

Freedom!
Friday – 09.02.62

“THAT’S INSANE! YOU’RE PAYING FOR THOSE CLASSES, they can’t just kick you out!” Mom yelled into my ear.

I pinched my nose. Even over the phone I could see my mom’s outrage. “They can, and they have.”

“Why?”

“I’ve converted my stamina. The general consensus in the medical community is that the Doctor job should be a requirement for both nurses and doctors. As a result, anyone who doesn’t have enough stamina to gain and use the Doctor job can’t receive a medical degree anymore,” I answered.

“Well that’s discriminatory.”

“Not really, Mom. It’s like saying you need hands to be a surgeon. Just kind of common sense.” I turned the corner and spied Michel’s Bar. “Mom, I just got to where I’m meeting my friends. I need to go.”

“But we haven’t talked that long!”

“Over an hour, Mom, check the time on the current call.”

“Oh. Well take care, honey. And keep me updated. I’ll see if I can come up with anything to help.”

As I got off I rolled my eyes. Mom could be such a worry wort some times. Not that I didn’t know

why, but it got tiring being on this side.

“Freedom!” I shouted as I stepped up to my friend’s table.

“Well that’s new. What brought this on?” Eric asked as I walked up to their table.

Eric was my first friend here at the university, and the only one willing to listen to my ramblings about spell-crafting. In return I listened to his economic ramblings. Technically speaking his ramblings were probably more important, as I’m fairly certain his Intelligence is in the upper 20s and he already has at least one relevant job. He was definitely going to go far in his field.

“Nothing much. I’ve just finally decided to be free of medicine in all capacities.” I laughed.

“So the university decided you had to be able to pick up the Doctor job to get a degree. Got plans for what you’re going to do instead?” John asked, interested.

My shoulders slumped. “Could you at least pretend it happened the way I say?”

“No.” John’s job in the National Guard, and the camo uniform he was currently wearing, helped with the deadpan delivery I’m sure.

Everyone was still waiting for the more important point. “No idea what I’m doing yet. Have to do more research. Thinking about getting a combat job though.”

“Just be careful. There are rumors of some ‘aggressive’ polices being used by different guilds,”

John said carefully.

“You know anything?” I asked, a little worried.

“Not really. Rumors and that kind of thing. If anything happens, it happens in the dungeons where enforcement is rather difficult,” John answered.

“I know it isn’t perfect, but you would expect the excessive recording would limit that.” I shrugged.

“Not too worried. I’m sure things like that happen, but it can’t happen too often. Or we’d hear about it from various lawsuits.”

John shook his head. “I don’t know. But the recordings only matter if someone brings them back out. Anyway, what are you getting?”

I grinned and handed in my order. About that time Alice dropped into a seat next to me and quickly rattled out her order as well.

“So what bet did John lose this time?” Alice asked.

“He bet Kathrine would pick up the Doctor job just to stay in the program,” Eric answered.

“What! When did he make that one?” I asked.

“The day we heard about the ‘assessment of jobs on careers’ review.”

I rolled my eyes and Alice giggled. John was terrible at any bet that wasn’t directly tied to a sporting event. It was so bad, I could have predicted this outcome of the investigation.

Eric grinned but turned to me. "What have you told your parents?"

"Just that the decision was made, they would have heard anyways. I hope to be settled in and contracted before I say anything else," I said.

"You know they'll drop everything to get you back, or come up here themselves if they think you're going into a dungeon," Eric said carefully.

"I know. But it would take time for them to arrange everything, even if they did know. I'm hoping I can convince them I have things well in hand before that happens," I answered.

"Based on what I know, the only delay would be the time to the next caravan." Eric raised an eyebrow, waiting for me to say something.

I couldn't: he was right. That is what my parents would do, but I had two advantages. Caravans could be expensive, and they weren't organized all that often. Hopefully that would mean my parents wouldn't be able to get out here too quickly and I could get settled before my parents could expend too much of their money.

Despite this, caravans were the most affordable way to travel between towns these days. With abundant monsters due to unregulated and unknown dungeons, large groups with heavily armed escorts were a requirement. So you needed to be more coordinated these days than in the past. And with so many flying monsters being near

suicidal, planes and other flying devices weren't nearly as safe as they had been in the past.

I have documentaries on travel before the system and the dungeons appeared, and I can't help but wonder why so many people were traveling. Or how they felt safe without walls around their towns. Of course, in many cases they didn't need walls, but the sentiment still stands.

John returned and conversation continued to flow around the table. Eric was focused on modeling how the discovery of new enchantments and alchemical cures affected monster component prices. It was surprisingly complicated, as supplies of monster-based resources were dependent on all sorts of things. Not the least of which was how willing Hunters were to actually hunt down and harvest the necessary resources. There were more than a few resources that were expensive, more because of the annoyance of hunting the resource than because of their rarity or the difficulty in getting them.

