

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 6

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)

Bind Willing Avian (1, Command)

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)

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Tenacity : 3

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

I have learned to nap; a brief suppression of conscious thought, to give my magic time to recharge, without putting me into the dark for a whole day. Now, I wake from one of those naps.

Extend my senses as quickly as can, check **Distant Visions** for any sign of threat. Listen in through Oob and Oop, the second beetle apparently deciding to follow their older brother's example of *being a terrible example*. The merchant's memories of long ago networks of spies and informants put to shame by these two simple bugs who just want to be helpful.

They are on edge. Almost as much as when they learned what I was. Maybe more. I don't know. I'm trying, so hard, to not scare these people into running from me. I've learned slightly enough of this grim new world to know that if they run, they won't last long. I can't do much, but

I've tipped the scales more than once for them already, and I know they're living on the razor's edge against the challenges of this cataclysm.

So I'm trying, to not push too fast, to not drive them into the domain of the enemy.

But I'm not doing a very good job.

"...just dropped. Like he was dead." Dipan is talking to Jahn, a quiet conversation up on one of the watch platforms of the wall that would have made me happy to see cooperation between the human and demon if it weren't for the context. "And Yuea says it's eating whatever it's taking, so..."

"If the human- no, apologies." Jahn stops himself. "If... Kakoa? Wishes to die, I do not see why we should begrudge him that." The demon lets out a huff of breath through his muzzle loud enough that my growing beetle can hear the rush of hot air. "The crystal is being cruel in their mercy."

"Bah." Dipan says. "Being cruel in general, ain't it? What if it decides it wants to stop any of us? Not much we can do about that, isn't there?"

Oob. I do not wish to hear this. The back and forth of eavesdropping has been playful, but I do not wish... to hear this. And my beetle understands, I think. Or at least takes me seriously this time.

Last night, the human who we had rescued from being taken to the enemy's domain managed an action other than eating, recovering, or quiet conversation. Unfortunately, that action was based on something Yuea told him about his daughter. The girl who died, the pieces of her life made visible to my new sense as my body tried to absorb them, was his daughter.

And once he knew she was dead, he despaired. But once Yuea told him about *me*, and shared what I'd told the survivors in a show of vulnerability, he had a better idea.

If part of his daughter had been caught by me, then he'd find a way to join her.

It was only by happenstance that Kalip was coming back from his own hike through the woods, and caught the man with a stolen knife kneeling just outside the wall. His shout had drawn attention, which had eventually drawn me, through my bound. Maybe if I'd been faster, I would have had another option, I don't know. But what I had done, something I can't and won't take back, was to apply **Drain Endurance** to someone who was supposed to be under my protection.

And, as Dipan said, he just... dropped. Humans, it seems, have far, *far* less endurance to drain than any of the monsters we've seen thus far.

And now they are worried.

One of my beetles offers me a new conversation, and I am almost tempted to commend their commitment to this job they've assigned themselves. Yuea and Kalip, sitting by the map table. I can even see them through some of the bees flying by, though I don't direct any of my honeybees to settle their vision. They're busy enough, especially as summer stretches on and they need to prepare for stormtime.

"...my defense," Kalip is saying, "he did say there was only one of them."

"I'm not sure who I'm going to fucking kill, but it's absolutely one of you." Yuea snaps back. "You left without saying anything! You were gone for half a day! Anything could have happened, and you wouldn't have been here!"

Kalip's voice comes back equally hot. "I'm sorry, *commander*." He bites at her. "I figured maybe the tiny dreamling we're sleeping on top of could have *told you!*"

Okay, I will admit, this is my mistake. But in my own defense, which I absolutely will not interrupt this conversation with, I was busy. Keeping **Link Spellwork** and **Collect Plant** from wasting time without recharging by plucking trees from points around the woods as I scouted with **Distant Vision**. I have enough now to start building a *real* settlement for them. But... well, we may be moving soon. And I haven't talked about it.

"Did you at least find anything?" Yuea asks, voice like cold iron as she barely stifles her anger.

"Three weird little lizard kids." Kalip says. He came back alone, so I know he didn't bring the gobs with him. But at his words, I start to suspect he might not have known how to draw them in at all. "They weren't... monsters or anything. Oh, and one bug thing. *Different* than the other firebugs. They're changing again."

There's a crack of wood from the bark table. "Fuck me." Yuea grumbles. "The kids?"

"Let 'em go. They didn't seem interested in me. And, like I said, not human."

"But the spirit thought they'd be allies." She sighs. "Regardless. Don't pull this shit again, no matter what your new god tells you, got it?"

"It's not *my* dreamling..." Kalip sounds like he wants to say more, but stops himself. "But... yes, commander." There's a pause, and some scratching at the map, and then, "What do you think about the party thing it was talking about? I doubt it means a festival, no matter how weird the language is."

“Sounds like old magic.” Yuea snorts. “Terrifies the shit out of me. But don’t tell anyone I said that. I’ll take anything that keeps us alive another day. And you will too, get me? Everyone...” her voice cracks. “Everyone’s looking at us. We’ve gotta keep it together.”

“Yes, commander.” Kalip says in a softer tone, before I hear the sound of footsteps retreating.

And then, Yuea adds, mostly to herself, in a voice that sounds so very, very tired, “What the hell are we doing, trusting this...” she trails off.

I don’t want to hear this either.

Chores. Routine. A false normal. This takes my mind off the mounting stress and pressure.

