

Issues
Wednesday – 11.16.62

THE TRIP WITH MS. KOVEN WENT EXCELLENTLY, AND WE'D already made a tentative agreement to do the same thing next week.

But the fallout was going to be a real problem. What was it I'd thought? Win-win-lose? Yeah, right.

While it was Dot who canceled the contract, apparently I was the one getting in trouble for the way the contract was canceled. Because apparently it was my fault Dot is a bitch? Or that the guild's guidelines were unreasonable?

Either way, it was time to face the music as I stepped into the guild building. I knew I hadn't been here as much as they thought I should in the last month or two, but I remembered Wednesdays being emptier than this. It appeared that people had showed up in order to give me disapproving looks today. I had no idea what was going on, but I had to assume that Dot had seeded the audience against me. Whatever the reason, I had two videos to script and edit and didn't want to spend any more time away from my editing software than I needed to. Damn, that sounded cold. But true.

As I stepped into Mai's office I wasn't that surprised to see Mathew present, but Dot did surprise me. She was fidgeting in her seat. Seriously, I was five minutes early, why did it look like I was the last to arrive?

"We can get started early, given that everyone is here," Mai began.

"Kathrine, Dot here is accusing you of violating the Sanctified Devils' guidelines to such an extent that a contract had to be canceled. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Not guilty, *Your Excellency*. Guidelines aren't rules, and the courts have ruled that guilds can't say anything about what their employees do when off the premises. So long as said activities can't be viewed legally as poaching. Therefore, the contract didn't have to be canceled."

Mai held my stare for a few minutes before answering. When she started talking again I glanced at Mathew, wondering when he would say something. For now he seemed content to stay in the background.

"Kathrine. You signed a contract with Ms. Koven right after she broke the contract with us."

"Not true. I, uh, signed the contract with Ms. Koven right after Dot broke the contract for her own reasons. She even paid the penalty out of her own pocket, proving she knew the cancellation of the contract wasn't grounded," I corrected her.

"I did not!" Dot shot up. "I only canceled the contract because you wouldn't do so, and I was clear you would be paying for it when we got back."

"You said nothing of the sort. And I noted I wouldn't be paying anything because I thought the decision was wrong. Just watch the video." Frustration caused me to raise my voice.

"Kathrine, every time you deny what you've done, then point to the video knowing we never use such evidence. Clearly you can't take responsibility for your own actions," Mai answered.

"And every time we've had this disagreement I have offered proof in the form of video evidence. And every time you've acted like such evidence can be dismissed." I didn't let them roll over me anymore. "However, if you attempt to issue punitive measures I can take this to court as a violation of contracts and rights. I will win, because the argument occurred outside of the dungeon, within view of the fortifications with a member of the National Guard standing there and Ms. Koven. All of which will have camera footage to corroborate my story."

Mathew now spoke up, his voice hard. "This is the reason we keep saying you need to slow down. Clearly you're stressing out and need to slow down and contemplate your insistence that your guild member's word isn't good enough."

"Biases. Agendas. And misunderstandings," I answered back. "But Dot clearly took the penalty on herself. Legally speaking, that's the same as saying you know you are at fault."

"No, I just know you wouldn't cover it and ignore the fact that you can't go into the dungeon," Dot shot back.

"I can, and did, go into the dungeon safely. I had no suspensions for cause on my account. Therefore I was completely within my rights to go into the dungeon," I answered back.

"Your overstuffed schedule has been overlooked until now," Mai argued. "But no longer. Until you have dealt with your stress, we will not be authorizing your entrance into the dungeon."

I sighed. I wasn't kidding when I said I didn't think I could cover my expenses as an independent Diver just yet. I needed more time, most notably, I needed to find a way

to cover the prices made from monster parts or solely focus on the Rat Way where I could get a bounty on rats killed. That itself was somewhat problematic, as the Rat Way was more stressful than Balltown.

