

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 14

Authority : 6

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Collect Plant (3, Shape)

See Commands (5, Perceive)

Bind Crop (4, Command)

Nobility : 6

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Stone Pylon (2, Shape)

Drain Health (4, War)

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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 : 5

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Sever Command (4, War)

Collect Material (1, Shape)

Tenacity : 5

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

Pressure Trigger (2, War)

Blinding Trap (5, War)

Animosity : -

Amalgamate Human (3, Command)

Trepidation : -

Follow Prey (2, Perceive)

The rear flank crosses into enemy territory. I cannot see them any longer; they are within a **Fortify Space**, and while they will follow their last instructions to the letter, they are out of my magic's reach now.

The other flank hits a second later, just as I am realizing a very serious problem.

When the bound of an apparatus occupy the space of a domain, it begins to erode that domain. Breaking it down, turning it into a wealth of new motes of power to be taken in. But this time? This time, the domain holds steady. I can't even tell what it is doing, because **Fortify Space** keeps out my attempt at **See Domain**. But regardless, there is no cracking, no splitting of small gaps that I can turn my arcane claws through.

This may be a problem.

Then one of the resin reconnoiters ahead of us *stops*. In the open ground around the enemy's domain, where its creations have already begun clearing away trees and underbrush leaving only torn dirt, my creation hits something and suddenly has a problem.

As it is not yet in the domain, I can tell what that problem is. It is *confused*. Its small mind is overwhelmed with images, colors, sounds, and smells that mean nothing and hit it all at once as a melange of useless information. Even though it doesn't feel, that doesn't mean that it can't lose the ability to process what it is doing, and whatever trap it has stepped into has certainly done its job.

A trap. **Confusion Trap**. I know that spell, because I have avoided taking it for five whole ranks of **Spirituality**. That's one more soul confirmed for this thing, if nothing else.

The confusion starts to fade, and I order it forward again. It's fallen out of the line with the others, but not by much; the trap was a weak distraction, and nothing else. But I *know* it will have alerted the apparatus ahead of us to our position.

I am in the process of relaying as much information to the others as rapidly as I can via my writings, when the next **Confusion Trap** hits. And the next, and the next. On both approaching lines that I still have contact with, over and over my little scouts are overwhelmed for brief moments by a deluge of sensations before coming back to themselves and being nudged onward.

On the hill, Yuea, with her blade sharp vision, gives a satisfied hiss through her teeth. "Got 'em." She says. "Sixteen of the big spider things, heading to the rear force, fast. Shiny, half your little boys are just stopped, but they broke one of the pylons already. Those things are *not* stable."

“Poor construction. No foundation.” Fisher sounds offended. “Throw for the base of them, if they fall over that easily, the blast will more likely topple them than up high.”

Follow the paths the scouts took, they will have tripped the traps. I add, and Mela rapidly reads off.

“Got it.” Yuea taps her hands across the chainmail on her body, shifting her shoulders. She glances back as one of the bees shoulders against her hip in a comforting gesture. “Alright. We’re up.” She taps a hand on the bee’s head, then makes a similar motion on Fisher and Mela. “See you at the witch’s palace.” The commander intones. She doesn’t make a gesture like that on me, which I find mildly offensive, but I suspect Yuea often forgets I am literally a crystal.

Yuea moves first, the others follow.

She’s just hit the base of the hill when a flood of a sensation passes over us. Over *all* of us. It is magic, rolling over the field, and bringing with it a specific and cryptic knowledge.

We are now joined in battle, the magic says. There are two sides, I am part of one of them. The opposing side contains the caster of the spell, and the abstract nature of conflict has suddenly become reified and codified; this is now a fight with stakes, whether they were offered willingly or not.

The magic feels not dissimilar to **Small Promise**, though the information that come with it isn’t *words*, exactly. There is no rallying call or oath of victory from the other side. Just that whichever of us win, under the conditions of the magic, will profit. At the expense of the other side.

