

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 16

Authority : 4

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Collect Plant (3, Shape)

Nobility : 3

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Empathy : 3

Shift Water (1, Shape)

Imbue Mending (3, Civic)

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Spirituality : 4

Shift Wood (1, Shape)

Small Promise (2, Domain)

Make Low Blade (2, War)

Congeal Mantra (1, Command)

Ingenuity : 3

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Tenacity : 3

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

I wake up the next day sometime around midmorning, according to the cloudy sunlight that I can see through the **Distant Vision** I immediately cast outward to refresh my scouting of the terrain between here and the enemy. Well, the enemy that we know of, at least.

There is time, here, outside of the next crisis, before I call upon myself to solve the next problem my magics let me reach for, that I can simply enjoy the quiet. It has been very busy, this recent life of mine. And taking some time to look at this peculiar white moss I have found in my **Distant Vision** currently empty of monsters, or spending some time touching the minds of my bees through **Bind Insect** to experience a small bit of their lives in their hive; these are things that let me calm myself before the day begins in truth.

Last night, I think I dreamed. Nothing clear remains in my thoughts, but the taste of blood and the feeling of slicing through flesh lingers.

But just because there is no crisis does not mean there is nothing to do. At the very least, there are things that need checking up on, beyond just whether or not we are once again in mortal peril.

I make sure my bees are doing alright through our bond, and check up on the hive in general first. They are fine, even the ones that have mantra... within? Around? As part of them. They are doing well. Their hive is doing well, too; the bees that I have empowered slightly have not abandoned nor been abandoned by their smaller kin, and the walls of the hive have been expanded somewhat to account for it.

Food! I didn't think about food for my bees! The farmer's memories are full of useful information on pollination and honey production, and I spend some time figuring out if my bees will be able to feed themselves with the increase in their size. The answer is... probably. The forest around us is bountiful, and their food supply is everywhere, even with the foraging by the survivors around our immediate area. Though I wonder now if I could **Form Wall** them a better hive, to ease the amount of work they need to put in for their little colony.

My bees will be okay. And if not, I can find a way to make them okay. **Bind Crop** is still an option I have access to, especially with my rampant growth after the last day's fight, and the new applications of my familiar spells.

So I move on to what is harder to check. The camp itself.

I ask for assistance from my larger bees, and head out with their eyes to see what is to be seen.

The bodies of the monsters have been burned away, and I verify it through **Know Material** that the supply of pelt and meat has been mostly converted to ash. The bones are still around, but have been buried, the survivors not wanting to make use of the potential food supply.

I can't blame them. How could I ever blame them? These things spit flame and spin poison silk, eating them seems like a rather terrible plan. And now I realize they must have done the same with the other bodies, or else by now, surely flies and maggots would have taken root. Though I do wish they had saved the bones. Those were rather useful for putting together blades.

Of course, now I am in a position where I can actually ask for help digging up some of the rock underneath us. Or even simply collecting river stones, and bringing them somewhere I can use them without the stream stealing away whatever knife or arrowhead I make. Or, even better, I could perhaps unlock a new spell to do the work itself; that option and my curiosity over my magic remains undiminished, despite the pressing danger and the recent injuries.

It helps that they were injuries only, and not deaths. Not this time.

My bees make their way across the camp, and through their sharpening eyes, I see small smiles from some of the survivors who notice them, and waves from the small pack of children who chase after them with absolutely no idea what they'd do if they caught up. This makes me happier than anything else, magic or otherwise; here, now, for at least a tiny slice of time, these children do not need to hurt.

Then I remember that by my collective age, everyone here is a child to me. Though if anything, this only alloys my resolve to protect them.

While my bees make their way around their patrol for me, my arcanelly split attention is also watching two **Distant Visions**, using **Imbue Mending** on one of the preciously rare sets of good boots in the camp, learning that **Link Spellwork** lets me **Collect Plant** at a distance with **Distant Vision** for a stupidly high cost as I eat a tree and drain two of the three spells, and continuing to **Fortify Space** the surrounding terrain. By the time my bees arrive at the table near the campfire, I have set many of my more useful magics to use, and begun regenerating them for even more work later.

The table started as a smoothed set of bark pieces I fused together with **Shift Wood**, and marked as a map. Now, it is still a map, but someone had the rather smart idea to balance it on a trio of log chunks, with more pieces of log set near it as chairs. The seating is rough, uncomfortable, I haven't had time to balance it or smooth it down, and to half my memories it looks like the best thing ever. The singer, especially, has a half dozen small moments of the first time sitting at a *table* after weeks on the road.

Now, this table is where they eat hurried meals between a million small tasks. Eight adults and five children require a lot of work to keep alive, and yet, do not really produce enough work on their own. They do not have enough security or population to specialize, and right now, permanent building or farming is an echo dream. We still don't know if we'll even be staying in this place much longer.

