

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change
Available Power : 3

Authority : 5

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Collect Plant (3, Shape)

See Commands (5, Perceive)

Nobility : 4

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

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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 demon girl's name is Zhoy. She is barely eight years old; if the people of this new world celebrate hatch days, she would have had hers in the middle of fleeing for her life into the woods. One of my newer mantra-infused bees quite likes her, and she in turn has developed a child's love for the growing furred insect. Zhoy likes the march nuts that the survivors snack on, and happily collects shirtfulls of them whenever there's time after the camping chores are done after the group stops each evening. The absurd bounty of these woods lost on her, but the taste of the small snacks and the lack of an empty belly is magical enough.

Right now, I am watching Zhoy from a crow soaring overhead. The girl is running, at a speed that only years of training, or being a small child, can accomplish.

I am also watching the thing behind her. A beast covered in pebbled grey skin, dripping some kind of liquid from a dozen lines on its body. It has no eyes, and its head is little more than a smoothed ball made to hold a mouth, but it has locked onto Zhoy and given chase regardless. It runs on two long and unstable legs, each ending in a wide claw that compensates for how unstable its movements are. It is like something that has no practice in the simple action of moving, given enough tools to overcome the handicap.

It is gaining on the girl. But not enough.

Zhoy passes a rock in the road, and scrambles as she turns to the side and bolts into the underbrush, the monster snapping at her heels right behind her. I lose sight of her for a terrifying moment, as the trees conceal her once again.

Then she emerges in sight of a dozen of my stronger bees, and another crow. The little girl running straight for them, eyes wide, chest heaving as she pants in exertion and terror alike. She *slips*...

And the flicker of a glimmer clutched in her hand flashes through her rust red fur. Her foot finds the right spot, and she makes a leap forward before tumbling to the sharp grass in a pile of limbs.

The creature smashes through the foliage, sees the girl, lunges forward, and topples teeth-first into the pit.

It's a shallow hole, really. Not much of a pit. But I'm conserving my spells for when - not if - they are needed later. And besides, Yuea wanted to contribute somehow, and this allows for it.

The monster recovers, somewhat. Staggering up on one broken leg. I feel like, whatever the apparatus that designed these was thinking, it might not have done itself any favors by failing to give its creations *useful arms*; the folded limbs the thing has clearly atrophied or underdeveloped. The best pulls itself upright, and starts to let out a keening noise that causes the crow watching in the tree branches overhead to give a hop backward.

Then, as it struggles to pull itself over the lip of the pit, Yuea emerges from behind a tree, swinging a branch that's more like a small log with all the leverage her weakened body can manage. Wood connects with the domed skull of the creature, which stops howling as the strike hits it. The branch Yuea swung cracks, and splinters, but she pulls it back and takes another swing, knocking the grey thing back down into the hole. With a series of frustrated tugs, and then a snap, Yuea pulls the splintered part of the branch off, leans over, and drives the point of the wood into the monster's back. And then, she repeats this over and over until it stops moving.

“Bah.” She gasps out, as she stumbles and sits back against the tree. With a small nod, she accepts the half full waterskin that Zhoy offers her. “Thanks kid.” The tired fighter mutters.

In the place that is not a place where my magic lurks and shows itself to me, I see a thrum along the connecting tether that links Yuea to Kalip and Jahn. Communication, moving across distance, words I cannot see shepherded by the spellwork of **Form Party**.

High up in the branches of one of the taller trees, thirty lengths away, aided in their ascent by **Shift Wood** created steps and climbing handholds, Mela and Kalip sit waiting with another crow. I watch through the crow as Kalip turns his head, listening to Yuea, and then speaks to the younger girl. “Yuea killed the first one. Anything?”