We were already committed to this fight. But now, more than ever.

Another **Confusion Trap** triggers in the soft dirt ahead of us, and one of my scouts stumbles. I form the active ones up into a wedge, and send them ahead of the others, absorbing each of the traps left in wait. There are a surprising number of them, but none of them last especially long. I keep my scouts moving forward ahead of us and taking every one of them in place of a living fighter who might have more trouble with it.

“Shit.” Yuea’s voice comes in just as the wall of darkness looms ahead of us in my vision. “Fire on the left flank. High arcs. Old style bombard?” Her voice is clear, but I can hear the others breathing heavily behind her. “Distraction’s working. Straight on, with me!” She calls to Mela and Fisher and a host of bees, and plows into the dark veil.

Mela isn’t far behind, and so, too, am I. But the instant her feet take her over the line, I realize the depth of the error I made.

I cannot see.

Anything.

Fortify Space wraps around me. **See Domain** reaches only as far as my own outer edges, letting me intimately understand that there is *something* out there, bordering on me, pressing inward but unable to break the domain that is 'me'. And all other magics I have are sharply cut off.

I cannot see through my bees, or Yuea and Kalip, or the glimmer creations. I cannot feel the links to the knives and magic stones I have crafted.

In an attempt to keep myself from panicking, I try to tell myself that soon the domain will break, as *so many* of my bound, along with my own body, are cutting a straight path through it. But I cannot feel any cracks appearing, and I suspect whatever kept it so stable on the other flanks is doing the same here.

Surrounded by darkness, intrusive thoughts do not take long to creep in. I was *important* to this part of the plan. I cannot be cut off. What if the others are hurt? What if they are dying? What if they've already been spotted and **Drain Healthed** into oblivion?

I need to push back. I need to break out of this prison that we foolishly ran into.

Fortify Space blossoms out of me. I don't bother to aim it, I just let it cast with my body as the center. The magic lets my senses flow with it, and it bursts into the air like ink dropped into water, tendrils of my will matched with the atmosphere of oppression that the other apparatus is maintaining. Then it's gone, as Mela's running takes me out of the range. Though I already see it being eaten away; replaced in turn just as I replaced the other domain first.

That is fine. I can work with that. **Fortify Space** lashes out again, but this time modified. Using one of the small tricks, and my growing understanding of the arcane mechanisms of the spellwork, to make a piece of the domain stick to me, and not the world. Fortify this *relative* space, I make it listen to my command. And this time, the renewed freedom sticks around me, though it starts to dissolve right away. Ink in water.

I didn't think. I'm a doomed fool, sending us in here without the ability to truly reinforce my friends.

The domain crushing against mine shifts like a tide, small waves of magical force slowly eroding my **Fortify Space**, and I have an epiphany at the sight. Ripples, as if the spell is being recast, over and over. Or perhaps steadily, with no breaks. I can do that as well. I can play this game.

I push out with my mind and magic. More ink in the ocean, until it is no longer a twisting blot, but a growing cloud. I'm wasting the spell's reserve, I know; pushing too hard, feeding tendrils

into the enemy domain that I don't need to. But I don't know how to solidify an edge like it has done, and it doesn't matter, because in a length-long bubble around me, I can see.

Yuea is yelling about pylons. I don't have time to process her words or write back, I just shove open the link between us and command her to point in the direction I need to see. Her arm jerks, and she sweeps the pistol she's holding out in two points.

The enemy domain is still there, but I have the trick now. I force out a tendril of **Fortify Space** against it, fighting back the dissolution of my magic as I tunnel toward where Yuea directed me. The first pylon isn't far away, and when I get there, through the open air I have secured, my bond to my glimmer opens back up.

I blow the bag of them up, and then work to repeat the process with the other side while Yuea shouts at the others to scatter.

"Inbound artillery!" She yells. "Sparky, if you can hear me-!"

