

Call Back
Monday – 11.27.62

“KATHRINE, I’VE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING YOU PROBABLY need to think about.”

“Um, ok.” I drug my mind out of what I was working on, only to realize that Ashley had already started talking. “Could you repeat that? I missed everything you said.”

“Stuck in a spell again?” Ashley didn’t even pause for a reply. “Ok, listen. I was talking to someone about how our data system worked. For a number of reasons, including that I would like to learn about computer programming.

“Anyways, it was pointed out that everything we have is being backed up. You probably want to figure out who runs the backups for the Devils. Most likely there’s information on the public computers. The backup program would need to be installed on the computer itself.”

“Ok. Why would I need that information now?”

“You told me that your last meet up with your study group has triggered an exodus. What do you expect to find out with subpoenas and the like? How much do you bet all that information was deleted and that the officers don’t wear personal cameras, or if they do that said videos will be deleted?”

“Sounds right, but can’t we just check the business documents and have the court demand the backups?”

“According to my source? No. Apparently a number of computer backup companies are designed to exploit loopholes in international law to prevent their names from coming up in legal businesses,” Ashley explained.

“Well, fuck.” I sighed. “I have no idea how we could find that out. I doubt the programs for such a company will say who they are.”

“You’re right. But if you know the name of the program, you still should be able to trace it back. It’ll just take longer.”

I shook my head. “Still doesn’t help me at all.”

“You should get one of your friends to poke around the computer before the Devils figure out what’s going on,” Ashley said, clearly getting annoyed that I wasn’t catching on.

“Ashley, they’ve all been locked out. Apparently because it was a conflict of interest. They were a tad bit pissed over us even considering creating a ‘rival’ guild.” I wasn’t sure what to do about that problem. My lawyer was already pointing out that we shouldn’t get our hopes up about getting all the files we needed, because the Devils had managed to find out what was going on before they were served.

“Can I come over? You in your underwear or something? Gotta squeeze in your bed?”

“Nervous much?” I laughed. “Don’t worry about it. Nothing embarrassing here to see, except my roommate who’s just broken up with her latest boyfriend.”

“Oh, is she crying or moping?”

“Nope, she’s shamelessly celebrating ‘freedom’ while hunting for a new boyfriend.”

“That seems...”

“Contradictory. Yeah,” I agreed.

Twenty minutes later a nervous Ashley was sitting on my bed, pretending not to find my “famous Divers” posters childish and amusing.

“Ok, what’s up?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

Ashley opened her mouth, then froze. Instead, she walked over to my printer, grabbed an unused piece of paper, slapped it down in front of me, and I watched as her stats cut themselves onto the page. This was surprising. Couldn’t say I wasn’t interested.

*< Ashley Gram | Human(Female) | Age: 31
Spy Lvl 11.32 | Infiltrator | Innocent | Incognito | Security
Expert
Rogue Lvl 34.02 | Melee | Speed Freak | Dual Weapons |
Suspicious Dodge | Critical Aim | Penetration |
Asymmetric Combat | Vicious | Reserves | Petra Natural
Reactions | Misdirection
STR: 17 | END: 25 | DEX: 31 | SPD: 26 | WIS: 10 | INT:
11 | CHA: 20 | MNT: 13
Stamina: 2,050/3,150 | +52.5 stm/min >*

“Well fuck. I kind of feel underpowered.” I mean yeah, she was over level 45 in total, but fucking-A. What was I supposed to do with three thousand stamina? That was a lot, and I mean a lot, of potential mana.

“Yes, well I’m sure you’ll get along fairly well when you reach my level. Not really the point.” Ashley rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know about you using your Spy job for me. Not only is it not that strong, but it risks bringing you into the situation.”

“See, this is why I’m willing to help you. You’re a great person.” Ashley grinned. “But I think I should. And you should pay me. Doesn’t need to be much though. ‘Friends and Family Special’ or whatever. Judges tend to be forgiving when you have a Primary job like mine.”

“Oh? I assume you believe the first action theory of Primary jobs?” This was an interesting point.

“Not exactly. But the current legal system is mostly built on that assumption,” Ashley said. “And you have to admit, even if it isn’t true in its entirety, there is something to it. Would you have been freaked out about your corpse minions before you picked up the Necromancer job?”

“Maybe a little. And I’m not saying you’re wrong. I just don’t think it’s the smartest way to plan your future,” I said, though it did explain a couple oddities about Ashley. Like why she didn’t seem bothered about being the middle man for that deal when we first meet.

“Maybe. But you have to understand how many Spies there are. I’ve had a job or two every year just for the Spy job. But there are a ton of us out there. Any cops who do regular stake outs. Every single paparazzi member. I picked up the job because I was a ‘gossip broker.’ I picked up gossip and spread it around to my own benefit.”

