

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 19

Authority : 4

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Collect Plant (3, Shape)

Nobility : 3

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Empathy : 3

Shift Water (1, Shape)

Imbue Mending (3, Civic)

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Spirituality : 4

Shift Wood (1, Shape)

Small Promise (2, Domain)

Make Low Blade (2, War)

Congeal Mantra (1, Command)

Ingenuity : 3

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Tenacity : 3

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

There is a strange paradox to the sort of lifestyle that the survivors live. It's something that my old lives have touched on in various ways, too, and I'm spinning in frustration that I didn't notice it sooner. The soldier and the farmer experienced it in bits and pieces, especially on long marches or especially dry winters. The singer and cleric are a little more intimately familiar with the problem. The merchant... well, even at her lowest points, she really never understood what it meant to sleep on the dunes and wake not knowing where your next drink would come from. But the others, certainly.

The problem is this. There are certain extant threats to your life, and the people around you. Food is a large one, though it's not alone. Water, shelter if you need it, certain comforts like clothing. And always, always, the danger of the eyes in the dark. Whatever is just beyond the ring of the campfire, waiting for you.

And through all of that, there is a finite amount that you can do to really fight back. Oh, you can find food and water. You can make a shelter. Piece by piece, you can recreate a comfortable life. But where do you *start*? Especially if you're thinking that you might need to keep moving soon; you don't want to start tanning monster hides just to learn that you'll need to flee again and leave it all behind.

The camp has come a long way, since it was a dirt clearing around a single tree. There's a wall that offers a small amount of security, there's a couple huts and a handful more tents salvaged from what was left of the demon's camp. There's me, making food stretch farther, and helping gather water and more forage where I can.

And that's it.

There is a kind of wall that a camp like this will hit. I draw on old lives as I try to map out a future history. Further development, truly setting down roots, will require *investment*. Tilling land and seeding crops, finding friendly neighbors, building tools to build tools to fill permanent buildings, *constructing* those buildings, these are not small tasks. These are things that require a great amount of support, and a great amount of stability, to even start on. These are things you cannot do, if you think you might flee tomorrow, or die to monsters tomorrow, or some other new disaster tomorrow.

And here we find the paradox. The camp has jobs that need doing to maintain base survival, but those jobs leave much of the day free. And as with an army camp, wandering off into the nearby wilds is ill advised. There is nothing to read, no games to play, no myrth or alcohol available, not even anyone new to share stories with.

Once your survival is accounted for, things can get pretty boring.

The survivors, however, have found a new and vibrant source of entertainment. And one that I find, in a strangely personal way that I have not yet felt in this new life, to be very familiar.

Arguing about me.

Oob's habit of eavesdropping is starting to get comical. I try to leave marks with **Nudge Material** when he opens his hearing near conversations, to try to let everyone *know* they are being listened in on. But half the time, I think that only makes them more passionate about their debates. And with the other beetle starting to bring in the sounds of clear voices, it is getting even harder to ignore.

Everyone has opinions. The context of their old lives, their own hopes for the future, their own fears and wants and needs. And now that they know what I am, and it *seems* that all of them have accepted that I am, if not a friend, at least not going to kill them, they have begun to do almost exactly what I do inside my own mind when I need to decide how to advance myself.

I have heard circular logic loops on why **Authority** is the soul I should focus on, and a very good quip about why **Make Low Tool** is the only real choice for my next spell. I now intimately understand why Muelly would like me to follow a path of **Tenacity**, and I am eternally confused as to why Kalip thinks I should prioritize **Form Party** over literally everything else. Even the children, ever present and listening in with the same passion that Oob and his new brother do, have started to make a game of guessing what I will choose based off the adults' words.

It is *fascinating*. Especially because I have only just awoken two candles ago, and it has already subsumed what is on everyone's mind. A form of easy entertainment, and a good distraction from the nightmare that is the devastation behind and around them.

But ultimately, the choices are mine. And I need to make them before I dawdle any longer. Even as my promises and claimed constructions bring me more points of power, I know I am wasting opportunities to grow, to practice, and to plan.

I lay out my logic to myself, to make sure I am doing the right thing. Or, if not the *right* thing, at least not making any true mistakes.

Authority would be the biggest mistake. I have tried my best to measure **Distant Vision**, and I know it will expand when the soul grows. Right now, it would expand the inner ring of it well beyond the enemy apparatus. The closest foe that we *need* to either kill or flee, *soon*. This means that soul, for now, is not an option for me.

