

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 7

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)

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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)

Somehow, I find myself actively offended that my actions with the oasis patches painted onto the terrain as we moved have given me another point of power.

Yes, it was a very clever use of the magic on my part. Yes, it has let us cover thousands of lengths in so little time it feels like we have the gaze of Hallia herself upon us. And yes, it feels poetically appropriate to rip the motivating drive from the monsters chasing us, and bend it to the use of the survivors.

But as soon as those monsters hit the first **Fortify Space** that I had bolstered with a reversed **Drain Endurance**, the process stopped being quite so viciously satisfying.

When one of my old lives was a soldier, there was a kind of perverse delight in seeing a plan come together in a way that brought total ruin to the enemy. She had several memories of that feeling, of traps perfectly set and ambushes perfectly laid. But that memory is a *young* one. Because eventually, no matter what you do, you also feel the sting of having a plan turned back on you. A trap turned to a cage.

And after that, it's a lot less satisfying when it works.

Because I cannot turn **Fortify Space** away. Cannot dismiss the spell, or modulate my outpouring once it is in motion. The endurance I had stolen and stored for use by my people is now snatched back by the small collections of claws and limbs and shapes of dirt that have caught up to where we camped two nights ago.

And worst of all, while I do not think they even need or *can make use of* the endurance like a living person could, they sit there. Steadily sapping my reserves and my patience in equal measure. Because they are breaking down the domain itself on their pursuit of us.

First oasis reached. I write to Kalip, who is currently carrying my bark slate. And I think also me. It is hard to tell, as my only eyes on the procession are in the air right now and watching the trees around us. It is also an enormous challenge to write without being able to see the piece of bark clearly itself, and while it is moving. I manage it anyway, with what I hope is some accuracy.

I could use the eyes of some of my bees, but I have been feeding every mote of that emptiness back into them, leaving little for me to use to speak with them or inhabit their senses. They seem to be getting smarter though, as they now set themselves to exploring and seeking nearby flowers and fruits while we are on the move, and rarely get lost.

There have been losses. I expected this, but all the same, it is painful. Honeybees are not long lived creatures, and even with my small bolstering touch, many of them have died of simple old age.

They leave behind tiny flurries of soft motes in the place behind the world. Three or four of them dancing in a spiral, before fading. Except for the ones that come direct to me, feeding the next growing crystal speck of power within me, preparing it to be used to dip into the options presented to me.

I didn't know the small ones well enough to miss them. But I mourn their passing in small ways. And their places are retaken by the other bees within the hive, the unbound coming under my sway as I keep **Bind Insect** working at the slimmest of margins during our travel.

I draw a crow down out of the air as the party stops, landing near where Kalip has called Yuea over, the two of them looking over my message.

“What the fuck’s an oasis?” Yuea asks the crow directly.

The crow does not answer questions. The crow caws, loudly, at her, and she sighs. Kalip, meanwhile, sets the sling that I am carried in down on the ground, and addresses me personally. A strange experience, to watch someone face your body from an outside perspective. “Assuming you mean the last rest spot. So they’re two days back, more or less. Catching up fast.”

They’ll stall at each point, but I cannot keep invigorating us as they do.

“Feh.” Kalip glances up at the sky overhead. I miss being able to do that. I should ask my crows to look up the next time we have some rest. “The brats can’t keep this pace up much longer. Commander, we need a better plan.”

“Easy.” Yuea said, dirty fingernails itching at her wound, the uncovered flesh having added a number of red bug bites to it. “Fort up. Walls, spears for the others, kill what comes after us then move at a safe pace.”

Kalip looked back at where everyone else had stopped, the survivors leaned against trees and exposed rocks, heedless of the dirt or where they’d dropped their packs. Then back at Yuea. “No.” The archer said bluntly. “Even if we arm the older kids, there’s not enough of us, we’ll take losses we can’t handle right now, and they’re *exhausted*. Not everyone’s dipped in, commander.” He glanced at me. “Any better ideas?” Kalip asked, flipping a scrap of a seed to the crow who snapped it up greedily, sending my vision of Kalip’s face jerking into the air.

The first idea that came to me was just an impression. A vague feeling that being included in actual moment to moment planning was something *new* to me. And that I quite liked it.

Beyond that... I tried to think.

I didn’t really have much *reach*, was the problem. I was a handful of magics and a body of useless rock. But those magics could do amazing things even if they were inflexible.

Inflexible didn’t mean they couldn’t be used creatively, though. And as I tried to come up with a way to deal with the problem of being chased, something occurred to me.

What are they chasing? I wrote, mentally nudging the crow who was preparing to hop away from the conversation that no longer concerned him. We weren’t done here yet.

“Us.” Kalip said simply. But Yuea didn’t say anything, her face going dark as she pursed her lips.

I tried to word my explanation as simply and quickly as I could. And probably failed. *The things are stopping at each of my settled domains. Eating them. Going straight for them. I don't think these ones are after you.* I wrote the words, and as soon as I shared them, I realized that if they were correct, that it was me that was the danger here. My days old assurance to Seraha already broken; I'd caused them all harm, just by being nearby.

"You think they're hunting the smell of magic." Kalip nodded.

"Okay." Yuea said. "There's an easy fix for that."

Yes. Leave me here, and keep going. I wrote. It hurt to say, but if it was my magic and my domains that were being hunted, then there was one easy way to stop the monsters from making the chase about the survivors.

Besides, I wasn't totally defenseless. And if I did end up dying, that wouldn't be so bad. I'd miss my bees, and the crows I was just starting to get to know. And Oob, I supposed. That frustratingly too-clever beetle. Yuea, a little. Everyone else, more.

