

**Counterplays**  
**Monday – 09.21.62**

“... THE REST OF THE JOURNEY OUT OF THE DUNGEON WAS rather boring. We only needed three more Hardbacks to fulfill the contract and weren't in the mood to try a risky attack again,” I explained to the camera. “I will include some highlight clips here at the end.

“Like I said in the beginning, this is my first video, and I plan to document all my trips into dungeons. I also intend to explore the development of my Necromancer job, something I've never seen on the net before. I hope to explain the misconceptions and understanding of how things work.”

After giving a quick sign-off statement, I shut down the recording and leaned back. Playing the rerecorded end segment, I grinned and edited it back into the final product and posted it up on the Tubs. I then sent a text to my friends and family. They could use this information, and if I was lucky they'd spread it around.

Dot had made it clear that the unknown points in the Necromancer job were easy to exploit against others. This channel, NecroDive, would be my counter to that issue. An online profile where I went over what I knew and learned about the job as it came.

The channel name came from all the cyberpunk fiction I'd been consuming lately and the simple fact that I liked camel case words. Technically it was also unique enough to stand out, so that was nice I guess. Setting up the

channel had been easy, but cutting things into workable videos was taking more time and effort than I liked. Even without feedback, yet I found myself a lot happier with the edited and completed video. I guess the time to edit was worth it.

Unfortunately, the backlog of video I already had was large enough to be a full-time job, which I couldn't afford to do. So I was keeping this to the events inside of a dungeon for now. But I did want to do one on magic theory to show how the command spell actually worked. But it would take a long time to figure out exactly how to demonstrate the explanation.

Leaning back, I rubbed my forehead. This had taken about eight times longer than I thought it would. Which meant it bit into my time to research better command spells. However, I didn't have any free time left.

Instead, I jumped onto a bus and headed out. As I walked into a new restaurant I spotted Ashley sitting at a table. She was looking at something on her phone. As I drew closer, I recognized the sound clip playing.

"... so difficult that I spent nearly the entire two weeks working on this problem, and after the orientation weekend I even sought out a retired Druid for advice on how to work the elemental knots used in Golem Creation."

As I sat down, Ashley looked up at me. "Someone's in trouble."

"What could I have possibly done to get myself in trouble?"

"You admitted that you sought out advice. Guilds like Sanctified Devils tend to frown on 'unsupervised advice.'" Ashley turned and signaled the waiter.

“Should have put it in their contract if they cared enough.”

“They have a number of ways to force you to fall into line or break the contract with fault on your side. I would consider a way out right now. Things will get bad.”

I found myself stuck on Ashley’s point as we ordered our food. It was possible that the guild would take opposition to it, but I couldn’t come up with any good reason, so long as the advice wasn’t explicit spells, there was really almost no danger. Once the waiter left, I had to ask Ashley what she meant.

“I can’t really see why they would care so long as I didn’t start copying spells wholesale. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

“They want to control your view of the world, and your development. This is an effort to ensure that Kathrine Baulcom is unable to advance her career with the aid of anyone else and is therefore unlikely to leave the guild,” Ashley explained, completely serious.

“I don’t know. Seems cultist, and there aren’t many of those left. Not according to what research I’ve been able to uncover,” I said slowly.

Ashley just shrugged. “I have no idea about that. What I do know is how these kinds of places work. I would start figuring out how to survive outside of a guild if I were you. I bet they’ll forbid you from entering a dungeon without someone specific. Probably someone who will ‘inspect’ all your new spells to be certain that your progress matches expectations. Bring doom down on you for creating, or using, a spell they haven’t approved off.”

I frowned. "I know enough spell theory to ensure that I won't blow myself up or anything. They certainly won't be able to convince me that a safe spell isn't actually safe."

"I didn't say they would succeed. Only that these would be their goals. And without a plan in advance you'll have much fewer choices and possibly just end up going along with their demands. I actually think this video was a good first step to more freedom."

We shifted to more pleasant topics from there, and once the late lunch/early dinner was complete I went to the guild to find any extra information on elemental knots. The hope was to combine the extra information from the Organizer perk into a truly new command spell that would allow me to give more complicated orders.

