

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 5

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 : 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 do not wish to participate in the world today.

It is my first thought as I wake up, and in truth, I cannot tell which part of me it comes from. It feels... different. A thought that is not a memory, but tastes like commerce and sounds like the late summer harvest. Bits of the farmer and the merchant, the deepening well of their respective souls echoing against my own thoughts as bits of who I am and how I feel shakes loose their own old memories.

We do not wish to participate in the world today.

There are no warm blankets to pull our tail into and nest within. There is no old pillow to flip over and fall back upon.

But there are chores I do not wish to think of. A task to undertake. And a body that I would do anything to avoid confronting the reality of.

Five points of power shine within me. Impossible to ignore as always, an endless reminder of their own existence and the different uses I have found for them. Two of them are from a man who killed himself on my own magic.

Waking up is not a pleasant experience today. But at least I have some motivation to find a distraction for myself.

My bound insects come alive at my touch through the magic. I have minimal time with them; so much of the spell's stamina is occupied by the eight hundred bees I have bound. But for the older and larger insects under my command, I do not need to puppet them to connect. I send a simple questioning feeling out, and they reply by pushing back images and sounds, and the spell's reserve stays steady. Only a slim finger of the empty liquid is left, but with **Authority** as expanded as it is, even that small amount and the speed with which it returns to me is enough to see a broken puzzle of the world through the eyes of my bound.

The camp is almost completely packed. The early morning sunlight is just starting to paint the world, the majority of the bees have begun flooding out of their relocated hive to find their bounty, and the campfire has just been buried in dirt to stifle the last of the embers that were used to make breakfast. The children poke with lack of appetite at the bowls of woodgrain porridge, the simple food distinctly unpleasant, but having gone a long way to stretching their food reserves. I cannot catch the feeling in the air, but I suspect it is one of gloomy resignation, and not excitement to be moving out.

I empathize.

One of my lancer bees finds Yuea, my world narrowing to one set of eyes and one set of ears as I puzzle out which of my beetles she is talking to. It is Oob. I am unsurprised.

The woman is pulling and tugging at the increasingly dirty bandage across her chest, an angry red blotch forming around the edges as she tries to itch her wound. She is wearing two badly connected pieces of chainmail; a sleeve on one arm and a skirt, the salvaged armor barely restricting her movements at all. She wears a belt of leather loops made from one of the tents we won't be bringing, with a half dozen knives I made stuck in it, along with a broken longsword.

She is also kneeling down, and poking at Oob, carefully nudging the stoic beetle with a finger she probably thinks is gentle. "Hello?" Her rough voice asks. "You in there? Fucking... how are we supposed to wake up a..." She jolts as the bee touches down on her shoulder, and I use **Nudge Material** to punch the symbol that means I am listening into the dirt underneath Oob.

“Great. Get your ass up.” She tells me through the beetle, my trick to lessen the burden on **Bind Insect** meaning the words come through with a delay, and with the tinge of Oob’s own memory. “Something’s scaring the birds, it’s time to go.”

Her words are simple, short, and pragmatic. And yet... it is immensely reassuring, to be told like this, flat out, that I am not only still welcome, but still *expected* to come with them.

I focus **Nudge Material**, and start making awkward lines in the dirt, aiming uncomfortably through still images taken from my bee on her shoulder. *What happened last night...* I start to try to talk to her. But Yuea cuts me off. “No. Stop.” She tells me through Oob. “You can tell us about it on the road. I don’t wanna waste daylight on this now.’ I can’t really see her face, but her tone is... not what I expected. Dismissive, maybe?

It makes me uncomfortable all over again, but in a different way than before.

“Yuea!” Mela’s tone is far from dismissive as the younger woman comes to a sliding halt, spraying dirt across Oob and getting me a pulse of mild annoyance from the beetle. “Is it time to go yet?” She asks rapidly. “Everyone’s waiting, is she awake or what?” I have, thus far, only heard this girl when Oob was eavesdropping on people, but I feel almost infected by her energy.

I am awake. I tell them. *Here.*

I realize, sometimes, that my life so far has been a series of risks. Not in the conventional sense that a lot of my old lives would have been familiar with. I’m not risking injury on a river crossing or death in a fight. I’m not risking financial ruin on a bad deal or getting kicked out of a town for spreading the wrong words. Because those risks were weighed against *other* risks. What if he wasn’t in time? What if she didn’t do her part? What if she brought ruin to her house? What if they said the wrong thing anyway?

My risks are weighed against nothing at all. I could have comfortably sat in the dirt and let the survivors pass over. Left them all to die, and lost nothing for doing so. Oh, I would have grown slower, without them. But really, it would have been so much more *efficient* if I had just listened to my own fear, taken the safe option, and never revealed myself.

And here I find the overlap, between every risk every life has ever taken. The one thing that every single choice was backed by. The single chorusing note that rang in the back of the mind of every person I had ever been and ever was and ever would be. The terror that all of us shared.

What if I died full of regret?

Nudge Material is an incredibly versatile spell, and even if its strength does not quite rise in the same proportion that my other spells do as the soul it is written upon advances, it is still far beyond what it was when I first learned it.

From where I am writing around the friendly beetle who listens for me, I draw a line in the dirt. It has taken me some time, to actually determine where I *am* in the camp. It took a surprising amount of effort to triangulate my position between **See Domain**, **Know Material**, and the relative ranges of my other spells. But now, I trail a line in the dirt and fallen leaves, leading them from where Yuea and Mela are standing, over to where I know I have buried myself.