“N-no.” She’s breathing a little rapidly, and not from the climb. Months of monster attacks still haven’t put her in the mindset of a fighter, or someone used to battles like this. I am not really used to it either, I simply have the knowledge of long campaigns to draw on from the soldier’s mind. “It was... uh... it was supposed to kill anyone that got close. That was it. It didn’t change or anything when Yuea... killed it.” She sucks in a breath, then nods. “Okay. I’m fine.” She tells Kalip, who did not ask. “Yeah, no new orders when the fight started.”

“Okay.” He says, pointing across the open field to the small drainage ditch that was dug some time ago around the fort. It’s overgrown with tall grass, wavy copper grain flowing in the summer wind, but I have bees in the area and I know there’s another creature laying face down in it, waiting, or perhaps sleeping. “Focus.” Kalip orders.

Kalip knows the creature is there. And while he can’t see it, he’s gotten worryingly good at making use of the glimmer arrows I made for him. The man shifts himself to a kneeling position on the thick branch, edging forward past Mela to plant one foot firmly on the rising slope of the tree. Flicking his thumb across his nose, he reaches down to his belt and pulls an arrow, stringing it on his bow and sighting out through the boughs of the last few trees before the clearing.

He gives a nod at the crow, and through the bird’s eyes, at me. And I direct a bee to act.

The grey hide of the monster jerks upright almost instantly to a standing position when the bee stings it. I wonder if perhaps there is a reason that insects haven’t been biting and stinging them so far, as we haven’t seen any react in any way close to this violently so far. But then, this bee is the size of a closed fist and has a stinger more like a stiletto than any natural prod.

The bee is already gone when the monster’s ball of a head starts whipping around, its eyeless gaze and cracked maw full of spiked teeth searching back and forth for whatever hit it. And then, Kalip’s arrow, already in flight when it stood from the ditch, takes it in the head.

It topples soundlessly and instantly.

Kalip closes his eyes for a heartbeat, and I can see the thrum of the party connection as he confirms the kill with Yuea and Jahn. “Anything?” He asks Mela in a focused voice.

“Nothing!” She says, gripping the spear she has with her. “It was the same, it was just told to kill anyone that got close.” The crow, helping her use **See Commands** with their overlapping vision, caws in agreement.

“Good.” Kalip says. “If you would, show me the others afield.” He asks me without turning. It’s strange, of everyone, I think Kalip speaks to me the most like I’m a person, and I never have trouble knowing when he’s saying something to *me*.

I oblige him. Overhead, the crow in the air tilts and begins to circle above a spot in the open field around the fort where one of the monsters is gnawing on the ruined wreck of a rabbit carcass. Kalip draws, breathes out, and releases. And I see in my magic a flare of power from the glimmer in the arrowhead as it corrects its own path, slamming into the skull of the monster in a shot that Kalip took on blind trust. The thing dies with no more sound than a splat as its bleeding head hits the stone on the way down.

I reposition the crow to where another one is wandering through the trees, and Kalip fires again, and again another one dies.

There are three left outside of the fort, but they’re out of range even for someone who is impossibly sure that they’ll be able to make the luckiest of lucky shots, every time they draw their string.

“Confirming kills.” Kalip mutters, as I see him share the information with the others. “They’re moving. Let’s go.” He hops out of the tree, leaving Mela to follow with an athletic but unplanned drop to the forest floor.

The two of them move, as the crow takes off and follows overhead. The bird is clever, and attentive, and it’ll scream out an innocent caw if anything tries to get the drop on them.

The way is clear. Well, clear enough. I watch from multiple perspectives as Yuea falls in behind Kalip and Mela, and as the other group moves out of their concealed spot to join them as they cover the open ground around the fort, moving from vegetation to mostly just dry grass, to dusty hard ground.

The fort itself is a rather unimpressive structure, from the perspective of the soldier and the scholar. Though the farmer notes that actually building something like this out here would be a rather large chore, and the singer has memories that make me vaguely nervous about the military nature of the structure. Wood and stone walls, rising up ten lengths overhead, simple crenellations meant for defensive cover for archers on the walls. There’s a single heavy portcullis at the front, where the small road meets the building, but that would be the *most*

defended part of the building. We have opted, instead, to go through the gaping hole in the side.