Alice was apparently looking to change from medicine to biology—a transition that was both doable and expected. Personally, if I had any skill with elemental magic I would be considering that path—Druids were always in high demand. Both inside and outside dungeons, as both builds were quite useful. Alice, however, hadn't unlocked her magic and was instead more interested in general research, probably with a focus on medicinal uses of

plants affected by the system. Based on what she had said to me, and honestly, it sounded very useful.

John spoke up during a lull in the conversation. "So you get that spell you were working on fixed?"

By way of an answer I cast the spell. Magic was pushed out of my hand, then formed into a runic array that created and controlled a floating hand glowing a light purple. The runic array was invisible to anyone who didn't have the Mana Sight skill, which meant everyone in the building except me. The only people who really needed that skill were those who cast magic. I do wish more people would pick it up though. Would help with plenty of misconceptions.

I grinned at the group as I used the hand to grab something off John's plate using the hand. I was still a little unstable in the control of it but managed not to drop anything.

"Yes, I got the spell working. I still have no idea how your idea was supposed to work, John. Nether the runic array nor the hand have a 'center of mass,'" I answered with a chuckle.

"Of course it does!" John argued back. "See, it's moving around the center of mass right now!"

I raised an eyebrow and looked between the hand and John a few times. "John, it doesn't have mass. Thus it doesn't have a center of mass. And even if it did, the center would change as the fingers move, making that a center point for anything a rather poor choice."

John opened his mouth for a few seconds as if trying to figure out what to say before closing it and sitting back. “It would move, wouldn’t it? As the distribution of mass changes, the center point of that mass also changes.”

I grinned, John was fairly knowledgeable but kind of an idiot anyways. “That’s what you get for wearing a helmet all the time. Too much pressure on the brain.”

John rolled his eyes. “You’d think you were already a Diver. They’re the only ones who say that.”

“Yet we don’t need to get into another one of these arguments,” Eric cut in. “Alice, what drew you to biology?”

“Smooth topic change there.” Alice laughed.

I leaned back and allowed the topic change with a simple nod to John. Honestly, I figured he was right about helmets in the situations the National Guard deals with. However, everything I’d read about hunting dungeons said that helmets muffled sounds too much and reduced peripheral vision too much to save oneself from ambushes. The only jobs that claimed helmets were useful were those who ended up in melee. Of course monsters don’t have guns, and the National Guard was originally founded to fight people. And probably will again, eventually.

After the group broke up, I headed back to my apartment. Fortunately, the bar was close enough to

walk back; I didn't like riding the bus if I could help it. It wasn't a big problem, just that all the busses were well-worn, given that so few people actually had cars at this point. The city had a cab system as well, but the public auto-cabs were out of my price range for daily travel. Though in my better fantasies of the future I could even afford the manned taxis. I don't think there are more than a hundred such taxis in the entire city, but a girl can dream, right?

A short greeting to my roommate, Beth—who never clarified if she's really an Elizabeth—and I headed back to my room. We didn't talk much, and I actually held the lease, having been the first one in the apartment with her subbing from me, so I had the larger bedroom, which I'd decked out with a large desk. This worked well enough, as Beth liked to work on the kitchen table. Even though she had plenty of room for a smaller desk if she wanted one.

It was only 6 pm, barely late enough to leave the bar now that I didn't really have homework to do. So I sat down to do some research. I probably had enough knowledge of biology, medicine, and chemistry to get the Healer job. But there was an issue surrounding the fact that I never could figure out how to make a Healer spell. Without that, I had no real chance of popping the Healer job. Instead I decided to look into the combat jobs I could get. None of the other runic jobs really interested me.

A few hours later I was getting hungry. I was watching a dungeon dive in the Northern Appalachian Mega Dungeon. This dungeon really wasn't bigger than any other, but it did have multiple entrances, and there were three "cavern" style dungeons in the Appalachian Mountains as well. This had led to an early erroneous assumption about a single massive dungeon. There still were rumors that these three dungeons were connected, and people who believed this continued to hunt for them.

What I was fascinated with was the blue ball of white "flame" the Sorcerer was holding in his hand. He described it as a "false flame light source." It couldn't be all that efficient as a light source, but it was cool as shit. The problem was that the Sorcerer job was an elemental magic job. Even though Sorcerers didn't normally utilize the elements in their magic, they used the same type of magic, the same type of spell knots that pyro-, cryo-, and other mancer-type elements used.

The thing was, I sucked at elemental magic. For whatever reason, I really struggled getting my magic to twist into strings, ribbons, or whatever. Most of the magic I put out seemed to form into the "mist" shape naturally, which lended itself well to the runic magic used by Healers, supposedly.

I wasn't married to the "false fire" version of the "vanity light" spell. It's just one of several different

spells I'd seen that looked cool as fuck and provided light, or some other service. The idea was to make a light spell that was just cool. I liked the held flame, but I didn't remember coming across any runes that would make a good base.