And then, I flex as much of **Nudge Material** as I can, pushing the spell to the limit of what a 'nudge' seems to be. And I pry open the ground around my body, turning a small spot of inconspicuous dirt near where I had recently uprooted and vanished a whole tree with **Collect Plant** into a small crater.

Every risk I have taken has been wagered against that darkness in the heart I do not have, but still feel. That thought that I could have done more, that I could have been better. I have trusted these people to be kind. To be worth saving. To trust *me*, in turn.

"Wastes." I hear Jahn mutter the curse, the demon standing near my other beetle, looking down into the hole I have dug.

"It's so pretty..." One of the children says, the little girl crawling to the edge of the hole to peek at my rotating crystalline body.

I'm not sure if more of them have more to say. Because the next thing I feel is a jarring sense of disorientation, as every one of my spells shifts and warps. Flickering boundaries of **Know Material** and **See Domain** wobbling, my reach with everything except **Bind Insect** fluctuating in tiny motions. My knowledge of the position of the hive and every small honeybee within it being the one thing stable in my arcane perception of the world.

I can feel myself stop spinning, as I am plucked from the dirt, and picked up.

There we are. My life is in your hands, Yuea. Or whomever has me, I suppose.

"Someone grab the beetles!" I hear called. "Get your packs on! It's time to go find somewhere with actual beds!" And if *anything* could motivate this band of survivors to actually enjoy what would likely prove to be a painfully long journey, *that* sentiment does it. The laughs that come from the people around my beetles are the kind of laughs you get from people who were not expecting to have anything remotely close to humor. Who have been through dark times. Who didn't think laughter would be part of their life anymore. But who are finding themselves hilariously wrong, off the back of a slim joke.

I can only barely feel the physical sensation as I am... not added to a backpack, exactly. But carried. Hoisted and moved. My larger bees send me images of the cluster of fifteen people, all of them in a loose line, beginning to pass through the gap in their camp's dirt and log wall. Worn

and battered boots flattening a trail in the grass as we turn away from the other enemy apparatuses, and begin to move.

And are immediately interrupted. Oob and Oop both echo the sounds of the woods to me, but it is with mild surprise that I hear the squawking caw of a crow from much closer than I expected. I see Kalip spin, bow up, like he's expecting a monster. But instead, there is only a feathery black bird sitting on the wall behind them. Watching.

Then another joins it, and then with a rustle of feathers against the air, two more. The first one screams at the survivor's again.

"What..." Yuea starts to say.

Dipan cuts her off, the normally quiet man clapping his scarred hands together. "It came back!" He cheers enthusiastically.

And I look closer. Both with my bee's eyes as much as I dare draw on that finite power now, and also with my own personal senses. And there it is; the lead bird is shedding something. Those soft flakes of power that inevitably find their way to my crystal form, to be processed into more magic and more spells. The markings I cannot claim to recognize, but this is surely the bird that I made a **Small Promise** to some days ago.

It has returned. With friends. Friends who now chorus a series of caws at the survivors.

"They came from behind us." Kalip mutters to someone. "Probably spooked by whatever's filling up the woods back there."

"What are they doing *here*?" Seraha's voice has a note of... well, I won't lie and say I don't understand. She sounds terrified. "What do they want? Are they scouts? Watching us?"

No. I should have arranged a way to write to them on the go, a bark tablet or some such tool. But no, Seraha. They are here because... as I can feel through my **Small Promise**... because I left the promise open ended. After all, what kind of promise has a time limit on it? That's no promise at all; that's emotional pressure.

The bird pulls on what I'd offered it.

If you join me, I'll give you the power to grow, and the best home I can make us.

It caws again. *Loudly*. A demand, or a plea. I don't know, I don't actually speak crow. I learned a lot of things in my old lives, but 'bird' wasn't one of them. The other crows join in, out of gleefully obnoxious solidarity.

My path forward is a simple one, that I commit to with a personal sense of smug satisfaction. I have held to my promise, and in return, I have been granted trust. Even if I am certain these clever birds are simply seeking an ally in their retreat from their home.

Small Promise lights a new ember in my soul as I reach out to the other crows. *I extend the same promise to you. I say. Power to grow, as you wish, and a home of our own making. But no hard feelings if you choose to leave.*

And then I send out the needles of magic that will establish the bonding tethers to these creatures, if they choose to accept. **Bind Willing Avian** having barely enough power to keep all four crows, but having that power all the same. Even if it does put it in the same realm of barely enough to actively use as **Bind Insect** sits at.

All four of the birds, with regal caws that drag on for seconds and bursts of the white motes of magic as the promise is filled, accept one after the next.

Then they are silent. As if waiting for orders from me. Standing and watching on the wall as the survivors eye them with suspicion. *Follow as you can.* I push the thought to them, not quite a command. *Land when you need to, and be carried. Tell these people as best you can if you see anything dangerous approaching.*

The crows give sideways twitches of their heads, two of them taking wing, and beginning a slow circle overhead. The other two hopping forward, their little bounces bringing them as close as they dare, before a cautious child steps forward and offers a spot on her backpack, which a crow takes eagerly, rustling her hair with its beak.

The child's laugh is enough to break the tension. Mostly.

"Now can we fucking go?" Yuea demands. "I don't wanna be here when whatever spooked these guys catches up."

It's a reasonable request. The survivors follow it. And, so too, do I. Carried away from where I was born, and off into the unknown wilderness.

I am terrified. I am vulnerable. I am on edge, watching through **Distant Vision** for any incoming monsters sent by another like me.

And I have never been so excited in my life.