Most of the people with Yuea are children, and they stop before the others do. The older woman, breath coming short, directing the nervous and frightened kids as they stop a few lengths from the hole in the fort's wall and begin digging into the ground with shovels we have, both the two good metal ones, and the handful of awkward tools I shaped for them. They will be our fallback; for when things go wrong. If we do need to retreat, it will be *bad*, but small trenches with spikes, and unsteady tiny hands with spears, will be better than nothing. It will be a *chance*. None of us, children included, have any chance if we fail here now.

Jahn and the others form a loose line in front of Kalip and Seraha as the demoness steps up with the remainder of the survivors. They clutch their spears in hands almost as unused to violence as the children behind them, but they all wear determined looks on their faces. Seraha carries me, my body, in a sling at her side, with a modified walking staff in one hand to support herself and to hold the bees that are waiting for their moment to act.

Ahead, just ahead, the gap in the fort's wall waits. It's so close, and yet, an impossible distance for me to travel on my own. I still cannot move myself easily, though I perhaps could come up with some strange idea if I had the *time*. We do not have the time now.

The line of spears steps forward. Out of step, out of alignment, the soldier's old thoughts have a dozen corrections for them. They're terrified; I don't need some spell to be able to tell.

One crow lands, two others take wing, the birds flying high over the fort, casting their gaze down into the courtyard. They feed what they see through **Form Party**, back to Dipan and Mela, but also, importantly, back to *me*. I can see from overhead the layout of the demolished mustering ground, the breached doors into the interior of the fort, the piles of bones and the gnawing creatures.

And the crows, still benefiting from **See Commands** so long as they have overlapped their vision, let me see clearly as a new intent passes over the monsters like a slowly creeping tide.

One head goes up, then another. Two more from the back. They start *screaming*, maws hanging open like a slice taken out of a cheese wheel as their bloody dripping teeth dance with the sounds of their howls. A scream I can hear even from far overhead, but also through the birds on the ground, and the emplaced ears of a pair of beetles who have successfully infiltrated the fort.

The survivors stop just in front of the gap in the wall, for two reasons. One, this is an excellent place to make a stand, with a convenient choke point right here, and two, the wall is beginning to move. To rearrange itself, strands of demolished stone growing like some kind of living liquid as they reach out from the broken edges, searching for each other, slowly thickening.

I hit the wall with **Claim Construction**. The changes slow to a crawl. It's *mine* now, showing up under **See Domain** as my territory, my mostly destroyed wall. Well, my mostly destroyed gatehouse. There must have been a second entrance to the fort here, though no more. The changes stop; the enemy has shown no sign of having a way to contest a domain, and just like my searching magic splashed off the domain of the others we left behind, its changes slide away without finding purchase in the fort's walls. It's not perfect; this isn't **Fortify Space**, but it's far harder for the enemy to make progress now.

I see Kalip fire his bow, and from overhead get to see as one of the things drops. He shoots again, but the monster throws itself in a frantic rolling dodge; the arrow keeps going and scores a lucky hit on the leg of one behind, but the injured thing keeps running anyway.

Then the first one reaches the survivors, and throws itself into the wavering spears. Malpa yanks on his weapon as rows of teeth clamp down on the haft and start sawing through it, the big man dragging the monster a half step forward and off balancing it. Jahn barks out a command and the others pull their weapons out of the way as the demon lunges forward to cut into the monster's torso with their axe; one strike leaving a line on the thick skin, then the next hitting harder and drawing blood. By the third, it staggers backward and drops the spear, turning to try to snap at Jahn, but the blade of the axe hits it hard enough that it tumbles backward and out of the immediate fight.

The next three of them reach the line at the same time; the crows telling me through their own control of **Bind Willing Avian** that they've been ordered to attack as a group. They fare better, one getting caught by a spear and held back, another being pinned by Muelly and Mela crossing their weapons and forcing it away, but the third taking unimpeded steps forward to bite and scream at the survivors.