Part of the table is empty, left clear for me to constantly shape and reshape with **Shift Wood** to spell messages to the people living here. My bees alight on the table, currently occupied by two of those people; Yuea, head buried in her arms like she's trying to sleep at her writing desk, and Malpa, the rough man looking quite a bit better now than when I first saw him. He greets my bees with a polite nod as he scoops porridge out of his bowl, and says something to Yuea, who snaps her head up.

The trio of bees skitter back from her, one of them taking wing slightly to put distance between themselves and the glare from the large woman. It's not me, exactly; it's a reflex from them, a sense of danger, or of unmuffled anger. But just for a moment before Yuea sighs, and says something herself.

One of the bees nudges forward, feelers bobbing in the morning air as it approaches Yuea. The bee is magically imbued with mantra, empowered by **Bind Insect**, but it is still only the size of

one of Yuea's hands. A lesson in scale in sharp relief. Yuea speaks again, before cautiously reaching out her uninjured arm to carefully run a single finger down the bee's back, my insect preening and leaning into her as her face shows surprise. Maybe she didn't think they'd be so soft.

She and Malpa start a conversation I can't follow, not with the honeybees anyway. I send out a feeler of my own through my magic, and find Oob. The beetle that either was named, or named himself, and that acts as my ears in the camp. He's on a tree nearby, doing beetle things, which I believe mostly means eating leaves. I don't know much about beetles, but that seems to be what Oob is interested in when not helping me.

He takes wing, and lands heavier than you'd expect for a beetle on the table a few short beats later, getting a refreshed glare from Yuea, who is now petting all three bees.

"I'm not doing this again." Yuea says in an irritated tone. Her dialect, I realize, is different than I'm used to. I recognize the language fine, but she is speaking with a pattern and some words I've never heard before. "I wasted half an hour on this, Malpa."

"Yes!" The other human says with a deep voice full of kind laughter. "It was very passionate! Now you have practice."

"Deep dark, I am *not* talking to another random fucking beetle..." Yuea continues with a lot of impressive profanity, as I silently express my gratitude that I do not, in this moment, need to hide my amusement. She tried talking to me through a beetle. Not Oob, not *my* beetle. Just... a beetle.

That poor beetle must be so confused right now.

I am here now, and can hear you. I write in the bark with **Shift Wood**. *Are you alright?*

Yuea seems almost shocked at the question. "Fine." She says, stiffly, like a liar. I haven't fully explained to her that I can see her through **See Domain**, and I know full well that she is injured. Not how badly, mind you, but there is something wrong with her listing that smacks of injury to me. "You can actually hear me?" She asks.

I don't waste more of **Shift Wood**'s spellform, instead asking a bee to extract itself from her gently touch and move over to my writing, to point its insect head at the phrase *can hear you* until Yuea got the idea.

I hear Malpa give a laugh from the other side of the table. "It has to repeat things too!" The man says, standing up. "You two enjoy your talk. I'll send Jahn your way when I find him. I've got kids to watch."

Yuea waves a hand at him as he left, a gesture that was clearly personal, but slightly unfamiliar to me. Then, she turns to look down at the bees. "This is weird." She sighs loudly enough that even the still-adapting senses of my beetle can hear it. "I don't even know where to start this time." The fighter says, before suddenly adopting a curious tone. "Yesterday, Kalip said two of the beasts just stopped, didn't resist at all when he killed them. That you?"

Yes. I write to her.

"I saw the bees. Didn't see that, though." She waits, like she's expecting an answer. "What did you do?" She asks directly, and now I feel more comfortable actually telling her. I want our communication to be direct, but that means nothing can be unsaid if we can help it.

Drain Endurance. I write to her. *One of my spells. I have nineteen of them now, though I may get more soon. The fight...* I almost stop writing, but no. Direct communication works both ways. *The creatures dying here helped.*

She doesn't say anything for a while. But then, leans in and quietly asks, "You can drain any of us, can't you?"

I think about it. I probably could. I don't know why I would, though. Yes. I tell her anyway, honestly.

"Thought so." Yuea mutters. "Well, thanks for the help." She says it in a rush, the words overlapping, like it's something she's said either a thousand times, or like she learned the phrase as a jumble. "Okay. Here... okay. You keep telling us that we need to kill the other *thing*." She doesn't have a word for it, she practically growls the temporary word. "Would that make you stronger? Is that why you want it?"

It probably would. I write back, keeping an eye on the spell's available stamina as I do. It's alright, though this detail work eats through it quickly. *Everything else has. Every new use for my magic brings me more power, as do deaths. But I want to stop it because it is killing people.*

"And you think you're people." Yuea accuses me.

I know I am people. I tell her, my writing style shifting to match her words, though I cannot steal her accent quite the way I want. *But also, so are you. And so are many other people. And you don't deserve to die.*

"Not so sure about that." Yuea mutters, in a voice I don't think Oob was supposed to hear for me. "Alright. Let's say I believe you. That you just want to help. What now?"

What now indeed? It was a question I didn't have a good answer for. Yuea was, far and away, the strongest person here, and she was currently moving slowly to avoid reopening wounds.