I can. I don't need further instructions. Inside the arc of the space I have cleared, I cast **Form Wall**, drawing from the stores of rock and wood I have sequestered away. Forcing more of the spell out faster is almost painful, but I rapidly manifest a high domed barrier that I see Mela and myself slide into, the girl grabbing one of the large bees in a double armed hug and pulling it in as well, just before a spiked ball of stone shatters into the ground where the bee had been running. On the other side of the crescent barricade, from *outside* my **Fortify Space**, another bee flickers into existence in the air inside my safe space before a similar shaped ball can crush it to death.

"What is this?!" Mela yells frantically.

"Bombardment." Yuea sounds irritatingly calm. She barely even flinches when a ring of fire starts to spread out from the landed projectiles, or when another trio of grinding crashes signal impacts on the other side of my wall. "That looks bad. Don't touch that."

Fisher's eyes track the fire spreading, unstopped by my temporary domain. The gob sights down one of their pistols with a kind of careful precision that is far faster than they should know how to do, and pulls the trigger with an accompanying pulse from one of my tethered mantra. The siege projectile doesn't exactly fall apart, but it is sent spinning away, a chunk missing, and the fire it was spreading smoulders out. Fisher reloads while Yuea just signals me for a knife and I **Make Low Blade** her a heavy throwing weapon to fling at the other one as she snatches the manifested projectile out of the air.

We wait, a cluster of ten bees that are broadcasting confused terror to me pushed up against each other under the shell of stone I've thrown up. Already the wall is starting to heat up, whatever was in the projectiles burning on the other side and ignoring my magic.

Yuea holds up a hand to them as the others look like they want to keep moving as the bombardment stops. “Wait.” She says, ticking seconds in her mind so forcefully I can hear them through our bond. One, two, three. Ten. Twenty. She makes it to fifty two before a spiked stone whistles overhead and vanishes out of my perception to crash into the ground behind us. Several more fall around the wall, flames licking out from them.

“Thirty count, then wall!” She snaps at me. “Move!” That word is aimed at the others.

Mela isn’t a soldier, but I can almost feel her gathering her courage and kicking off the ground as she spins around my wall and sprints us forward into the unknown. Fisher seems to be almost in a fugue state as they mechanically finish slotting the powder pellet into their pistol, snap it shut, and turn to join the sprint from the other side.

That’s the last thing I see through the explosive movement of my group of massive bees before I am once again in the dark. Leaving my **Fortify Space** behind and letting my magic recover as best I can.

I need it to recover faster. I stop wasting time on what-ifs and spend six small stars to bring **Authority** up to the seventh rank. Eight power left, and a flood of life coming back to **Fortify Space**, among other things.

Trapped in the dark, with only the arcane devices and sigils in my mind for company, I try to count. With no heartbeat, no breath, no *voice*, I find it surprisingly hard. How long is *one*, when I don’t have anything to compare it to? I can’t even look out at the world to follow along with swaying branches or footsteps or wingbeats.

I focus, and try. Try to count, try to not let the terror that creeps in at the edges erode my mental state, try to prepare myself. I feel like the merchant once did on her first caravan through a hostile route, given a gun and told to keep her finger on the trigger. I have no fingers, but the triggers are primed regardless.

Has it been long enough? I think so. A thirty count. Yuea left me a buffer. I appreciate it, but I also wish I had a stormeye in here with me.

Fortify Space bubbles out from me as I guess at the time. My vision from my bees starts to come back to me as the sphere pushes away the enemy **Fortify Space**, though I am starting to feel the other apparatus pushing back. I’m stronger, or at least, have more stamina to burn. But I have to keep focused to do it, and it seems like there’s something else at play here I don’t understand. A pressure from ahead that’s missing from the atmosphere behind us. I don’t have time to consider it though.

There’s a low wall ahead; like someone grabbed a rectangle of the calcified ground and yanked it upward. The white chalky terrain that looks like it has been drained of all life brought up into a tripping hazard.