There I ran into Sandra and Adam. Both were willing to teach me the nature of the knots I needed to make and was making. Which was an interesting discussion. I didn't tell them about the video that went online, but when asked I did explain about my second trip into the dungeon. They told me theirs, and their new schedules from their other jobs. Seems they'd both got a little time off after the orientation mission and were now working regular schedules again. Monday and Sunday were their guaranteed days off, on advice from the guild of course.

I kind of felt like Ashley might have given me a bad view of that phrase. Right up until I found a document on advice on the guild's servers. Not only was it a bit out of the way, but it was a couple years old. And it had some dubious advice.

Like the suggestion that Divers not seek divine assistance until they'd at least reached level 5 to avoid

getting used to the blessings. Or the suggestion of a specific set of gods for each job. Necromancer wasn't one of them of course, but I didn't agree with any of the gods, based on my little knowledge.

The big one though was the "advice" to shut off all recording devices when in the dungeon. That was such a bad idea I had no idea how they'd even managed to avoid lawsuits with that kind of policy.

"Kathrine. The boss wants to see you." I turned to see some random guild member whose name I didn't know if I'd ever gotten.

I stood up and headed toward Mai's office, as she was technically in charge of all the new recruits. I was a little surprised to see Mathew Oswald, the leader of the guild, and one of the more powerful individuals in it. Dot wasn't surprising at all.

"Well, now that we're all here we can deal with this issue," Mathew began. "Normally this would fall completely under Mai's jurisdiction, but Dot's father has demanded that I handle this personally. And given he is one of our oldest members and most common clients, I have to be involved."

Mai leaned forward. "Kathrine, Dot is accusing you of being aggressive when she was simply attempting to build a relationship. Specifically, she says you refused to answer her or even acknowledge she was talking."

"I did no such thing. I corrected her multiple times about my name and she never stopped using the wrong one. So I simply refused to respond when she used the wrong one."

“I’m sorry, what? In what universe is Cat not an appropriate shortening of your name?” Dot protested.

“As I said, I will not answer to anything that isn’t my name anymore. Dot knows better and she still refuses to use it,” I continued.

“Kathrine, that’s not a productive attitude,” Mai began, only for me to cut her off.

“This isn’t about attitude. It’s about common curtesy.”

“I think this is a minor issue, Mai,” Mathew started, giving me some hope. “The guild doesn’t need to micromanage our members’ relationships. That being said, it’s clear neither of you knows how to get along with the other, and we’ll need to take measures to handle that.”

Right, not certain if that was good. Unless it was applied evenly.

“Right, I’ll skip the other minor things, they can be handled separately,” Mai continued. “Did you try to abandon the party when you lost an argument over sharing of resources?”

“No, I threatened to leave the party and head back alone because Dot and Steven tried to use the censoring policy of the guild to punish me for not being a blind follower of Dot’s.”

“Totally untrue!” Dot yelled. “All we did was suggest you should help more, and when you tried to deny that you weren’t helping we had no choice.”

“Bullshit. Just watch the recordings,” I growled back.

“What recordings?” Mathew asked.

“The recordings of every dive that every single set of armor takes?”

“Kathrine,” Mai said carefully. “You seem to have forgotten that those recordings are disastrous for team cohesion, as nobody can comfortably act as their true self with all the cameras rolling.”

“What?” I had no idea how to respond to that. About half of all clothing manufactures had miniature cameras and audio pick-ups. The police in every major city pushed to make those cameras universal, despite them not solving all crime, purely because they successfully deterred a significant quantity of crimes.

“No. Simply no. Even the Reverend Aylene Krusen, one of the most prominent privacy activists in the world, says that dungeon Divers should record their expeditions. If for no other reason that we still don’t fully understand what dungeons are. She’s well known for taking a pragmatic approach to radical privacy beliefs.”

“Kathrine. Why do you know this fact so easily?” Mathew asked, clearly quizzical.

“I was just discussing this topic with some friends. I went looking for famous quotes because one of them is a follower-type philosopher.”

“Not really relevant,” Mai interrupted. “Guild policy is that no recordings can be taken, or used, for these kinds of inquiries. So, no evidence other than shifting the blame?”

