

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 8

Authority : 5

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Collect Plant (3, Shape)

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Nobility : 3

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Empathy : 4

Shift Water (1, Shape)

Imbue Mending (3, Civic)

Bind Willing Avian (1, Command)

Move Water (4, Shape)

Spirituality : 5

Shift Wood (1, Shape)

Small Promise (2, Domain)

Make Low Blade (2, War)

Congeal Mantra (1, Command)

Form Party (3, Civic)

Ingenuity : 4

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Sever Command (4, War)

Tenacity : 3

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

The dirt road was really more of a mud river at this point. Each step draws a sucking pop from my boots, and if I'm lucky, no tiny slip backward when I try to pull the cart forward. The wooden wheels are reinforced, the axel is good, but the cart carries eight full spellsealed barrels, and the mud and the hot rain are making this a challenge. But I cannot let up. This needs to get to the camp; battle could be tomorrow, and thirst on the night before a fight kills us just as surely as arrows tomorrow. The rain mixes with my sweat, and I wish the ock had survived the ambush. I wish Mally and Gallo had survived too. I was supposed to be a guard, not a porter. My feet are soaked, and I wish we had the good boots. Sweat collects under my breast, and I wish the

rumors that we cut them off to fire heavier draw bows were true. I look up at a menhir; twenty lengths to go. Our logistics line is down, but I'm not. The water gets there on time.

The tiny dirt monsters don't let up. The river stops them, absolutely, but they hug the other bank like they're considering trying to turn their bodies into a bridge. Crows send me singular blinks of vision as I try to conserve what's left of my magic, showing me the coils and claws of moving dirt standing almost still as they watch the survivors. Watch *me*.

I let the memory fade. The other one, the one from **Sever Command**, is still waiting for me. I'm starting to learn who I was, and the moods and tones of the living memories that become part of me. This one feels sadder, more like a story for around a campfire after some argent drink is shared. I ask for a reprieve, and am granted it. For now.

We need to be away from here. We're still several days travel from the fort Yuea insists is there, and now I can hopefully be freed up enough that I can devote more of each day to searching for it. The absence of landmarks, mundane or magical, makes it more sun dreaming than deliberate travel, to hope we simply run across the fort. So my eyes will be needed.

But for now, there are still those creeping claws, and I worry that one improbable mishap could see them cross after us. I don't know *what* would do this; none of the trees are tall enough to fall and bridge the gap, no amount of piled dirt will dam the flow of water unless deposited by a vengeful divine beast, and unless they can fly, the only other option is if the apparatus in the river does something.

Of course, there is an apparatus in the river. Or at least, something like me that can feed on the ebb and flow of that pale white dust that magic and death shakes free from the world. But regardless of what it is, its presence changes the arithmetic somewhat.

I am limited in my magics. But I can still manifest a strangely diverse array of tricks. And looking at the things that I have access to, that my souls whisper to me are offered, if I wanted to be a very real problem for people encamped near me, I could find a way, without spending any of my influx of new shining points of power spread through my amalgamate souls.

So many new points, as well. All in a flood, a feast, coming from the deaths of the pursuing monsters, the use and shattering of glimmer, the small bursts from my promises. Each point takes progressively *more* before it coheres into something I can recognize and use, but I have *eight* of them now again. Enough to fill my remaining soul parchment if I chose.

I don't, of course. Or rather, I say 'of course', but what I truly mean is that I have six old lives that all would have done this differently inside me. And this cautious mix of conserving for emergencies and happily experimenting with things that may not be useful for some time is something of a compromise between my lives.

The memory from the cleric nudges me obliquely. Old lives that want to be part of me again. I push it back; we need to regroup first.

Get Yuea please. I ask Oob, and the growing beetle takes off with a sensation of vibration from his wings. I suspect that, like how a person cannot properly hear their own voice, Oob does not actually hear how loud his wings are. But regardless, this will at least get someone's attention.

After a few minutes, with the help of a crow who is currently nursing a broken wing from the fight, and the crow's combination mount-and-nest that is the tiny demon girl, I see Yuea dragging herself over to where my body and writing platform is sitting.

She doesn't look good. If it weren't for the somewhat improved **Fortify Space** around us, I don't think she'd be able to stand at all. Though she is standing, and the expression on her face is as much emotion as Yuea ever shows.

