

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 9

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 : 5

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Stone Pylon (2, Shape)

Drain Health (4, War)

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 : 5

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

Pressure Trigger (2, War)

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Animosity : -

Amalgamate Human (3, Command)

Trepidation : -

Follow Prey (2, Perceive)

The first thing I do after I wake again is to attend a ceremony of ending.

My body is whole once more. The crack from absorbing - stealing - a part of my enemy has healed. Mostly. I may have forced myself awake before the process was complete. But I can one again take in what I need to work my arcane machinery, and so I do not care. It will be done in time, or it will not.

My souls are likewise also whole. My spells function, my memories are personal and true, my power grows with each exertion upon the world. I am what I am meant to be; a rampant *thing* that brings change, feeds from that change, and processes it to bring more change.

What will the world look like, when there is only one apparatus left? A roiling chaotic nothing? Perhaps there will be no more world at all. There almost certainly will be no people. Or maybe it will be an ironic cold order. A stagnate, unending landscape, locked forever as that apparatus made it.

My mind is not healed. I don't think it ever will be.

All it took was one chance encounter, and everything was almost taken from me. A single enemy, and all that I was working for was nearly lost. Instead, through manufactured fortune and reckless bravery, our loss was far, far less than it could have been.

But it's still too much. And it's still my fault. My fault I didn't do more. My fault I couldn't be more.

I wake into an angry, hateful world, and I attend a ceremony of endings.

The child's body is laid out on a smooth wooden panel next to a hole in the soil near the farm plots. Eventually, maybe, those farms will grow and cover his grave, and the body he has left behind will give one last gift to living. A farmer's platitude. I recoil at the thought of it.

He was a child. Barely at the apprenticing stage of his life. The oldest of the children amongst the survivors, the youngest of the adults, caught somewhere between two worlds while the world around him fell apart. He never had a chance to come of age in a way that mattered.

The other children cry silently. They understand, through hard experience, what has happened. I wish they didn't. They hide their tears and their hurt. I wish they wouldn't. They are afraid and angry and hurt and a thousand other things, and I have nothing to offer them but the companionship of their growing honeybees.

The adults stand in a rough circle. Any other time, I would think they would be annoyed I arrived too late to help with the digging. But now, there is simply a gloom that hangs over all present.

Yuea's arm is still regrowing. She scratches at it, which I can tell is interrupting the spell's ongoing feeding of magic into her flesh. I don't tell her to stop.

Dipan digs his nails into his fists. He is thinking he could have done more. I understand. I agree. I could have as well.

Muelly looks lost. Like she doesn't know what they are here for. Malpa stands with her, his arms enfolding her in what he thinks is comfort. I don't know if either of them notice.

Jahn stares at the body, covered in a blanket, waiting for some kind of answer he won't get.

Kalip is learning why his commander was so angry when she lost her mage-touched status. He can barely stand. But he does so regardless.

Mela looks like she wants to kill something, but doesn't know where to start, or how to make it matter.

Seraha doesn't stare at the body. She watches the hole in the ground, and waits for the inevitable.

I just sit, balanced on nothing, spinning, because I can do nothing else. Watching through bees and beetles that are only just starting to understand the significance of death. The beetles are curious as to why, now of all times, no one is speaking.

A man's shaking voice breaks the silence. "He..." Dipan starts to say. But he doesn't know where to go from there.

Kalip picks up the words in a dry rasp. "He was a good kid." He says. "He wanted to learn to be a guardian."

"He was so much like my little brother." Mela has tears streaming from her eyes like she'll never stop crying.

"He was a good brother." Fisher says, the gob not quite knowing what family means, but knowing when someone was important. Like Yuea, they are clawing at where a wound used to be, unfamiliar with both injury and healing.

Malpa keeps staring at anything *but* the body. "He annoyed me." He says. And then, after Muelly slams a hoof into his foot, barks out, "What?! He did! He was an annoying kid! Always asking questions or trying to tag along or insisting on helping or... or..." he struggles for breath, his own tears no longer able to be held back.

"Why is this so hard..." Seraha's whisper carries to all of them. "It's not new. This is all we've been doing, for months. Burying children."

“Not the last month.” Yuea says. Her voice still comes out with a sort of squawking emphasis on the first syllable. “Not since... well.”

She doesn't look at me. None of them look at me. I don't blame them. I'm one of the enemy, aren't I? I have been the whole time.

“He... I don't...” Dipan tries again. He doesn't get far before he drops to his knees at the edge of the hole. A shuddering breath later, he pulls together the words he wants to say. “He kept us alive.” His eyes look up to the rest of the survivors gathered around. “He *shot* that thing. *Twice*. He turned around so we could get away. He... he...”