Monster parts were sold through guilds, because they had contacts and knew who was looking for what. I couldn't exactly walk into a grocery store and sell Ice Drake meat, because they had no way of knowing the quality of my meat or if I did something to it. Guilds were supposed to make an effort toward quality control, and the loss of income when they were found out was significant motivation.

Instead of the Rat Way I could try to run the Asylum. But I doubted my poisons would be effective there, given the large quantities of undead monsters. Which meant without having a way of moving skeletons to that dungeon I would have to come up with new spells that could affect undead. A feat I still had no idea how to achieve.

"Right. What do I need to do to have the suspension lifted?" I asked.

"We'll check and see if you're relaxed at the end of the month," Mai answered far too easily. "If we have any evidence of you entering any dungeon before then, we will talk sometime after the new year."

I just stared at her. "Are you insane? I'll run out of money before then."

"As I've been telling you, that's why you need a part-time job," Mai replied.

"And no job will cover my expenses when I don't have a secondary to enhance my performance of said job," I answered.

"It sounds like you should have thought about that earlier."

"It takes a year at minimum to pick up a secondary job." I was done with this line of reasoning. "Look. We're obviously not going to agree on this point. So here's the question. If I get a psychiatrist to certify that I have any stress under control, will you allow me back into the dungeon?"

"No. It's too easy to get the answer you want from the psychiatrist. And the stress is only part of the problem. Your lack of trust in your guildmates is causing them stress. You need to remove the video capture equipment from your armor, as is required by our guild policy."

"That does nothing about non-guild members, clients, or peace of mind. I don't feel safe without extra cameras involved. Besides, it does no good to ignore all the crime stats that show crimes against persons have gone down since we started using these cameras all over the place."

Mai didn't even react. "After that, we will need you to pay the penalty surrounding the cancellation of the contract."

"Dot was the one to cancel it, without justification. And she accepted the penalty herself, while being an adult. No court in the world would uphold that ruling. Especially not now."

"Of course I said I would be the one to cover your penalty. It was clear you didn't agree with the situation. I'm certain Ms. Koven will fully agree with me after seeing you stumble around the dungeon for two days."

"I have a verbal agreement to escort her back into the dungeon again," I disagreed. "And you weren't there, and I seriously doubt you spent all night scrolling through the

Dungeon Mapper video looking for evidence. After all, that's around thirty-five hours of video. Way too much to for you to process this quickly. So you have no evidence and no reason to know."

"Kathrine. Stop accusing your guildmates of lying. If you disagree, you need to prove that you can be trusted," Mai disagreed.

I just pinched the bridge of my nose. "I have evidence for my position. And I have a witness that can be called to verify what I'm saying. Of course I'm accusing her of lying. She is lying and has no way of supporting her claims. Now, if you have no desire to actually hear what I am saying, then please, just let me go."

Once I opened my eyes I saw Mai and Mathew exchanging a look. Clearly they knew what choices they had and were just making sure they were on the same page. Which they appeared to be.

"I am very disappointed in you, Kathrine. As we have discussed before in the past, it's not that we are disregarding your opinion but that we can't trust what you say until you start acting like a part of this guild."

I thought about not saying anything, but I had honestly gotten to the point where I didn't give a shit anymore. "I would be more a part of this guild if the guild didn't do everything in its power to push me away. Honestly, just educating everyone on how magic users need to research new spells would make coming here a thousand times more tolerable. Though I still probably wouldn't come, as there are no useful tools for said research in the building. Not with my database access removed."

"It's not our place to educate people on things you could be educating them on."

"No, I can't. As long as the guild leadership acts like a mage's research is just them trying to act smart, we can say anything we want and no one will believe us.

"But that's not the point, is it. You just don't want people who believe something different than you on privacy and trust in your guild. Plus, you want me to be totally dependent on you for funding. That's why you're doing this now. You're hoping I want be able to find another way to support myself that I'll tolerate. Then you can 'offer' to cover parts of my expenses in order to make me beholden to you."

This got no reaction from Mai or Mathew, though Dot seemed shocked to hear me say that. Which confirmed the idea to me. To be honest, I had hoped I was wrong. But this wasn't the time to dwell on that.