"Being a loyal guard for our friend?" Yuea says, and the small child holding my borrowed set of eyes preens and giggles, sending vibrations through the crow that he does *not* appreciate. I've been noticing, over the last few days, that Yuea behaves differently from the other humans. The adult humans - the children are exactly as children always are; smarter than anyone thinks but still learning so much - are growing closer to the demons that are part of their camp now. And with numbers this small, everyone knowing everyone, that was inevitable. But they still have small bits of hesitation sometimes. Even Malpa, the man exploring a romance that Oob *won't stop spying on*, sometimes... pauses. Has to think. Has to spend time breaking lifelong habits and uncivilized propaganda.

Yuea doesn't. Yuea speaks to them like the idea of discrimination is utterly foreign to her. A strange trait for a ranking member of the soldiery of an imperial ethnostate.

I have a lot of questions for Yuea. But unfortunately, the truly interesting ones will have to wait. I draw on the few drips of stamina that have recovered in **Shift Wood**, and start trying to etch words into my panel of bark that at this point has been marred and smoothed so many times it resembles the surface of a river rock. *We can't stay here.* I write with all the emotion of someone grimacing and biting their tongue. I don't want to tell her, *now*, that after all that she needs to get everyone moving. But I'll do it, desire or no. *There's something like me in the river. Here isn't safe.*

"Here's plenty safe for a quarter glass." Yuea says, taking a kneeling position in front of me that leads to her taking a ragged gasp of breath, and falling onto both knees in a resting pose that she tries to make look natural. The little girl mimics her, I think, because Yuea gives a wry grin to the child my bird is roosting on. "If it wanted to kill us, it had days. If it even can kill us."

I could kill us, with how we are now. I say, and regret the words instantly. But the wounded and battered soldier doesn't look offended, instead she just bellows out a laugh. In my mind, I see

the link she has to the two others through **Form Party** light up briefly, and I *truly* regret my word choice. *Any small trick could claim someone. We need distance.*

“We need...” Yuea blinks, stops glaring at the bird and turns to glare at *me*. “We *need* to...” She trailed off, coughing, lungs heaving. One dirt covered hand came up to clutch at her chest, and the badly healing line of a wound across it. The little girl scrambled forward, my crow cawing a protest at being moved as the little demon, who realized something was wrong, tried to fix Yuea with force of will and a hug of her blue furred arms alone. Yuea dragged in another gasp, before settling herself. “Hey kiddo...” She said quietly. “Can you go find Kalip for me?” The child nodded vigorously, carefully putting the indignant crow on the ground before bolting away.

Of course, that was pointless. Yuea could speak to Kalip by thinking it. And the bowman was sweeping the nearby woods regardless. *That wasn't kind.* I wrote.

“Heh.” Yuea bit off her chuckle. “Deep dark, that hurts. Okay. So. The fort's gonna be four days at your speed. You're looking for a valley. It's built over a vim pit, not for defense, so you should be able to spot it if you get close enough up high.” She starts talking again, and leaves me slightly confused. I start to scratch out words, but Yuea continues without reading. “You're looking at a sixteen person host, if they're all there and alive. It'll be washouts, you won't have trouble. Listen to Kalip, maybe you won't have a fight at all.” My crow, watching her with tilts of his head, sends me a feeling; he doesn't understand the words, but he knows something is wrong. “In case Kalip doesn't make it with you, you're gonna want to look for a descending stairwell in the main structure. That'll-“

Why are you telling me this? I force the oval of bark up to a tilted position with **Shift Wood** that Yuea cannot easily ignore. *What are you doing, Yuea?*

“...is that what it looks like when you write my name?” She asks. “I don't hate it. Very polished.” The woman tilts her head forward, bare scarred arms resting on her folded legs. “I'm done.” She says quietly, after a long pause. “Pushed too hard. Broke my connection to the timeless.” She huffs a breath. “Infection won't even have time to do me in before the backlash does. Tonight, maybe tomorrow. Who knows. Doesn't matter. I've got things to tell you first. And when I'm done, you damn well better use every part of me, got it?”

Absolutely not. I reply rapidly, burning away extra effort from my spell to write faster. *Tell me what is wrong, and I will find a way to fix it.*

I do not know if I can do that. I do not care. In this moment, I have identified a new problem, and I have lifetimes of knowledge, several spells, and a stockpile of potential magic to solve it with. For the person who was the first to speak up for me, I do not think it is so strange to drop everything else to help.

So what if she says she is dying? Just another bridge to build before the river takes it away.

“What’s wrong is that…” Yuea’s angry voice trails off as someone approaches from my crow’s blind spot, the bird not bothering to waste the energy to turn while he’s still injured. I peek through the eyes of some of my larger bees who are scattered around the camp, and see that it’s Malpa. Yuea’s tone stays curt as she addresses him. “What?” She demands.