“He was an actual hero.” Mela's voice is reverent. No hesitation in the respect for the fallen.

“I like to think we helped.” Yuea grumbles. No one listens to her. Now isn't the time.

“He was nice to me!” Zhoy says, the young demon's voice high pitched and in contrast to the others. “Mum always says that humans are mean, but he was never mean!”

Muella kneels down to wrap the girl in a hug. “Maybe he'll meet her someday, and they can be friends.” She says softly. Zhoy nods along, only just old enough to really know what has happened. Even with everything that has torn the world asunder.

Eventually, though, there is nothing left to say. No more words to explain the feelings that were never spoken in life. No more thoughts of what could have been. Except for one last thing.

“You gonna say anything, glitterbug?” Yuea says.

Me?

“Yeah, you.” She adds. She's looking at me, now. Everyone is. And I don't understand. “Come on, you must have something to throw in.” Yuea motions with her intact arm to the hole in the ground, the gesture sharp and choppy and overextending to the point that I can see her hurt herself within the magic of our bond.

It takes me some time to catch the mental construct that is **Nudge Material**. The closest I get to my voice catching in my throat, I suppose. When I have it, it takes me multiple tries to get the scrawl in the dirt correct.

He cared about the bees. I write. I didn't realize, until he spoke up for the first time, how they had come to matter to him. To anyone. He was curious. We never talked, he was still learning how to read. I wish we could have talked. I think we could have been friends.

Seraha softly reads the words in the dry dirt as the summer sun overhead shines so brightly that I can almost feel it on my inorganic surface. And then she looks up into the sky with a deep breath, sweeping a tired hand over her horns. “These last words we share, to send you on your way.” The old woman stands, wincing as one of her legs threatens to twist from under her before Dipan catches her and holds her up.

Then those who aren’t crippled step forward to lift the wood panel, and slowly lower it into the ground.

Wait. I write, before they get it off the dirt. They oblige me.

I flex my magic. What feels like broken pieces of injury and grief cracking off of my ability as I muster my effort. **Shift Wood** is still there, halfway refilled even though the broken body I inhabit. And it answers when I ask.

One by one, I add to the burial panel the words that have been spoken. I don’t think I will ever forget them. I don’t know if anyone will. But some old memory from the cleric calls to me. To give the dead this gift, to let them go with something special to us.

And around the outer edge, ringing the child’s corpse, I write in ancient worldline script, the older version of Seraha’s small prayer. The version an older life of mine learned long ago.

These goodbyes we offer, to send you on your way; though we know all meetings and leavings are temporary; until our next hello.

I offer a steadying grip through **Nudge Material**, holding the panel from below as the others lift it up for one final time, and settle Siv’s body beneath the ground. And as I have no tears to cry or voice to scream, I lash out in the only way that makes sense. Emptying the spell in an instant to grab the dirt that has been dug up and flattening it down again, filling the grave with a swirling explosion of dust in the hot summer air.

I am so tired. I feel too young and too old, all together.

One by one, the others filter away. Seraha and Mela leading the children off to have a late lunch, Janh followed by the gobs who expect to be put to work. The others to their own tasks or interactions.

Life cannot stop, just because it has been cracked. And from this, too, these people will heal.

“Don’t get too comfortable.” Kalip says, after Yuea limps away with jerky uncontrolled motions, guided by a half dozen sentinel bees. “You need to do that to me, fast. This was bad timing, and we’ve got another army coming in.”

I know.

"I know you know." Kalip coughs. "I need you to *know*."

I know. I outline the word. *You don't need to worry.* I tell him. *This doesn't happen again. I'm going to kill them all.* I don't feel anything as I write the words slowly, with the barely refilled dregs of **Nudge Material**. Not determination, not anger, nothing. All I know is that I have something I need to do. I know this won't last; that soon I will feel overwhelmed and unstable. But right now...

I am going to get to work. I write. *I will tell you when there is more health to take.*

"...good luck." Kalip says, turning and leaning on the heavy branch he's using as a walking stick. "Don't get yourself hurt."

I may be... away. I add. *For a while. I do not want...*

"I know." Kalip's voice is heavy. "I'll be here when you get back."

I let my mind touch on one of the two new shadows around my spells. The one that isn't a mindless and modified wolv. The soft, small, painfully human shadow, not around any magic in particular, but simply drawn in as a part of my domain.

I am not fully healed. I am not feeling quite stable. I do not care.

I begin to cast.