

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 16

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)

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Animosity : -

Amalgamate Human (3, Command)

Trepidation : -

Follow Prey (2, Perceive)

Promises made and fulfilled bring in more power. Magic exercised on the world brings smaller, but still very real portions as well. Point by point, a constellation builds itself inside my souls. A realized construct of the change my actions have brought; to the world, the landscape, the lives, and the hearts of everything around me.

I should really figure out what to do with that.

When I was young - if I ever was young in this life - every point of power was earned through exhausting action and daring choices. And so, too, did every point I coalesced find a home rapidly as I rose to new challenges.

Now, though? Between five and twelve points for a new spell, depending on which soul I choose to reinforce. Which means the combined power that I have accrued is worth... one and a half spells, on average. A far sight from the five, six, maybe nine that it could have bought me when I was born.

Worst of all, I don't need anything new. Oh, I could *use* something new, certainly. But none of the magic that is offered to me for the open spaces for my spells is *needed* to survive, or to save a life. Assuredly, it would bring me yet more power, and more flexibility, and more choices. But nothing can fix the largest problem, and all smaller problems I can address with creativity.

I will bring it up to the others later tonight. I'm sure Yuea will have words, but perhaps someone else will have real insight. Last time, a handful of days that feels like a season ago, Fisher's new perspective was rather helpful, and I'm sure more wisdom can be shared again.

After all, power - real power, not the reified abstraction of small shards of living light in my mind - power left unused is lives left unchanged. And while I must *always* face the truth of the damage I could do, that is no reason to shy away from the good I can do.

Today, some of that power is being spent on my bees.

On this fine summer evening, I perform a quick count, and wish that my magic did this for me. Perhaps some form of **Know Roster** spell would...

It's *real?! Why*. More importantly, how can I...

I am losing focus. I am counting my bees and need to start over.

Fifty three total tethered to me with **Bind Insect**, which stops up perhaps half of my total reserve with how much each of them has grown. One of them is the queen of their hive, enhanced with glimmer and now mantra as well. I've used **Form Wall** with the supply of wax they have provided me to shape them a new hive. Not in the fort itself, but nearby, and certainly

something that would stand out if anyone decided to take a stroll through the Green with an eye toward the insects of the forest. Another fifteen are bees that reside in the hive itself, growing steadily off my power but as yet unchanged by either of the Congeal spells.

Twenty one are bees with a single glimmer. Stronger, larger, smarter, and fuzzier than their siblings. Eight have a single mantra. More clever, sharper, and faster. Seven more have one of each, and they are the oldest. The lancers. Half of them have learned to use their glimmer to move themselves in small dashes without ever beating their wings, and all of them have mantra that add arcane edges to their wings or stingers.

And *one* bee who has surpassed the others.

Two glimmer and a mantra. If they weren't already one of my oldest bees, I think the process would have broken them. Or, rather, *warped* them. Taken away the small mind they were developing, shattered their newfound personhood, and left their body a twisted weapon suitable only for my own use.

But they were the oldest, and they did survive. And now they are the size of a farm dog, heavy enough to tackle some of the children if they put their whole frame into it, and they are *thinking*.

And I find an old promise given a new context. Because a very long time ago, from my short perspective, I swore to use one of my spells as was decided by a fair vote of everyone present. And while this particular bee had not even hatched when I spoke the words, the spirit of my **Small Promise** knows the truth. That they *have a voice*, and that I should listen. And when I shared their desire with the others on their request, it didn't take long for the vote to swing in their favor.

So, despite my worries, I am adding glimmer to the bees who have decided they are ready for it. *If* I think they can handle it. I have turned one down already, and told them to come back in a few days.

One by one, the bees who have chosen and been chosen are changed. In the fort's courtyard, a group of survivors watch them and the children greet my newly grown bound with flower crowns, hugs, and pets as the process finishes. Seraha watches from under an awning like she's waiting for something to go wrong. But as the youngest demon in the group, a boy named Marrko who runs with a heavy limp, swings himself up onto one of the bees with the insect's prompting and the two of them take off toward the other side of the courtyard with the kid whooping a laugh, not even she can keep the smile from her face.

The other children want rides, too. And it is with great disappointment that many of them learn they are far too heavy, even for the oversized honeybees. But that doesn't stop a whole pack of them from heading out to the nearby forest to play.

I send the other lancers with them. And every other bee that isn't busy. And a perimeter of my new glimmer-creations.

The children *cannot* be kept trapped within the limited walls of the fort for their whole lives. But I am entirely unwilling to let anything threaten them again. So whether they know it or not, a small army keeps watch over them while they try to figure out how to build their own 'fort' out of sticks and a fallen log.

After the improvised glimmer ceremony, the older survivors and the one gob that didn't race off into the green with the other children join me for a conversation.

"How, though?" Jahn is asking as my beetles arrive to let me listen in more closely. "You speak the words but they don't *explain*."

Muelly shrugs. "I don't *know*!" She protests. "It was just right there, so I grabbed for it, and it worked. That's all!"

It was very well done. I add in the courtyard dirt between them.

Dipan has to lean forward to read from where he's found a seat in the dust against the stone wall of the fort's inner building. "Wish I hadn't missed it." He grouses. "Muelly doing magic is nice, but Malpa getting hit in the head sounds like high class comedy."

Ignoring him, Seraha inclines her head toward one of the beetles. "Perhaps *you* could help us replicate this?" She asks. "Jahn has been kind enough to inform us that this is something you are aware of, and welcome, but we do not know the how of it yet."