“Dipan says he’s ready to move.” Malpa reported, ignoring her anger. He was looking a lot better, the endurance from my spell refilling his natural reserves of physical stamina rapidly. I let the bees watching go, though. That spell was still far too limited. “Kids are better, too. Though half of ‘em scraped their hands. They’ll live.” He sighed. “Wish we had some of my ma’s ointment, but…” The man trailed off. “You… you alright?” I wanted to ask a crow or a bee to come around and look at him; it was so strange, not *seeing* half the conversation. Especially when I was so close to being able to perceive everything again.

“I’m fine.” Yuea lied. “Get everyone ready, we’ll move out as soon as…”

Another crow lands near me, and both of them shrill out loud caws. The kind of signal that’s very hard for a human to ignore. I’m starting to, perhaps, see why some of my old lives would have called crows *pests*. But these crows are, right now, my beautiful friends.

Malpa raises his eyebrows and looks at them, as one hops a few times and pecks at my writing slate. He steps forward, and I have to **Shift Wood** to drag the bark away from Yuea’s snatching hand. Malpa casually picks it up, accepting a crow onto his arm as he does so so that I may see what I am writing.

Settle in. I write. We’ll stay here for the day, at least. Find Jahn and have him call Kalip back; don’t tell Yuea. She needs to rest.

Malpa raises his eyebrows, turning to look at the crow on his shoulder who caws directly into his face. “Okay.” He says, setting the bark back down on the ground near me as I wipe away my words. “I’ll get some tea going. Everyone could use some tea.” And turns to walk away.

“You bastard.” Yuea mutters.

Tell me what’s wrong. I say again. I wish I knew how to be demanding or stern when I’m just carving words into bark.

Yuea glares at my crows. “Traitor birds.” She grumbles at them. But I just wait patiently, taking advice learned from the lives of the cleric and merchant; no one can hold anger forever, if you just give them space to sit and breathe. Though Yuea is barely breathing properly. “Alright, fine.” She finally says. “Magetouched like us - me and Kalip - we’ve got a connection to the timeless, okay? But it’s fake.” She points to a patch of scars on her exposed chest, just over her heart. “We’ve got these deep brands, to help focus what it gives us. But mostly it’s just being that little bit *better*. Stronger or faster or whatever we need. Except, you push too hard, and the connection breaks.”

And you need someone to repair it for you. I write, already preparing a list of questions on what exactly the timeless realm *is* so that I can begin to attempt to connect to it with my own magic. *I understand. What-*

She cuts me off before I can write more. “No, Shiny.” Yuea says. “There’s no putting it back. Once it’s gone, it’s gone.” She stops talking as a crunch of dry grass draws her attention. I saw Kalip coming from ten lengths away through my bees, but Yuea seems caught off guard.

“And once it’s gone, the withdrawal kills you.” The bowman says with a flat voice, staring at Yuea. “Commander...”

“I’m gonna fucking stab the next person who pities me today.” Yuea growls at him.

“Yes commander.” Kalip said with that aggressively neutral tone of his. I sent a pulse of ambient thanks to my crows; being able to discern tone again like this was like having the horizon opened up to me. “Is this why we’re waiting a day? For you...”

Yuea started to fumble a knife off her belt, but Kalip didn’t move, just waiting near her, trying not to let his face fall into a sad wince. I took the opportunity to begin writing, wasting an extra drop of **Shift Wood** to move the bark quickly, which caused a noticeable scratching noise. Kalip came over to look at my words. *We’re waiting so I can find a way to help her.* I wrote. *What can you tell me about being magetouched?*

“Little.” Kalip said, pausing briefly as the black furred form of Jahn approached, the man wearing an apprehensive look in his yellow eyes at the sight of the two humans next to me. “Hey.” Kalip nodded to him after that slight hesitation. But then, in typical fashion for the bowman, continued without any concept for tact. “Yuea’s dying. We’re working on it.”

“We are?” Yuea asked.

I am. I wrote. *Everyone else is distracting me from learning what I need to know.*

There was some arguing between them, and more when the rest of the camp figured out what was happening. Not that there was really much chance of keeping a secret with this few people this close together. I let my grip on **Bind Willing Avian** and **Bind Insect** go while they talked and the flock of children made everything much worse by clustering around Yuea, who still hadn’t moved from her kneeling position.