“Uh. What?” I shook my head. “I just gave you the evidence, go to the Map the Dungeon’s website. They approved the posting of my video, as it follows all their policies. It will be under my name and yesterday’s date. They even use AI to make sure the videos haven’t been tampered with.”

“Kathrine, you know using the recordings is not allowed by guild policy,” Mathew said, actually sounding a little upset.

“Why?” I asked. “What about the recordings is wrong? It’s a way to confirm what really happened.”

“That’s the problem.” Mathew had switched to condescension. “You’re not trusting your teammates to act honestly.”

“No. I’m aware that people are often fallible, occasionally malicious, and usually forget things that don’t support their beliefs. Thus, yes, I think recordings are a requirement for modern society to function.”

“And what about the need for privacy?” Mai answered. “I don’t really want to be recorded at all times.”

“Over half of all clothing manufactures include audio- and video-recording devices into their clothing. And the ones without electronics are slowly getting more expensive every day,” I countered.

Like usual in this discussion, things didn’t go anywhere after that. Beliefs were too heavily polarized, and I also refused to step down from the point I tried to walk because Dot was attempting to bully me into something. Dot only spoke when we moved off the importance of recording data, so I suspected she didn’t agree with our elders. I kind of expected that she had the recordings as well.

“Alright, enough,” Mathew said. “Kathrine, you need to lighten up. It really doesn’t matter if Dot uses your nickname or not.”

“It’s not my...”

“Quiet.” Mathew took a deep breath. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have interrupted. But we’ve heard you say that a half a dozen times during this meeting. Enough is enough.”

I just glared at him.



“You signed up with us, and so you agreed to operate by our code of conduct. That means no more recordings in the dungeons. I don’t care what you erroneously believe about human nature. We can only move forward once we actually trust each other,” Mathew continued. “Now, Kathrine and Dot, you’re officially assigned to a team. Your teammates will be asked how well you get along. Once you’re friends for at least a month, we’ll see about allowing you to split up.”

No way. One of us would be dead before we became friends. Seriously, I couldn’t trust that woman to protect me, and for some reason she seemed determined to one up me. I could see no other way this would end.

“You can’t do this. Just suspend her or something. Make it so she can’t work until she apologizes,” Dot complained; apparently this was far from what she wanted.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you’ll saddle me with her. This is going to end badly. If she doesn’t start actually taking the dungeon seriously, we’re going to have problems.”

“Remember, Kathrine. Part of your job is to relax. Don’t push yourself that hard,” Mai said.

“How many times have I told you I don’t have enough saved up to pay rent through the first of the year? I need to be able to make enough to sustain myself before that point,” I sighed.

“If you’re worried about that issue, find another way to make money,” Mathew broke in. “But we know for a fact that the best Divers are those who don’t push themselves and let things develop naturally.

“Speaking of, Dot, I do believe we’re done with you. Please return to whatever you were doing before.” Mathew waited until she had left the room. “Now, who did you talk

to about summoning? We know you shouldn't have been able to make viable skeletons unless you had some outside help."

"How could you possibly know that?" I wondered if they knew about my video yet? Probably not.

"Necromancers aren't exactly common, and one who uses skeletons is even rarer."

"We left out information about gate runes on the database we gave you. Proper use of gate runes is the only way you could have perfected Golem Creation," Mathew explained.

I stared at them. "Oh, we have a problem then. My contract explicitly states you would give me the entire runic database for the express purpose of accelerating my growth as a Necromancer. Holding back critical resources will be a breach of contract."

"Not really. We can, and have in the past, argued successfully that our actions are in complete compliance with the contract. After all, you can hardly move forward if you break from stress or die early by pushing yourself too hard."

You know you weren't going to win an argument when they retaliated with something like that. Time to sit here and learn what my punishment was. And plan how best to go forward from here. Turned out my "punishment" was that I no longer had access to the enchantment database, which I was pretty sure they couldn't withdraw, and that my access to the normal spell crafter database was hereby suspended. Apparently not trusting the guild resulted in having no reason to care if the guild trusted you.

Ashley was right, I needed a way out of the guild. But until then I needed to at least try to work within their framework. It would probably make any argument to the court that I didn't join in bad faith actually stick.