But I'd died before in the service of others.

The thought jolts me. I don't think I'd ever remembered any of my deaths before. Even now, there is only the bare grey ghost of an impression in my memory. Thoughts that never finished being fully thought from the scholar, the merchant, the singer... thoughts of the end, and the lives they were leaving behind.

No, dying couldn't scare me now. Not when I'd done it so many times. And not when I think everyone I was would have approved of this.

"Fuck off with that." Yuea interrupts my thoughts as she reads my inscription on the smoothed bark. The words shake me back into focus. I imagine she is about to say something about how I'm too important, or how the fight is inevitable or something equally foolish. But then she keeps going, and I realize I may have been overly eager. "You can set your spell anywhere in your long range scry, right? Just do that. But away from us. We'll live without the extra strength, so just leave a trail off into the trees, and then we can lose 'em over the river."

"Mmh." Kalip nods. "Do you one better. You said it was a trick to make your drain work in reverse. So don't do that trick. They'll run for the bait, and you use the bait to hurt them." He nods to himself again, a rough hand thumbing the edge of his bow. "Good plan. Do that."

They say, like it is nothing. Like it doesn't resonate in my souls, a stinging hot feeling, like the feeling of tears held back sliding across the inside of my mind.

To them, it's just a simple tactical decision. But I cannot set aside anymore the fact that I have been afraid since the day I revealed myself to them. That it would be so easy for them to simply

leave me; I wouldn't after all do anything to keep them back. And yet, here, they have the clean option to lose two problems at once.

And I don't think it even occurred to Kalip that it was an option.

I'm sure it occurred to Yuea. Which makes her words stronger, though I do not think she understands that either.

Memories unearth themselves within me. Old scars and bitter disappointments. I've had companions, friends, cohorts, bowmates, partners... and there have been moments of loyalty and compassion, yes. But never at the end. Never when it mattered. Never so easily, like it was nothing to them, like they didn't see how it was everything to me.

Thank you. I write in an unsteady cast of **Shift Wood**. *And I will begin work.*

"I'm gonna go nap." Kalip says, like he's talking about his plans for the festival tenday.

"I'm..." Yuea sighs, and glances at me. Not the crow, *me*. "Don't suppose you know if anything edible is around here? We could do with a restock while we've got the time. And it's an excuse to get Muelly and Malpa to stop flirting so blatantly."

Leave them to their young love. I write. *I will ask the crows to help.*

"Bah. 'Young love.' You're *twenty*. *Days*. My *shoes* are older than you." She glares at me briefly. "I'm not the most loyal blade of the empress, but I *am* supposed to... oh, fuck it. World's ending. Who cares." She pauses. "And... thanks." The fighter says. "Don't think I didn't notice that. I'll remember it." She stalks off, leaving me at the edge of the clearing with one of my crows for company.

The crow caws at me. I think he knows this is my body, but my body does not feed him seeds, making it inferior to the humans and demons. I sigh, and together, we get to work.

Fortify Space and **Drain Endurance**, blended into each other like colors of paint with **Link Spellwork**. I do not have time or effort to spare to think on how **Link Spellwork** is different than the spells that fit into each other like keys made for locks. Instead, I set two of the hostile spaces, with a plan to add two more, trailing away from our position at an angle that will send pursuit a couple thousand lengths away, and hopefully out of range of whatever magic they are using to follow.

Bind Willing Avian and **Nudge Material**, using the last of **Link Spellwork**, gives me something I've known I could do for some time, but never found the right moment to put to work. Letting my crows tap into the spell in a small, limited, way, I send them out into the trees to find berry bushes and edible greens, the spell trailing behind them acting as a basket so they can bring back a small amount of food to the survivors. The birds are far less tired, despite having been

soaring overhead for much of the day, and I remember that I need to give them their own glimmer or mantra when we rest for the night, if they choose. I use **Form Party** with them to link each crow to a handful of roaming bees, letting them give simple nudges toward things they ask me about with incessant questions. **Form Party** takes much, much less energy for them than for the humans and demons, and it makes them effective teams. They bring back their small batches as my spells drain down, and are rewarded with delightful pets from the children and bits of seed and grain from the adults.

And lastly, before I let myself lapse back into a state of unfocused peering through **Distant Vision** to track anything following us, I have one last thing to do. Because I have noticed, repeatedly, on this journey, that the hive for the bees is no longer large enough to accommodate the multiple larger specimens that I have bestowed my magic on.

Shift Wood is a versatile spell, and now, I put it to use on a series of branches. Some of which were already conveniently near at hand; the walking sticks that the survivors have been using. Walking sticks they will remain, but I compress the wood, toughening them while fixing the balance with all the experience of someone who has spent several lives walking trails and roads with tired feet. And then to their cores, I add hollow spaces; not meant for pupa and honey, but instead simple resting areas. Using the tiny bit of energy I have in **Bind Insect**, I nudge my larger bees, my lancers and watchers, toward them.

A small puff of soft motes comes from the **Small Promise** I made some time ago. Not a large one, but something all the same. It joins my core as the bees investigate their temporary homes, a few of their smaller bound siblings coming with them to nestle into the walking sticks.

Now I will have a way to know where everyone is, as we march. And a set of eyes and stingers near each of them, if needed. Not only that, but a comfortable place for the larger bees, until we find a place to settle and I can give them free reign to shape their hive to suit their growing bodies.

With many of my magics fading, I duck backward to **Distant Vision**. I already know through **See Domain** that the first oasis is mostly gone but still holding on, so I know the creatures have not left yet. But my sight confirms it. And I settle in to watch, and wait, and let my magic draw from the world around me to resupply itself and strengthen the next of the small stars growing in my center.