Its teeth sink into Dipan's arm, the already wounded man howling as he jerks away from the grapple, leaving a trail of blood behind. He stumbles, but keeps ahold of his spear, trusting the rest of us.

Which works. Even as he's shaking off the injury, blood seeping from his wound and panic in his eyes, I am applying **Drain Endurance** to the monster. It's far harder to exhaust than one of the tiny dirt things, or the firebugs, harder even than a human or demon, but I'm getting there. I focus as much of the spell as I can, and it falters and stumbles, looking around in confusion. The birds say it has been ordered to kill the mage, but it does not know how to do that, I think.

Seraha would have given it a target, if it knew what a mage was supposed to look like. The old woman raises the staff she's carrying, and taps it to the ground twice. I am conserving **Bind Insect** for the linked spell that is humming in the back of my mind, and in this way, she can give a simple order to the bees so that my spell's empty liquid supply can be better utilized.

From the end of the staff, a dozen honeybees emerge. And they are, still, honeybees. They collect pollen, make honey, are part of the hive. But they are also something more. Their wings

glitter, or are traced with the yellow glow of runes I cannot read. They are larger than even the worst heart wasps. And, most important of all, as they take off from their temporary shell of a nest, they collect the water-filled arrowheads hanging from the staff around them.

The bees follow Seraha's pointing finger, obeying my previous command to trust her when she called. The twelve of them streaked forward in a buzz of yellow and black and dull metal, whipping past the defenders that are struggling to hold back the grey fangbeasts. They're even less organized than the human and demon survivors, but also, I doubt they're expected in any way that matters to defend against them.

One of them buzzes past the head of the beast I'm draining, and as it does, the control the bee has over my **Move Water** spell through **Link Spellwork** flexes, and the liquid filled arrowhead held near it surges forward. A stinger of metal and magic, that embeds itself a finger's width into the neck of the staggering creature.

Then the next one. And the next. A buzzing, angry swarm of insects, many of them darting in to add their own organic stingers to the arrow swarm they're dragging with them. My spell's reserves begin to dip, but it takes them almost no time to kill the monster. I refocus **Drain Endurance** on the one that Dipan is stabbing, while the bees effortlessly flow toward the monster the girls have pinned.

Kalip fires again, something else dies. A bee makes an impossible dodge, and I thank the moon that I cannot get nauseous watching through their eyes. Another been is snapped out of the air with vicious fangs, dying almost instantly, their life flowing back across the bond to me - something strange happening with the spell, something I do not have time for - before the last wave of the monsters joins the fight. Kalip fires his last arrow, wounding but not killing, while Dipan finishes his enemy. Malpa interposes himself between Muelly and a maw, his fist shredded to the bone when he tries to punch it away. The bees redirect to that one, while spears drop yet another, though the things are *strong*. We should have prepared more, should have set the stage better. Taking them one by one with traps would have been smarter, this kind of fight is dangerous. Even if the survivors are winning. Sort of.

There is a burst of motion from the roof of the fort proper, the cluster of buildings inside the walls, and my crows in the sky jerk in panic as something flies past them. Several somethings. They are diving, scattering, not listening to orders, just getting out of the way of the projectiles flung their way. Good instincts, but a problem for my view of the battlefield.

Behind the line, there is a scream. A series of screams. The kids run, not quite scattering, and not going too far, while Yuea stands between them and one of the monsters that were in the field, blades gripped in shaking hands. Just behind her and to her side, Sivs, the stupid boy desperate to prove himself in a gesture that is all too familiar to some of my old lives, also holds the sharp wooden blade I made him so long ago. Yuea flings a knife at it as it charges, and the dull blade bounces off. She tries again, and the glimmer enhanced knife barely nicks the thing in the leg, but it causes it to twist just enough that it steps directly into one of the small holes

with a wooden spike in it that are set up all around her. It's still beyond dangerous, and she's still too weak, but what she lacks in arm strength, she makes up for in enthusiasm as she kneels down on its head and drives her knives into its spine over and over. Sivs follows after her, screaming a child's battle cry as he adds his own blade to where an eye would be on a fellow human.