What was I supposed to do, send a pair of men who'd been cart drivers until a season ago into enemy territory to fight a swarm of monsters? Jahn, I remind myself, *was a baker.*

I don't know. I tell her.

"Can you make beasts of your own?" She asks. "Reshape the landscape? Maybe get me a new shirt?"

Ordered, I could but also cannot, no, and if I spend my power on it yes.

"Deep dark, you write like an Altiean history tutor." She rubs her eyes. "You can but cannot?"

My bees. The creatures straighten themselves up for her to inspect, the gold and black runes on their wings glowing soft non-light. *They become stronger the longer they are bound to me, and I can add things like glimmer or mantra to them. But I have sworn a promise, that I will not force them to change.*

"Of course you fucking have." She mutters. "Mantra... is... a problem for later. Okay. The shirt?"

When points of power form in me, I can see paths to open with them. Strengthening my souls, or adding spellworks to my form. I may-

"No, no, no. Stop. Fuck." Yuea taps at the bark table I am etching on, startling the growing insects on it. "If you don't want me to get Seraha over here to translate, you need to stop writing that way."

Stop writing what way? The scribe's memories are offended. This is the proper way to write, and it has been for *decades*, since the Standardization Decree made the continent's libraries into a...

Into...

What year is it? I ask Yuea, suddenly afraid.

She looks at the simple line, then back up into the sky with a deep sigh. "I'm being mocked by a rock." She grumbles.

Please. I add, and she does that thing where she looks shocked again that I might actually have feelings. Wait, no. She *is* shocked, isn't she? She still doesn't actually think that I'm a person, even if she's willing to take the risk.

"It's Clavia 108." She tells me. "Thirty six years into Empress Clavia the Third's reign. Does that... mean anything to you, even?"

It doesn't. But it also does. Because it means nothing to me. I have never heard of an Empress Clavia. Much less one that was part of a century long dynasty. There isn't even an empire within a month's travel from where any of my lives lived.

I have no idea where I am. Or when I am. How long have we been dead? How much has changed? It can't have been *too* long. But I fear I am going to miss more words in casual conversation.

And also, I fear that I am even further pushed away from connection with the people around me. I am not simply different, I am *lost*. Thrown into a world I am no longer relevant to.

Later. Later, I will fret to myself. Now, I make another attempt to answer Yuea, trying to emulate the style that Seraha writes to me with. *I gain points of power through my actions. And something takes them like currency. Expands my souls, and gives me new spells.*

"Wait, so, you know what parts of the timeless realm you can access?" Yuea seems to struggle to read what I wrote even still, but she puzzles out enough to get the gist of my words. In turn, I don't recognize what she means when she says 'timeless realm'. Maybe understanding of magic has advanced since my timely deaths. "Anything useful?"

Many things. I tell her. *That's the problem. So many choices, and I cannot take them all.*

"Well, maybe see about making some soldiers of your own, if you want to pick a fight." She tells me.

I don't want to fight at all. I say back. *I will, though. But if I understand the situation, we are pinned between two things like me, possibly more. Before I commit to any new magic, we should talk about moving on.*

The fighter groans, itching at her bloodied bandage. "This is getting beyond just me." She says. "I'm not supposed to be a leader, you know." The words are like a secret slipping between friends. "I'm just a soldier. But everyone expects I know something they don't. You... you probably get that, huh?"

I do. I write. And then, I have a thought. *Ask them.* I prompt. She makes a questioning noise, and I continue, running down the available effort for **Shift Wood**. *Ask the others. Put it to a vote. There is risk either way. Explain it, and see what we want to do.*

"You love your votes, huh?" Yuea questions me.

I took the idea from you. I snipe back. *Do that. Then we can talk about how I can grow, and help.* Then I add the mark to the table for 'my spell cannot work much longer'.

Yuea makes to stand up, but looks down at the bees and beetle staring up at her, the small representatives of my influence in this place giving her a steady look. "You know. If you actually get stronger from the killing, we should... we should see if we can lure more of the beasts in close. Trap them in the pits, kill them where you can eat them." She says it like it's a simple tactical choice. And, to her perhaps, it is. Maybe it should be to me, as well. "You aren't what I expected." Yuea says as she pushes herself up from the map table. "Maybe you should be as strong as we can make you. Maybe you're the right... person... thing... to have that power. I'll talk to the others. We'll chat later, when you can write more. You can tell us what all your magic is, and we can come up with ways you can do new things with it. Because if that's what it takes for you to get strong enough to build us walls and swords, then I'll fucking be the most creative soldier you'll find. And I'll bring you ideas and I'll bring you death and you can fucking gorge on it."

She turns and stalks away. Somehow managing to look like a deadly predator, even when I know she's missing a good portion of her blood.

What a terrifying woman.

But she's trying to trust me. And the sensation of a wry grin goes through me when later, I send a bee to check on the glimmer vote, and find that she's moved her token to the option to let me experiment on my own.

In a few candles, when the day grows long and the people need a rest from their work, we will talk more. But for now, I have bees that wish to grow, and a new experience to live.