"If you know that we will offer assistance if it is needed, why are you worried about how much you can make?" Mai answered. "Is it possible that you're overtaken with greed?"

"No. I refuse to be beholden to people who would use dishonest tactics to force me to be beholden to them. That's it."

"Unfortunately, it seems we are at an impasse," Mathew said. "We will see how things work out the next time we talk."

I took that as a dismissal and left. Given that no one stopped me, I headed outside, ignoring how everyone turned and looked or that conversations stopped as I walked past. I was as good as fired. Under no circumstances would I be able to fulfill their criteria to return to the dungeon. Which meant I needed to boost my independent business or jump to another guild.

First thing I did was send out a text to Ashley, Eric, John, and Alice. Hopefully they would help me get some good information going through. I thought about sending my mom a text, but I was worried they'd immediately jump to a stupid idea. And really, with the loans taken out to start up Dad's new business I wasn't even sure they could undersign a loan.

On the bus ride back, it was Ashley who responded first.

Kathrine: Hey, guys. Need some help making a difficult decision.

Ashley: What's up?

Kathrine: Devils have soft fired me. Suspended from entering the dungeon, under their direction anyway. Can only get it removed if I don't enter the dungeon till the first. And then something about covering for Dot's mistakes and ego.

Ashley: That's a lot. Jumping will be hard. You'll probably need to get professional opinions on whatever reasons they gave.

Kathrine: They think I'm not managing stress because I'm entering the dungeon more than once a week.

Eric: Hi. Get a shrink, and don't increase your frequency of entering the dungeon. Could be used to prove that you're stressing out.

Ashley: Point. And hello.

John: You might talk to the guard. We hire Divers sometimes for small escort things. A Necromancer might

work better than others. Plus, that just helps for the 'trustworthy' part.

Kathrine: Hello, everyone! It's great to have everyone chiming in. Sounds like I need to jump then. Can't think of a way to get steady income at two dungeons per week. Not with the insurance I have to buy if I'm always doing independent work.

Eric: Insurance?

Kathrine: Yeah. Right now I'm buying per trip insurance in case something happens to a client with me. But if I need it even four times per month I might as well pick up proper insurance. It's expensive but definitely needed. Ironically I have no idea how the Sanctified Devils qualify for insurance, they press all their Divers to disable their cameras.

Ashley: Holly shit. That's bad and probably something you can leverage. Assuming you can prove they officially do the pressing.

Kathrine: I can. They've pointed out numerous times to me that I need to 'prove I'm trustworthy' by removing the cameras from my armor.

Ashley: Have they made it an official stance? As in, can you be approved if you don't remove the cameras from your armor?

Kathrine: Not officially. But I guarantee you that will be an option. They've said multiple times that they won't trust my word on anything so long as I have cameras up and running.

Alice: That's not the same thing. It will take a good lawyer to prove they aren't going to let you back in.

Though they certainly could prove that they left you with the impression of that as a requirement.

Kathrine: ALICE! Welcome to the party! And yeah. I can see how that would be true.

Alice: Glad to see I'm appreciated.

Eric: Always.

Ashley: A decent guild could get you out of the non-compete clause. But I don't know if you want to risk the timeline involved. It could take a year or two.

Kathrine: Temporary suspension of non-compete while waiting for the case? Someone who has access to a computer, please.

I was still on the bus back to my house, and doing web searches on my phone wasn't something I was good at. While we waited for Alice and Eric to race to the answer, we chatted about other things. Somehow I ended up with plans to meet with everyone in the chat at a club. Even John was a part of the plans, and he was bringing his wife.

In the end they came back with a maybe. It was possible that the court would suspend any non-compete clause while hearing out the arguments, but maybe not. Which wasn't helpful. Thankfully I already knew a good lawyer to talk to, I just needed to find the shrink. Though perhaps I should talk to my lawyer first.

Unfortunately, that one would require extra effort to figure out the best way to overcome the problems.