What rank are you, Ryūta?”

“Eminent. What about you?”

Potts tilted his head slightly. “For real?”

“I suppose it’s the benefit of always being in trouble.”

“I’m still only Seeker myself,” he said. “My mentor was a Savant though.”

“Was? He’s no longer here?”

“She,” he corrected me. “And no, a Demon killed her. I’ve been wanting to take the Quest to chase it down, but it’s Eminent-ranked.”

“What was her name? Your mentor.”

“Mary-Ann,” he said.

“I’m sorry to say I’ve never heard of her.”

“She mostly worked in the north of Lacksmey. You just came from Arley right?”

“More-or-less,” I replied.

“I haven’t been back there since I was summoned to this world.” The way he phrased it made it sound like he was putting more agency behind ending up here, when, from my perspective, it seemed random.

“What kind of Demon was she killed by? And what’s the Quest? Maybe I can look at it?”

He frowned. “I would like to take the Quest myself if you don’t mind. I’m just looking for the right exorcisms to undertake to help me rank up. Also, I don’t know what kind of Demon. I don’t think she figured it out either. She was just tracking down some disappearances in the city, when she herself ended up disappearing.”

“How do you know it’s a Demon then?”

“Because anything that can blend into the population of Evergreen has to be of similar intelligence as a Demon.”

“It’s in this city?? How hasn’t it been taken down yet?”

“Because it’s clever and hasn’t gone on a rampage. People go missing every day, so it’s hardly noticeable unless you look at patterns.”

That sounds troubling...

“Maybe I can help you when you decide to take on the Quest.”

“I’ll think about it. At any rate, it might be a couple more exorcisms before they rank me up, stingy bastards,” he complained. “Are you going to take on any exorcisms while you’re here?”

I nodded. “I’ll be staying for a while after all. Right now I’m just perusing though.”

“Do you have a place to stay?”

“A friend of mine has a place.”

Potts pointed to an area of the board. “You should consider one of *those*. They’re Haunted House problems, which are fairly common in a city as big as Evergreen. Especially given the few working Exorcists here. None of them are what I’d call prime real estate, but you get a house out of it at least. Won’t do you much good if you’re trying to rank up though, so I always just leave them be.”

I followed his finger and saw that there were a cluster of five fliers for exorcisms. They ranged from Initiate to Eminent-rank, with difficulty ratings of Troublesome and Complex. Two were located in the Pleasure district, while the rest were scattered between Great Marketplace, Easthall, and Butchery district.

“Pleasure district is not the worst place, but the Peacekeepers always have to restore order there every few days, when fights inevitably break out at one of the brothels. Also there are a lot of Euphorics users there, which makes it dangerous at night.”

“What about the rest?”

“Great Market is noisy every minute of the day and there a lot of thieves and break-ins. Butchery stinks to high heaven, due to, well, the work that goes on there. It should be illegal to dump the remains of cattle in the streets, but alas...”

“And Easthall?”

A big hand clapped me on my shoulder. “Not a bad place, I reckon! Didn’t realise you were looking for a new home,” Ludwig said, his mouth very close to my ear.

Potts nodded respectfully to the Incarnate. “Good day to you, Savant Pawn.”

“Potts! Did you break your glasses already?” he asked, his hand pressing down on me.

“Why are you acting surprised?”

“Ryūta, word of advice, don’t lend this guy any of your stuff.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad,” I said in Potts’ defence.

“It is,” the man replied, though he looked grateful for my comment.

“I had to stop letting him try out the Possessed Items I made,” Ludwig said. “Kept breaking down after he touched them.”

Potts narrowed his eyes, then asked me, “Did he ever tell you his unlucky disposition?”

I shook my head. “He didn’t.”

Ludwig’s hand left my shoulder. “Now, don’t you go spilling my secrets, you little shit.”

Despite the hostile words, it was clear they were on amiable terms.

“His fate is the saddest of them all,” Potts remarked.

The Incarnate settled both of his hands on Potts’ shoulders, getting in-between us. “Don’t make me bring up the time in Noblehome.”

Potts paused. “I see, the nuclear option?”

“Mutually-assured destruction. Nothing less.”

I thought about his phrasing. “Are you from Earth?”

“In essence, I suppose,” he replied.

“What does that mean?”

“He’s just being coy,” Ludwig said. “He’s from some little shithole in England.”