I collect another tree, draining **Collect Plant** to nothing and leaving a stump and some tumbling branches in my vision. We need to decide soon if we’re moving or not.

I pass on **Congel Glimmer** and **Congel Mantra** to another octet of honeybees, the two groups of four each growing and changing into softly furred luminescent creatures that look more like impressions of bees than the actual insects at this point. But they are still kind and communal, and I love them. I observe their behavior with these changes, seeing how the hive reacts to the differences. They change little, for all that they are more ‘powerful’ now.

I **Fortify Space** and **Bolster Nourishment** as much as I can, as I always do. Never letting those spells rest, as I do what I can to keep expanding the safe space around us and keeping everyone fed.

Normal things. Like feet learning the cobblestones of a new town, getting into the flow of where the good markets are, where the alleys to avoid are. Knowing that, no matter how comfortable it becomes, it won’t last...

Even my memories are not safe to retreat to, it would seem.

One of the beetles offers me the spoken words of some of the children, and I almost eagerly latch onto having something to listen in on. It takes me a while, listening through the exaggerated sounds the young demon girl is making, to realize that she is acting out a stage play sword fight she once saw with her father.

She has their attention, though. The other kids sit enraptured as the girl - Ammy, I think her name is - and the oldest of the boys - Sivs; I can remember names, I promise - duel each other with sticks, awkwardly reciting half-remembered lines to a drama they do not fully understand.

They would make good singers, my memories tell me. Not just my memories, but who I am now. I think they make excellent bards now. I watch them through some of the larger bound

bees that are sitting with or on the children making up the small audience, the terrifying boredom of scarce survival fought off for a brief moment with play swords and old words.

All of these children are orphans, aren't they? All of the adults must be as well, now that I think about it. There were no elders in their groups. Whatever has happened, it has broken all these families.

The young performers take a break. The young people, tired from a day of a too-hot sun and too much effort spent climbing trees for fruit, turn to the ancient art of complaining about how hard things are for them. They want to swim, but aren't allowed out to the water, even if the wall does extend that far now. They want to explore the woods, but there are monsters. They want...

They want to know if they'll be moving on soon.

The adults, they have decided, are dumb. At least when it comes to me. The kids trust me, and by association the bees, with their lives. They've adapted to my presence so well, it fills me with a warm joy. They don't care what I am, only that I am on their side. But they're tired, and angry about losing everything, and bitter about being forced away again, and all of those perfectly reasonable emotions are amplified by the fact that this is probably the first time they're feeling any of them in their lives.

I want to reassure them. But the larger, and fuzzier, of the bees are already doing exactly that even without my prompting. Offering comfort to the much larger creatures, without even needing my guidance beyond that long ago request to play nice.

And also, my reassurance would be a lie. Because I think we *are* going to move on soon.

Far away, through a **Distant Vision** I have sweeping a patch of the woods, I have hit something familiar and terrifying. Just past where a rocky spire juts out of a sloped hill, my **Distant Vision** cracks and bows inward; the spell's sphere of sight pressed against something that it cannot see through, a chunk of dark nothing cutting off a part of what I can see.

I still have enough **Link Spellwork** left, even with my use earlier, to apply **See Domain** through my sight. I already know the answer, but I do it anyway. And there it is; a different flavor to the owner of that stone spire. The construction like five flat cobblestone slabs stacked one atop the other, tapering to something I would generously call a point at the top, is very clearly not a natural formation. But more than that, it is something artificial, and *made by another apparatus*.

I look closer, taking in all I can before it decides to **Fortify Space** this area as well. I don't have enough **Link Spellwork** left to attempt to **Claim Construction** this thing's pillar, and I don't want to alert it yet anyway. So I try to see what it is doing here.

I can almost, almost, see small motes of power swirling into the pylon. Or maybe that's my imagination, and I am assuming the worst. But as I try to examine the whole scene, I become sure of one thing. I can *certainly* see the dirt and mast of the forest floor twisting and rising into coiled four legged shapes, like children's bad drawings of spiders. They're small, maybe the size of a cat, but there are several of them. And as one finishes forming, it scampers into the trees out of my vision, and another begins to come together.

So.

At least two of these things behind us; one that took the human village, one that destroyed the demon's. One of them ahead, shaping those long legged silkspinnners that are stealing any survivors they find. And now, one of them to our flank, making... something. Tiny dirt creatures.

Creatures hard to see against the woods, for anyone without the magic to observe everything in a radius, and plentiful to mantle. A combination I do not approve of.

I have tried to give everyone time and space, but this is not something that can be ignored. Our position becomes worse by the day, and I no longer think that a single fight will remove the problem.

Oob starts listening in to a conversation Seraha is having, but I cut off her words about how concerned - and when she says concerned she means terrified - she is of my attempt to bind a bird. **Nudge Material** comes to life, and I draw a symbol in her line of sight, and again for the younger demoness she is speaking to. One of the signals everyone arranged days ago.

We need to speak. It tells them. *Gather who you can, quickly.*

I send the same symbol to Yuea, to Dipan and Jahn, I scratch it in the dirt around the children, I ask my bees and beetles to assemble themselves as well.

We've gotten lucky for too long.

It's time to stop being lucky, and start being intelligent. The soldier's memories chorus in my mind as I look at my own map, dusty old notions of strategic movements and tactical approaches coming back to life as I draw on a life that I had hoped I wouldn't need quite so much.

But I am all of who I was. And it is well past time to put that to use. Everyone can be secretly scared of me later, once we are safely away from here.