And then it goes quiet. The monsters here are dead, half of the survivors are bleeding but *still standing*. And, importantly, I have eaten every piece of the deaths of these creatures that I could grasp.

I spend all my points of power strengthening two souls. **Tenacity** and **Authority**. We will need them. I check in with my infiltrator beetles. They are, Oob especially, far smarter than they have any right to be. They tell me they tracked the sounds of the screaming enemies, let me know roughly when they stopped making noise - around when the battle turned in our favor - and roughly where the three monsters in the fort are now hiding.

A small amount of time is taken to apply rough bandages to the worst wounds, and for Kalip to collect his arrows. The bees cluster back around Seraha's staff, the children are gathered again, splintered spears are smoothed out with **Shift Wood**.

We advance.

Seraha goes first, taking me with her. I drip a steady stream of **Fortify Space** onto the ground at her feet. The woman walks into the unknown like someone with the confidence of a prophet, taking gentle, almost dainty steps over the oozing corpses of the monsters and the rubble of the fort's side gate.

Almost right away, something green and writhing bursts out of the ground and the cracked cross section of the wall. Thin tendrils covered in rapidly growing thorns, they lash forward, their growth arrested by **Fortify Space**, but their own motions not slowed at all. One of them whips toward Seraha's head, and I watch from multiple angles through crows and bees as the organic barbs close in.

Something in my mind makes me want to laugh. An old argument the scholar once had, when he was younger, with one of his teachers. Not a tutor, exactly; a friend who was sharing some language lessons. They had gotten in such a sudden fight, over the name of a singular food. Was, after all, a palvla not simply a sideways sandwich? The debate on classifications had raged for long enough that both of them failed their inquiry the next day, and in the end, all that was learned was that some things are not worth fighting over.

But I remember, that some things can fall into several categories. And while I doubt very much I could take command of the thing with something like **Bind Insect** but for vines, I have something I know will work.

I hit it with **Collect Plant** - or, more accurately, I shove out the spell of **Collect Plant** in a dome around us, which means I also get a lot of dead grass - and before it can impact Seraha's shoulders, the vines are plucked out of the world and into wherever it is that I keep things.

The others follow. We advance. Glass shows up within **Know Material** for the first time as the windows of the commander's quarters or some other important second floor room come into range.

The door to the barracks is crumpled inward, and Oop informs me that there is a creature hiding just around the corner, waiting to strike for a kill. Jahn uses their axe to leverage the shattered remains of the wood open off its broken hinges, and Kalip almost casually flicks an arrow through the opening. I think it bounces off something, and a second later the monster is running screaming out into the open with a line of blood dripping from its naked grey chest. The survivors, surrounding the door with their spears, put it down with only a little effort.

Dipan and Mela shout a warning at the same time my crows start cawing, and I see what my crows see as they watch an order *move through the air*. It flits at a speed almost too fast to see, but it moves through one of the building's like the solid material means nothing to it. Everyone is on edge, watching where Mela points, and no one is expecting the window of the elevated room behind them to shatter and the bodies of two of the things to drop to the ground covered in splinters of glass.

One of them falls too hard, and its legs snap, but the other is up and running toward the back line of the children in one of my nonexistent heartbeats. Shouts echo, the crows take wing to intercept it, but before anyone can get there, Yuea interposes herself, levels her arm, and fires the pistol she's salvaged off one of the bodies in the courtyard.

The explosive shot and cloud of powder smoke billow out from her in a riot of noise and injury. A gout of blood sprays from the back of the head of the thing that is not even an arm's length from her, and it splatters to the cobblestone ground as its momentum carries it past her. Yuea, for her part, drops the gun and starts swearing and clutching her arm as the weapon - clearly calibrated for magetouched - shows off exactly how much of a kick it has on her. The soldier in me thinks it was an amateur shot. But none of me really cares.