Part of me swept around us with my perception spells. Not that I could see much, but I checked for anything abnormal, and was surprised to find that there was no domain but my own, even knowing that there was another apparatus in the river.

The other part of me, I frantically tried to find *anything* in my list of available magic, that might help. I wasn't panicking. But I wasn't calm, either. One of my people was dying, and while I said that I'd do what I could, what I could was... limited.

I did end up getting a description of what the magetouched were from Kalip. The timeless realm was, as best as I could understand from his limited knowledge of the process, something like what would happen if you looked at magic from a single unmoving angle. But also it was an ocean. But also it was a poor metaphor. I could not claim to be an expert sorcerer king, my magic was more akin to using tools someone else had forged for me; so I did not have perspective on this situation. But it sounded like it was the sort of thing, like making good bread, where a handful of bakers knew the truth, and everyone else simply knew that some application of flour and heat created food.

The scholar I once would have loved this. He would have had a quill out and a fresh journal ready to go, eager to find different pieces of the puzzle and understand what this phenomena was. But the scholar was not here, and did not have the sharp cliff of a fatal time limit that I did.

For the magetouched, their connection was established by a war court magi. Kalip's phrasing implied that people could establish connections naturally, and I wondered if this was their term for natural hedge witches, or if it was something new. But once established, it was as Yuea said. The connection persisted until death, one way or another. But until then, it gave them something.

Kalip's phrasing was also very strange, even compared to how these people spoke already. Like he was hiding something, but was angry about it. It was quite confusing.

But there was one thing that might help. Kalip described what was given through the bond as something *sharp*. I asked for more details, and he had tried to shrug it off, as if embarrassed by his own semi-poetic phrasing, but I persisted. I told him what my own magic felt like - an empty liquid poured into shells - and he confirmed it was *not* like that. He said it was like bits of broken light, sharp and clean.

Which was interesting. Because I *had* some of that.

I had taken it in, almost reflexively, when Yuea had broken her connection with her last burst of motion during our escape across the river. And while I could not sense it, I knew it was still in me somewhere; it had not *left*, after all. And I somehow knew it to be true that it was not part of any of my points of power.

But it was useless, sitting in my body, inert. I couldn't even use it for my own magic, it was as separate from me as the diminishing pool of endurance or the random trees and grasses I'd harvested.

Unless I could find a way to share it.

I scanned over my available spells again. Looking for *anything* that might help, before I started taking guesses on which souls to bolster out of fading hope. So many material spells, **Shift Metal, Know Stone, Shift Stone, Shift Dirt**... these did nothing for me. Yuea's condition wasn't something I could build my way out of. I didn't need to **Collect Material**, though now that I knew how **Collect Plant** worked, that could be invaluable in the future to actually building my way out of other problems. I had a half dozen forms of traps, and multiple things I could learn to bind to myself, and I cared for none of them.

Congel Memory or perhaps **Congel Sin**... could be answers. Possibly. If only I knew what they did.

I didn't know what the timeless realm *was*, was the problem. None of my old lives had ever heard of it. All I knew was what these two could share with me. And it was... strange, still. Broken and incomplete information. I needed to find a way to cure Yuea of an addiction to a substance that I had but could not share with her and could not make more of. There were medicos and saints during my old lives that would balk at such a task.

It didn't matter. We had a relative moment of peace here on this bank of the river, and I would take the time I needed to find an answer. I thought that, and then felt the tug of an old memory, a living memory, pull at me once more. With an internal sigh, I checked through the eyes and ears of my bound, confirmed that I was not needed, and let myself slip backward in time to another life.

The city was one of wood and amber. Cobblestone streets and cold days. Geopolitically, it was a constant thorn in the side of the cities and settlements around it. The people were similar to the city; beautiful and cold. I knew, because I had weathered their casual cruelties often enough. Red fur and long horns was a good way to be noticed in a city that hated your people, and it was worse when you involved yourself in the affairs of the sinstalkers. But involved I was. I couldn't not be. I couldn't let another cruelty go unaddressed. Not without giving them a chance to change. Which was why I stood between a beaten woman, curled on the cobblestones, and the trio of young monsters, one of whom held a sword to my throat. I spoke the ancient words that my teacher had passed down from our god. "You can be better than this." I told them. Showed them who they could be, if they were not this. And for a moment, I had them. But then the moment passed, and the sword gave me another scar, and another city was left behind in my pilgrimage. But the woman had fled by the time I was bleeding, and maybe, maybe, maybe, one of them listened. And maybe for them, the cycle could change. As it once had for me.