So. I need a way to help fight back, or help run, and I need it to be flexible. For this, I look to raising two souls with an eye to filling each of the incoming spell slots. **Spirituality** will offer **Form Party**, as well as strengthening **Make Low Blade**. I won't be able to make better blades - I've tried, believe me - but I will be able to produce handfuls of arrowheads and long spears for the non-fighters to defend themselves with. Kalip is right. **Form Party** is too much of a nagging curiosity to not attempt. Though, as always, I will leave myself open to new options when I advance.

The other soul is **Ingenuity**. I don't have a particular spell in mind there aside from **Create Fire**, though I will be comfortable taking that if it is the best choice to wage war with. But in the absence of the option to expand **Distant Vision**, I will still need more fuel to project **Drain Endurance** where and when it is needed, and **Ingenuity** is the soul that governs **Link Spellwork**. I know it will not be a perfect solution, but it affords me more stamina to reach out and disable distant threats; perhaps buying time for my own people to reach them and intervene.

Ingenuity is at three, **Spirituality** at four. Together, it will cost seven of my nineteen points to elevate them, which will leave twelve left over. Four to fill the fourth slot of **Ingenuity**, and five for **Spirituality** - a quirk of this magic that the scholar in me feels should be an exception and not a rule - and I will have three left. Enough to feel that I still have some flexibility, even if I am

beginning to reach a point where I cannot rely on rapid situational responses to every crisis from my magic.

I make marks on the bark table with **Shift Wood** to let them know that I've decided. The soldier's old recollections nudging me to make sure I make it sound impartial, so whatever abstract bets they might have had will be intact and their fun can be preserved. And then, I begin, pressing down on the power with a thought and expanding the scope of my two souls.

The feeling is becoming more pronounced. Before, I didn't notice it much, but now, this time, I think there is something there. A kind of pressure, followed by a rush of expansion. Am I growing physically? Is this me feeling my actual body? I cannot truly tell, my proprioception doesn't have much of a sense of scale. But I wonder, now, if maybe my souls have become *physical things*, and what that even means about the nature of my personhood.

Then the feeling intensifies. The smell of old dust, the taste of economics, the texture of a failed marriage, the color of tested belief, the itch of a lost friend, the sound of defiance. Light and sound presses in on me, scraps of memories going from abstract old archives to *real* in the blink of an eye I no longer possess. My body feels *wrong*, as I struggle against the tide of new-old sensations and bits and pieces of two lives.

I make a sudden choice, a flash of my *own* memory reminding me of something I had thought. And I stop fighting. Let the memories come, let myself *be who I was and am*. It does not lessen me, I declare to myself, to have been someone else. It does not lessen them, to let them live again in this new way.

The memories smooth in their flow. The pain is there, the old hurts and strange feelings, but the momentary panic passes. I am not trapped in an alien form. I am in my own body, and while I have changed, and will continue to change, I will always change into the person I have always been.

I am okay. Things will be okay; the thought that used to be a memory of the cleric whispering to the hurt or ill, the words repeated over and over but always meant, it is less a memory now and more a thought, a familiar part of me that wasn't there before. I could choose to see it as alien, as something coming in and changing me. But I don't. Instead, it is reassuring; to know that however I am changing, I am changing into someone reassuring, which is the someone I wished to be already.

The feelings and memories fade, leaving me again in the increasingly deep realm of my mind, alone with the arcane machinery of my spells and the small windows to the surrounding world. I know I will consult with the others before picking either of my new spells, but I still wish to see what my new options are now, and so, I focus on my souls and see what has been added to me.

Shift Wood (1, Shape)
Small Promise (2, Domain)
Make Low Blade (2, War)
Congea! Mantra (1, Command)

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Available :

See Worship (1, Perceive)
Confusion Trap (1, War)
Drain Purpose (2, War)
Form Party (3, Civic)
Congea! Sin (3, Command)
Small Trade (3, Domain)
Delay Spellwork (4, Arcane)
Seek Resource (4, Perceive)
Bolster Warmth (4, Civic)
Observe Civic (5, Perceive)
Aggravation Trap (5, War)
Form Caravan (5, Civic)

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Ingenuity : 4

Know Material (1, Perceive)
Form Wall (2, Shape)
Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

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Available :

Collect Material (1, Shape)
Invite Low Mammal (1, Command)
Make Spike (1, War)
Collect Focus (2, Civic)
See Lineage (2, Perceive)
Know Ingredient (3, Perceive)
Create Fire (3, War)
Bind Low Mammal (4, Command)
Sever Command (4, War)
Refine Material (4, Shape)

My plans do not change overly much for **Spirituality**. While **Form Caravan** tempts me, I still believe that **Form Party** will be the better use of the points, and neither of the other new spells call out in a way that I would find useful. **Observe Civic**? Which civics, exactly? I have lived lives in cities before, often been curious about the subtle workings of grand population centers.