I build off it as I see Yuea slide into a crouch against it and snap off a pair of shots into the air. **Form Wall** reacting to my desire smoothly, despite the foreign nature of the construction I'm building on. I remember to **Claim Construction** this one, so I can watch as it deflects an incoming artillery spike.

Fisher shoots something off to the side, and suddenly several of my bees are awash with fire. It lasts only a moment, but it *hurts them*, and me by association. I respond by trying to feed them **Bind Insect's** magic, but that spell isn't made for healing, and it will be some time before I can actually put them back together.

"Good catch sparkles." Yuea raps her knuckles on my wall. "Mela, any more tarfucker birds?"

"N-no! Wait, yes! Up high!" The girl is gasping for breath, her hands fumbling as she tries to reload her pistols. I pour **Drain Endurance** into her, offering up what I've collected. She straightens up, but the focus shifted away from **Fortify Space** lets the enemy gain ground on me, and the edges of my domain bow inward by a third before I catch it and stabilize. "The big things, though...!"

Yuea peeks over the wall, the motion absurdly fast even though I can feel her mind racing as she processes the field she's seen. "Sparkles, your critters are down. Spiders headed for us. We need to move, now, beat them to the little fort." She rises up. "It's a race now."

I recast **Form Wall** and punch firing slits in the wall, making a fortification for Fisher and Mela with a pleasant wood veneer on the inside, into which **Shift Wood** carves instructions.

Hand me to Yuea. Cover her.

To the bees, I give a similar instruction. Take to the skies, use their glimmer and mantra as needed to fly. Intercept the artillery that is raining down on us. And it is *raining* now, there is no more delay between impacts. The other apparatus has finished my other forces, unable to take the risk they weren't lethal, and now it is focused on *us*.

Yuea grabs my pack. There are no more words. We've already decided to trust each other.

She kicks off from the top of the wall like an overgun firing, two actual gunshots from the others going off on her flanks, and everything vanishes as I leave my domain behind again.

Suffused in empty dark again, though almost able to feel the momentum of every one of Yuea's footfalls, I wait.

Either we make it, or we don't. Either she clears the open field of blasted chalk, or we die. Either we win, or we lose.

I'm calm, I think. Bizarrely calm. There isn't anything to do between here and there. Just wait for Yuea to touch me and establish a connection, let my spells recover, and prepare. But there's nothing to prepare. So I'm just waiting.

And then, in the dark, something changes. Not a touch, not an interfacing with my shell-tight domain, but something else. Something that echoes, a voice from afar, calling to me with words that have a certain familiar weight.

I will not let you get close. It says. It promises. A **Small Promise** made against me, personally. Myself and Yuea, both of us tightly wrapped in the domain of this thing, it is confident enough that it is making oaths.

I am going to harvest all of you. The second promise comes on the heels of the first. It's talking to a lot of us; it must have broken down the domain I left behind, but if it didn't have the ability to kill or drain from a distance before, it won't *now*. I think... I think the words are a distraction. A bluff. I think it is afraid.

If you don't leave now I am going to kill you! It sounds furious. It sounds *afraid*. Yuea's hand touches on one of my facets as she runs for just a moment, and I feel a sensation like caged feral glee. She knows it's lying too, and she's not falling for it.

Then another touch. A raw demand for support across our link. I can almost feel my body crack as I push **Fortify Space** far beyond what it is meant to handle at a time. Shoving magic out around me, shoving back the enemy. The enemy retaliates, forcing the domain back, our spells dueling with each other, neither of us really knowing what we are doing; I can sense the same errors I am making coming from them. We are throwing frantic punches with all strength and no skill.

I gain control of half the space around Yuea just in time to watch her take a bolt the size of a tree branch into her side. The projectile tears a line in her armor, but doesn't kill her. I push everything I can to her as well, endurance, health, whatever magic our bond is. She accelerates, sword flicking out to slap another incoming bolt out of the air. Then another. I watch through her eyes, only seeing the bolts from a tiny distance ahead as they emerge from the black of the enemy domain and Yuea cuts them down.