“Seems a lot of Exorcists have come from Earth,” I commented.

“You just haven’t met a lot of Exorcists,” Ludwig replied. “Easy to draw an incorrect pattern from a small sample size.”

“Mary-Ann was from Midrealm,” Potts answered.

“Any news on the Demon?” Ludwig asked.

“No.”

“Probably time you recognise that your pet theory is wrong. *If* there were a Demon snatching people up in Evergreen, it wouldn’t have been allowed to live untouched for this long.”

From Potts’ aura, it was clear that he was upset at having his theory challenged, but he did not say anything. Instead he walked up to the board and carefully removed an Exorcism Quest flier, which mentioned something about a graveyard, but I hadn’t had time to study it closely. As he pulled it from the pin that’d attached it to the board, the flier tore cleanly in half.

Potts sighed deeply, before taking the half that was still stuck to the board and then going over to the queue for the Quest Counter.

“He’s a bit of a dull one,” Ludwig said as he watched him leave. “Doesn’t even have a Watcher or Protector. But he’s never failed an Exorcism. He just takes longer to wrap them up. If this’d been Neon City, then he might’ve made an excellent Detective.”

“Is it true that his mentor was killed by a Demon?”

“Couldn’t tell ya, buddy,” Ludwig answered honestly, turning to face me. “All I know is that she vanished. She wasn’t a bad soul, but she had a lot of enemies in this city. Powerful people. Enough that I decided that snooping around was a terrible idea. Of course, *if* there had been a Demon at play, then I would’ve tried to help, but there’s a reason the Quest to find out what happened to her is Eminent-ranked and of the ‘Investigation’ type. It requires a lot of tact and cunning to handle her case, and given that the Guild itself is sponsoring it, they’re not likely to give him the Quest.”

“I’ll keep an eye open at least,” I said. Part of me wanted to believe Potts, but Ludwig made it seem that he was just delusional. Given that Ludwig seemed an expert on Demons, it felt obvious that I should trust his judgement, but there was just *something* about Potts’ conviction that stuck with me.

“I’m done here, by the way,” Ludwig said. “Do you have time to come to the Necromancy Guild with me?”

“One moment,” I told him, then turned to the board and reached up to grab the Exorcism Quest for Easthall.

<i>‘The Humming Haunter’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Complex</i>	RANK: <i>Seeker</i>
<p><i>A house in the Easthall district of Evergreen is beset by a peculiar Haunter that seems to delight in frightening any who decide to enter the house, as well as those living nearby. Neighbours report hearing humming at random times of the day, which makes the floors and walls of their homes tremble where they are connected to the house.</i></p> <p><i>There are no reported deaths to this Haunter, but Explorers who have attempted its Exorcism have been plagued by madness and delirium, requiring physical restraining by the Peacekeepers. Many of the neighbours have also moved away since the Haunting began, as they reportedly witnessed paranormal events that spilled over into their homes, despite there being no signs of the Haunter leaving the house it is seemingly bound to.</i></p> <p><i>If the Haunter is successfully exorcised, the Exorcist will receive the deed to the house, as there are no living relatives of the former owners.</i></p>		
REWARD: <i>6 Gold Crowns for the correct identification of the Haunter</i>		
REWARD: <i>15 Gold Crowns for the complete Exorcism of the Haunter</i>		

“Fair warning, these clear-the-quest-and-get-a-house deals are pretty scuffed. You’ll get ownership of a dump and there’s a fee and everything involved. Of course, you can decline the house if it seems too much of a hassle.

“Oh, and a head’s up, the Explorers’ Guild will probably try to snatch the quest out from under you. They always try very hard to deal with the Haunted Houses that appear in Evergreen. Even when they’re clearly outclassed. They’re fairly suicidal in that way.”

I looked down at the flier in my hand, but I’d already decided to give it a try. Besides, even if I got a house that needed a lot of renovation, it was no doubt still cheaper than buying a new one in the same area. I wasn’t sure what to make of the Explorers’ Guild yet, but hopefully, if I encountered them, they would be open to working together.

Determined, I walked up to the queue. Two parties were already standing behind Potts and, as soon as I’d gotten in line, Renji and Emily came up behind me with the Scalebird quest.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Renji joked.

I grinned. “Wait until you hear about what I’ve got.”