Kalip kills the other one, still struggling on the ground, and then plucks his arrows back. Only two of them are still good to use, but they're still *very* good to use. I eat the incoming power from the deaths, the glimmer shatters, the use of mantra and glimmer and blade, from *everything*.

Kalip, Jahn, and Seraha make the final push. There's nothing left alive in the fort except two things. One is the monster hiding underneath the stairs below the cellar. The other is the apparatus itself.

We get a half length into the hallway toward the stone stairs down, when something changes. The wall warps and shifts, and before I can **Claim Construction** or **Fortify Space** on it, a rectangular shape protrudes out from the right side. I have a hard time seeing through my bees, but the crow sitting on Jahn's shoulder clearly sees a... door?

The enemy has formed a door, parallel to the floor. It has a frame and hinges and everything. I don't fully understand, and from the raised eyebrow Kalip gives back at us, he clearly doesn't either.

Then the door detonates. Wood shrapnel and fire bursting out of it toward us the enemy sets off whatever trap it had prepared. The crow takes a spike of wood in the chest, and while he doesn't die, he does topple backward and I doubt the bird will make it. Seraha screams as her fur singes away and they all take a hail of splinters in the unarmored parts of their bodies. At least the bees are mostly safe, clustering in their hiding spot.

Kalip urges them forward, yelling the command to move as he flings himself into the burning wreck of the door; the object now looking familiarly like the rest of its brethren in the fort. The construct snaps off the wall as he shoulders through it, and Jahn helps Seraha to her feet as they stagger after him.

Another door appears, just before the cellar steps. And this time, I am ready. **Form Wall** acts as fast as I can make it, as I empty its reserve of stamina all in one splash of magic upon the world. Even as the door juts out of the ceiling overhead, I am slamming the material of the upper walls together. The lamps that I hadn't really thought to pay much mind to shatter, and the hallway is plunged into darkness just before a line of fire lights up the edges of my hasty defense.

But it holds, and they keep going, Kalip rushing ahead and then freezing right before the door to the cellar, jumping back and pressing himself against the wall just before the door explodes.

Wood and fire filled the hallway, sending Kalip tumbling back, but still breathing. I hope. But it doesn't hit the others. Or me, importantly. I didn't really think about if those explosions could hit me. Have I been hit? I cannot feel my body, but I'm still there, being pulled along. Kept in easy range of everything I need to cast.

Then they're in the cellar, at the top of the steps, and there's only one thing left to kill between us and the target. Seraha sends in the swarm of bees first, to flush it out.

Four of them, the ones infused with mantra, die almost instantly as they get too close. This one is *different*. A last line of defense, perhaps, or a desperate final stand. I see the spikes growing off it slowly slip back below its skin as my bees drop, and it tilts its eyeless toothy head to lunge forward one of the others as it prepares to take a snapping bite.

I pour every last drop of **Drain Endurance** into it. It slows, its attack comes in a clumsy motion that my bee easily dodges. A stinger goes into the pebbly thick hide of its head, and scratches against a skull. Then another, and another. The bees swarm around it, repeatedly lancing their own stingers and the arrows they carry into the creature.

Link Spellwork runs out, and the arrows drop to the ground, but the thing is stumbling out now, swatting at the bees with absurdly long claws on the end of arms far more useful than any of the others. It slices one of the glimmer bees in half, and I catch part of it through **Bind Insect**, in that same strange way as before. The creature turns, starting to recover its speed as my spell runs dry and falters, starts to raise its claw again.

Jahn drops from over the side of the stairs, falling the length to the poured stone floor, their dulled and chipped axe biting into the flesh and snapping the neck of the last monster, as the demon slams into the ground with all their weight.

And there, in the middle of the room, among casks of wine and racks of sausage and cheese, the thing sits. It doesn't look like me, not quite. Only four points, a lopsided triangle shape, sitting over the stone floor in the dark room, just floating. Spinning.