She leaps a wall that is trying to grow ahead of her, growing over a series of siege weapons that look like they were grown from the ground. Then another wall is in front of us, and Yuea pulls up short, slamming into it with enough force to pulp her own shoulder but not to break through. "Shiny!" She screams to me.

I go to work while she wordlessly draws a gun with her free hand and fires over her head, then throws the weapon, draws her other pistol and fires that too. A thick black leg, tipped with a bladed bone that I haven't had the displeasure of seeing up close before, closes on Yuea's head as I try to focus. She grabs it with one hand, and jerks so hard I see her bones fracture as she

pulls the silkspinner off the side of the structure and slams it into the calcified ground hard enough to pulp it.

Form Wall conflicts with the domain around us. I need more. I can't punch back hard enough. The other apparatus is *desperate* now, and it's holding tight to this singular barrier. So I cheat. When Yuea ducks a stabbing black furred limb and slices into it, I direct her to tap the wall, and I pour **Claim Construction** into it. Sneaking around the domain, inserting my own.

Our **Fortify Space** continues, and I can feel it trying to rip the wall back. But my tool is more specialized, more precise, and *stronger*. Not for everything, but for this one thing, I win every time.

And now that the wall is mine I **Collect Material** a chunk of the rock ahead of us.

Yuea rolls back through it, into darkness.

Something splinters. A promise made, broken. We *got close*, and that lie lashes out at the enemy in retaliation.

The pressure of the enemy **Fortify Space** slacks, and I press my advantage. I fight with every scrap of focus I have, down to burning the drops that are regenerating in real time at this point. But it's enough, because I suspect they're doing the same. I carve out the inside of this structure, and make it mine, and through Yuea's eyes, I see a nightmare.

Controlled rings of flame hang from the stone walls of the building. It's just a box, but the only light here is flickering red, and the heat on her skin is oppressive and almost painful. Along the walls, stone troughs full of brackish water and bloodied bones sit, the material in them accounting for half the smell in the room.

The rest of the smell comes from the people.

They lay on the ground, or sit with backs to the walls. Dozens of them. Maybe a hundred of them. Some of them are slumped against those troughs. Those *stores of food*, however disgusting it may be. All of them are tangled in silkspinner web, the substance apparently not needing the silkspinners at all to have a pacifying effect. Glassy eyes stare at nothing at all, or, if they focus on anything, it is only the slowly spinning crystal lattice placed on a high platform in the middle of the room. It's not just people, either. Animals big and small are stacked like firewood on top of each other. Bound more firmly and slowly dying in silent agony.

A half complete ballista tries to shoot Yuea from the other side of the room, and she contemptuously slaps the bolt out of the air.

If you leave me alone I'll give you everything I have! The **Small Promise** is openly fearful now. And in return, Yuea and I are openly disgusted.

“No.” She grinds out the word, and steps forward.

The **Confusion Trap** catches her off guard, the strongest one yet. I can feel the riot of screaming noise and color through her, but I cut off the sensation as she struggles through it. Instead, I grab one of the troughs of liquid with **Move Water**, and fling it upward. I cannot touch the enemy with it, not if I’m controlling it. But I can let momentum do its job.

The other apparatus topples off its perch, hitting the smooth white floor a light *tink* that I barely hear over Yuea’s screaming internal voice. It’s hard to aim through her wobbling vision, but she gives me a guideline on where to focus before she stumbles sideways and trips, her vision pitching upward.

Make Low Blade is aimed into the air of what is now my domain. I form a stone butcher’s snapper, a long blade with a heavily weighted base, meant for crushing bones and not anything else. It won’t hold up, but I don’t care. I’m simply choosing the heaviest blade I can think of.

I finish my work and let it drop.

The screams start as soon as the apparatus dies, and a flurry of a hundred different magics fills my every sense with white.