But here, I have fifteen people in the woods living in tents and huts. I somehow doubt there will be much to see there. And **Aggravation Trap**, oh, yes, what a perfect tool. I'm sure making the murderous monsters even angrier will be an excellent solution to all our problems.

No, I do not need to ask on this one. I push the needed power in, and select **Form Party** now, dismissing the increasingly long scrollwork of my options as a more complete memory pulls at me.

There are four of us, and getting this unified political bloc has been a chore. I have been told that the artisan and labor castes believe that these festive gatherings are meant to be a way to relax, and I envy when I was young enough to think that as well. Now, I know. This is where our caste brings out our claws. Or knives, if you're one of the human or gob merchants who have managed to make it this far. But knives are not allowed here, to keep them 'in their place'. I think this is foolish, which is why two of them will aid me in this endeavor. We do not move as one, but we coordinate with our eyes and our words. Speak to the right people, at the right time. 'Step on the right tails', as our human would say. Push the others into just enough fear to exploit them. And then, when the host has accrued exactly enough of their doubt to be in a vulnerable position... my role comes in. A public display of wealth and security, a polite offering of a contract that he would be a fool to refuse. And he *does* refuse it, because he knows the true cost. But it's too late now. The other merchants see a bad choice in public, and tomorrow, my team's houses will receive dozens of quiet messengers asking for meetings. I pluck a fresh egg from a circulating tray, and savor it, making eye contact with the others just long enough to get a good wink or a flick of the tail in. Knives are not allowed in, but if you're fast enough, you never even need your claws.

The memory fades, and settles into me, and I remember the taste of egg and the feeling of collective triumph. And... something else. A dull pain, too. The merchant, I think... she never had a good life. It feels strangely intimate, almost a violation, to look through her old memories now. But I cannot help my wandering mind, and time after time, I turn up small hurts and quiet desperation. Even small victories were won through a flawed and painful system.

It makes me sad for her. Her life was one of constant war, even more than the soldier. The soldier, at least, *knew* when the fights were coming, and knew the time between was quiet and relatively safe. The merchant...

I shake off the feeling, and seek for myself a distraction. I do not yet know what will come of **Ingenuity**, but I will mark down the options to discuss. **Sever Command**, especially, seems like it could tilt the tide of battle, especially against the larger monsters. But I do not know exactly how the enemy apparatus uses its own soldiers, and so I do not pick it quite yet. This will require practice and scouting. **Refine Material** looks like an industrious spell for a peaceful time, and I look forward to when I will be learning that I have the opportunity to choose it.

But for now, I let the choice lie. I cannot handle more memories at the moment, not if they continue to grow in strength and pull. But soon. For the moment, I address my chores.

Strengthening my bees, tending the fire, watching the children as they play, fruitlessly telling Oob to stop spying on people, fetching water.

The camp is alive. Not thriving, not truly successful by any of their own metrics, but they are *alive*, and while we may not have much time here in this place, for now, it is a place where everyone can banish away their despair for a day.

And then, through my bees' eyes, I see Dipan stroll into the camp like he's the biggest man alive, holding a small bundle of an old ragged shirt close to his chest, a massive grin on his face as the kids circle round to see what he's found and Yuea calls a question from where she's sitting on her perch atop one of the walls.

He pulls back the cloth a bit, and a night-black feathered head pokes itself out of the bundle, his grip fumbling as he tries to contain the crow he has *somehow* caught and brought back to the camp.

Through Oob, I hear him yelling something back at Yuea. "You said it wanted a bird. I got a damn bird! Woman, do not tell me to let the taking thing *go!*"

"I said *it* wanted a bird!" Yuea yells back at him. "Not 'Dipan, go grab me a crow!'" By this point, the others are gathering around, and the crow seems to be in increasing distress.

I want to sigh again. The more memories I relive, the more I want to sigh all the time. This is strange and unhelpful. But I cannot sigh, so I instead turn to my magics.

Nudge Material to leave a note, as close to where Seraha is in the gathered group, and another near Yuea, that we can talk about this before I really commit to anything. Especially if they feel unsafe. And then, **Shift Wood**. I have quite a lot of stamina and power behind **Shift Wood** now. And it takes me very little to weave a tight net of lines out of some of the chopped firewood near the center of camp. I set the creation on the ground, growing it upward, capping it with a flat top with enough holes to let the sun in.

Dipan looks down at it with mild worry, nudging the newly made birdcage with his foot before realizing he can easily lift it. He does so with help from two of the kids, slipping the struggling bundle of bird under it before setting it back down and stepping back. The crow, for its part, extricates itself from the old shirt, before letting out a set of furious caws in the general direction of anyone nearby.

I understand exactly how you feel, my feathered friend.