Seraha, still carrying me, takes a halting step down the stairs. I watch her through my returning bees as she limps, favoring her left leg and using the staff to effect as she drags herself down the stairs. Jahn is still staggering to their feet, planting the axe once again in the spiked grey beast and finally rewarding me with a flood of power as it dies, as Seraha drags herself forward.

Gently, she sets the staff between two of the barrels. My bees watch her at my request, the surviving insect eyes following her, and my body, for me as she steps toward the other apparatus, steps over the piles of gnawed and fleshless bones scattered around it.

The old demoness picks up a thick bottle of wine out of a nearby rack. Her mouth moves, she says something that I cannot hear. Her posture softens, like she's waiting for an answer to a question.

Small Promise tugs at me, the magic asking if it can be used. I let it go, and hear her words to both myself, and the other. *We don't have to fight.* She is saying.

At a crawling speed, a door starts to form out of the floor under her feet. And Seraha notices it. Her aged form tenses up, and I see her mouth move like she is screaming and hear the impression of the sound through my bees, though not the words if there are words to be found at all in her utterance. She raises the bottle, and brings it down with a crash of shattering glass.

Shattering glass, and shattering crystal. Wine leaks like blood onto the cellar floor, and Seraha hits the floating pyramid again, and again, the bottle breaking away in her hands as the doomed apparatus chips, then cracks, and then finally, painfully, breaks. *Shatters.*

A riotous flood of soft motes and preserved forms and one singular intact pattern burst out into the world, visible to my senses in a way that I doubt any living mortal has ever seen.

I drink the motes like water, and the pattern finds me without prompting before attaching itself to my souls. The rest, I let go. I feel the texture of grey hide and sharp teeth in the shadows that flee the dying apparatus, and I do not want anything to do with them.

The storm howls around me for some time. I cannot focus on my magic, cannot hear what is said to me, I cannot do *anything* but desperately focus on what is pressed into me, what I drink, what I take. I ride the feeling, am subsumed by it, am *overwhelmed* by it.

And then it clears.

I believe I have been cracked, slightly. My body unable to contain quite so much at once, a hairline fracture running down one of the faces of my form.

But I am alive. Wounded, but alive. Just like Seraha, who sits holding me. Like Jahn and Kalip, battle damaged but standing. Yuea, her hateful internal magic pressed back and her body recovering. Dipan, with more scars now than Malpa, who himself was trying to catch up during the battle. Mela and Muelly, the poor girls not having gotten away without scars of their own.

One crow is dead, the others mourn with caws and thoughts of sorrow. The children are mostly unharmed, except for some bruises and scrapes. My bees are... decimated. But within the shadow of **Bind Insect**, I can see something new. Shadows themselves, echos of what the fallen used to be. These are not the same things as souls, I *know this*. They will not hold memories, but they are... forms. A kind of remembrance. And I know, I think, that I could find a way to change a bee to take up their mantle. Or perhaps some other spell to recreate them in full.

And around us, the fort lays empty. Abandoned, but not destroyed. Not wholly. It isn't a home, but it is a place to take a stand, and make a new start.

I should say, it isn't a home *yet*. Because it is filled with the people who have become my home. Who have made the start of this new life thrilling and terrifying and worth the act of reaching out to the world and trusting that it will reach back. And together, I know, this place can be a true start of something greater.

There is one last thing, that I notice, as the darkness of sleep creeps in around me. I perform one last task, **Nudge Material** trying to write a note in the stone of the cellar that I will be resting for a time before I turn my last dregs of attention inward.

**Animosity : -
Amalgamate Human (3, Command)**

Ah.

I suppose that was what I took, then.

How strange. But how much I find it to be the problem of the me that will wake up tomorrow. The me of the moment has only one thing in mind. And that is to rest.

I close eyes I do not have, and let the world slip away. This time, truly victorious. For now.

END BOOK ONE