So I started digging through other ideas. One that caught my eye was a field of firefly-like orbs. That seemed to actually be useful. All dungeons had an open-closed cycle. Some part of the day when you couldn't move around for whatever reason. If this dungeon was perpetually dark you could set up these "fairy lights" all around your campsite, possibly in a single cast. Of course some dungeons, like the Balltown one here near Columbia, had something that kept you inside your tents. But other ones had ten hours or so where you couldn't do anything for one reason or another. Like the Asylum, where all the doors were shut and locked.

Yeah. I thought that was a good idea. Something cool and festive. It could also help set the mood for an outdoor space for a BBQ or something. Actually, getting different colors in those lights would be a good idea. Even more interesting, though a project for after I'd gotten the base lights down.

So I grabbed my ideas notebook and flipped to a free page. This was the part of spell-crafting that so many movies and TV shows skip over. The long, drawn-out, planning part. There were more failures in this notebook than successes, but I still

considered this one my lucky notebook. It's a five-subject book, and I have four verified and successful spells written inside it.

I started noting down runes I thought would work. Of course, I couldn't remember every rune perfectly. Runes are 3D shapes that mana easily falls into when in mist form. So I keep more notebooks that just hold runes and what I know about them. How they affect mana, what other runes they can be connected to easily, what types of runes they cause interference problems with. All that jazz.

It's a series of jigsaw puzzles that require a lot of trial and error. Once the runes start being built into arrays, you find that some of your first choices can't work. Of course, plotting out three dimensional connections for runes on a flat piece of paper was always going to be difficult. That was where experimentation came in. The only part of spell creation you see in the movies. And even then the movies tended to act like the experimentation was super easy and quick. Assuming they even bothered to note that it happened at all.

I decided to try and make a green light first. Because I like green. Plus, I remembered that during my experimentation looking for a healing spell I found a whole series of runes that produced a green glow when they're powered. I have no idea what else they do, as I could never fully utilize them, they just glowed. While this wasn't the safest way to

make spells, it was often the only way. You only got the Knowledge skill after making discoveries.

It took me longer than it should have to find the notebooks where I recorded the runes and other experiments that were a part of the healer research I'd done. Damn. Now that I thought of it, I hadn't done any specific research into healer runes in a while. I did have a number of runic knowledge skills, none more than level 2 or 3, and none listed as "healer" or "healing" or whatever. Which was one of the big problems with the Healer magic, I didn't know of any Knowledge skill dealing with it.

The last idea I had was an advanced runic family. Advanced knowledge families contained information from multiple normal sources. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to get the advanced skill until all the basic ones were at 10 or higher, based on my research, but it should be possible to see the beginning of the skill earlier. I had been combining random runes from different families I thought were likely to be a part of the rune set. That was how I had found the glowing runes.

A lack of focus on Healer stuff didn't mean I'd stopped magic altogether. The "Mage Hand" spell was something I had been working on after classes and homework for the last week or two. Before that I had a detection spell that didn't work out. Actually, it would have worked out, but I was fairly certain that completing it would trigger a job. Nothing

wrong with that if I wasn't going for Healer. But Light Bender wasn't a job I wanted, and the job I thought it was associated with I definitely didn't want to have as my primary job. Though I can think of some uses for it that wouldn't be all that bad.

Still, the last few weeks went like that. I was reflexively flinching away from spells which might result in a job. I guess it became habit. Your first is always supposed to be the easiest, assuming you know what the requirements are. Information was lacking in new jobs like Healer. In this case there are less than two dozen people with the job globally, far too few to figure out the requirements beyond "general magic job."

By eight that night I had four prototype arrays that could work for my spell. Stretching, I headed into the kitchen to get something to eat. I wasn't surprised to see that Beth had left without saying anything. She had a new significant other, don't think I'd ever been told even a name, and she had been sleeping over there the last few days. If the normal pattern held, she should break up and be back here at night in a day or two. Since she had the "love them and leave them" mentality, all I had to worry about was her max volume "rage rock." Which wasn't as bad as it sounded.

After a swift dinner, I grabbed my notebook and headed toward the bathroom. Long experience has taught me you don't want to cast prototype magic

anywhere near flammable objects or delicate electronics. Especially when you're not 100% certain what the runes you're utilizing will do.

First step is to remove the shower curtain, turns out plastic will melt. Next, I took another look at the first spell array I had designed, memorizing the rune sequence, and then stepped over the bath tub. I then cast the spell.

I pushed mana out of my hand and forced the mist-like mana to condense into the runes I needed. I wasn't too surprised when several runes dissolved or got ejected from the sequence. As always, I didn't know everything about the runes being used, so there was always something that didn't work. The spell array collapsed not a second later. Grinning, I cast the same array again, this time paying more attention to which runes failed and in what order. Sometimes the magic got chaotic and runes failed that wouldn't normally have problems.

To check that requires recasting only parts of the spell, which causes weird shit to happen. Sometimes. Either way, I spent about two hours casting my way through three of the prototype magic arrays. I went to sleep early, eager for an early start the next day.