I frowned. “Ok, so it’s an easy job to get, not certain what that had to do with anything.”

“Simple. A Spy has gotta spy. And with the increasingly decentralized US government, there are plenty of jobs for us.

“What happens if the leadership of this Sanctified Devils guild is transferred to other states? You need enough evidence for the state to force their rivals to honor

the punishment dealt out. Proof of knowledge of actual harm is enough to force the issue.

“And the same is true for everyone. I’ve been hired by the police department because they needed enough evidence to convince other states that a criminal is sufficiently dangerous that they need to honor South Carolina’s ruling a number of times. Everyone hires outside Spies on a regular basis. And this isn’t the first time a rival business has hired me to prove that a crime has taken place. Everyone will look the other way because it’s now necessary.”

Was that true? Probably. The US government had become extremely decentralized during the time that travel was all but shut down by the first wave of monsters. Clearing those out reduced the need for as decentralized a government, but the states refused to give up a lot of power. Especially when every state seemed to have its own rules regulating combat powers.

“Ok. I can see your point. But what do you think you can actually do?” I asked carefully.

“Easy! My form of spy craft focuses mostly on infiltration. If you tell me about the layout of the building, I can most likely get inside easily. And infiltration-based skills are either dexterity or speed-based. So I have everything covered on that front.

“I will need some funds, but only because I’ll probably need to hire someone to create an access card for me. I don’t see the need to charge a friend on something like this,” Ashley said.

I frowned. “I don’t really have that much money laying around.”

“Yeah. But I know a hacker who’s always wanted to go into the dungeon. And a girl who can do that for him. Besides, it’s time you go a little deeper anyways, and I’ll be right there to help you out.”

I raised an eyebrow at what she was saying. “A clean swap? That’s not bad.”

“You’ll also need to provide information for us about the security of the situation. But yeah, I think I can swing the swap. Actually, I know I can. But a small amount of funds might need to change hands for legal purposes.”

I leaned back in thought. Even with my recent forays into the legal system, I had no idea why money would need to change hands. At least in what still felt like an illegal move.

“We’d need to pay you for your escort services. And you could pay us back, not all of it, but some of it, for some other service. Maybe as private investigators. Pay us a little extra and everything will look legit. We can even provide some PI-like reports that don’t help out. We’ll have to keep an eye on several officers anyway to time our actions right.”

Ashley’s explanation kind of made sense. But I wasn’t sure how much sense. On the other hand, if she could find evidence that the Sanctified Devils had legitimately and knowingly destroyed evidence important to a lawsuit that could really change things. That would be a huge find. Actually, a simple legitimate threat that we could notice such a thing might be enough to get a settlement that had everything we wanted.

“Let’s talk specifics,” I said. “I don’t know if I’ll say yes right away. I want to think about it long enough to know

I'm agreeing out of reason and not desperation. Or that it's not just desperation that's driving everything."

Ashley got excited. "I thought you'd say yes! And don't worry, I've done some looking into Zilena and I don't think she'll be too cut up, given the way the modern legal system works!"

I grinned. It was nice that Ashley cared enough to look into Zilena's teaches before bringing this up. However, I didn't agree with her assessment.

"I don't know if I agree with your assessment, we don't know that they committed a crime, only that they have scummy practices," I responded. "I'm tired of taking action that looks like we're causing problems and infighting. There was a big movement to turn regulation of dungeons over to government organizations. And we know how well that'll work out."

Ashley's shoulder's slumped a little. "I just want to help you out. I kind of feel responsible for amplifying your problems with the guild right from the beginning."

"Ashley, thank you," I said. "How about we brainstorm what we need to do."

Ashley smiled and we continued to talk over the options. I didn't really want to turn Ashley's offer down. Much like her, I was quite confident she'd find evidence of criminal activity. But I didn't want to create problems with Zilena by taking an action like that.

The more I thought about it, the more uncertain I became over the prospect of being a priestess. On one hand it would be a quick way to get stronger, and having miracles in the dungeon would be amazing. On the other hand, you had to balance your relationship with the chosen god to maintain such a thing.

I didn't think I'd have a hard time keeping Zilena's rules, they were close enough to what I already believed as to be believable. But I would also be expected to proselytize. And I didn't think I could actually do that. I mean, once you'd converted people you were expected to be their spiritual guidance. And that was a level I didn't want to deal with.

More direct involvement from the divine could go in both directions. After all, more direct help would be great, but pointing me toward problems they wanted fixed would be horrible. I was sure some consideration to the person involved was taken, but everyone knew what they were signing up for when they became priests and priestesses.

In other words, I was thinking about it seriously, I just didn't know what to actually do about anything.