All I know is that it can be done. I say to them. *The promises have all been given in times of... perhaps emotional turmoil is a good phrase. This, though, was simply Muelly acting, and the magic listening. She did nothing special.*

"Which I've been telling them." Muelly drags her fingers down the side of her neck in a forceful tug. "I can't even do it again." She kicks one of the buckets of water, half empty from the day's heat, her hoof making a sharp sound against the folded metal.

Jahn hums. "Where is Malpa? He was supposed to be here."

"He's with Yuea and Mela dumping giant eels in the lake." Kalip says as he slowly approaches the group. I've been watching him make his way down from the wall, and I can say with absolute certainty that he *wanted* to just jump down. "Along with your new addition." He nodded at me through Oob. "How's that going, by the way?"

Not well. The other apparatus is... quiet. Afraid, really. I don't think they believe we aren't going to kill them, and they might in fact be trying to commit slow suicide.

“Why do people keep trying to kill themselves on you?” Muelly asked. She got halfway into a grin that would make a wolf jealous before Seraha grabbed one of her horns and yanked her head back with a savage twist. “Ow, *ow!* You- alright, alright, I’m sorry!” She flailed briefly in the older woman’s grasp before the pink furred demoness dropped her and she stumbled back. “Fine! No joking about that, I guess!”

Yes, *thank you*. I write at the same time Seraha speaks the same words.

Kalip raises his eyebrows at the whole affair before continuing like nothing happened. “Well, make sure they’re not going to kill all of us, at least.” His voice is strained.

“You doing alright?” Dipan asks, flipping a smooth stone over in his hands as he lounges against the wall. “You seem tense.”

“He’s starving himself.” Muelly cuts Kalip’s own reply off. “Before he gets dunked headfirst into the timeless realm.”

“I’m fasting for personal reasons.” Kalip says, pretending Muelly didn’t speak. “Has anyone had any luck with the water?”

“You do know you’re allowed to join us and leave the wall from time to time, yes?” Jahn asks. Then sighs deeply, and answers anyway. “No, we have not. No one can feel the magic, no matter how much we focus. Though, I should say, I could still feel bits of the farming spell in the field yesterday.”

“Same.” Dipan adds. “Just not the water thing.”

“I *had it*.” Muelly pouts. “It was right there! Why can’t I do it again?”

A thought suddenly strikes me. *You have been trying for the last day, yes?*

“Yeah, most of us tried for at least a bit.” Dipan says. His own foot taps Muelly’s bucket of water. “It’s just water, though.”

We had talked about this briefly, before I had been taken away by the task of making more **Stone Pylons** and adding my small magics across the fort where needed. Perhaps I should have focused more on it; but while I can work without losing focus, I cannot do it without spending *time*. Not yet at least. If I could, perhaps I could have saved a day’s worth of attempts.

I have a thought. I tell them. And then I reach out, using Oob and Oop’s eyes to help me target, and grab the contents of the bucket with **Move Water**. Unlike **Shift Water**, which wants me to push against air and the pull of the world, and direct currents and droplets, this spell is more

ambitious in its application. I use it to lift half the water as if I am cupping it in invisible claws, and hold it in the middle of their loose circle. *Try it now.* I offer.

Slowly, I move the water around in front of them. Each of them focuses in their own way, screwing up their noses or glaring at the mobile liquid, or, in Dipan's case, trying to swat it away as I get too close to his head. I do a loop, then another. **Move Water** might be a fourth tier spell, and my **Empathy** soul is not so strengthened that I can keep this up forever, but it is meant to command rivers to stop and wells to overflow. A bucket isn't going to overtax me.

"I still do not know what I am feeling *for*." Jahn sighs, one of his rough hands running a finger through the water as it passes. "Muelly, what is the taste of it?"

"Like..." Muelly stops, and then tries to grab the ball as it goes past, though it just passes over her hand. "Like being part of the game." She says. "Sort of happy, sort of kind, sort of wet? Is that a feeling?"

Dipan groans, and starts to say something about how that doesn't make any sense, but then abruptly, Kalip snaps to attention. "Oh." He says simply. And then, reaches out and snags the magic from me. Well, not *from* me. He asks, in a way that isn't really a question, and I answer in a way that isn't really an answer, but fundamentally I have given him permission and he has taken responsibility for it. "That's it?" He asked, staring as he made the water form a torus around his flat hand.

"What did you do?" Dipan asked, curious despite himself.

"This." Kalip didn't flick his hand like Muelly did. He just tells the magic what to do, and sends the water in an uneven glob at Dipan's head.

The other man yelps, and tries to stop it, and that's all it takes. Just move along with the spell, get my ethereal permission, and lean into it. So simple, that you can do it without knowing. And yet they *can do it*.

Something calls my attention. *I'll leave you all to practice.* I write in the dust that is getting small drops on it as imperfect minds start to work my magic. *I have enough of this spell to last a half a candle. Call if you need my help with anything.* I pull myself away, leaving Oob and Oop to watch the group of survivors trying not to laugh as they learn to move water with only their hearts.

I wish I could spend more time with them. But something is calling me away.

Literally.

A voice, coming through the one **Form Party** bond that I can sustain with myself without killing the other party. A silent and tentative "Hello?" Repeated and whispered in the darkness.

“Hello there.” I say back. “I am here. Would you like to talk?” I have given them space while they made the journey back, and the nervous silence I will admit was getting to me. Perhaps that is why it was so easy to throw myself into time sinks instead of talking to people.

“It’s so quiet.” The other apparatus says. I don’t think they’re talking about my voice, though. “Did you... Where am I?”

“We set you in the lake. I believe Mela is playing with your eels near you, you could look through them if you would like.”

“No.” The word comes back in a sharp panic. “Too much. Too bright. Too much.”

“It’s alright, you don’t need to.” I say back as calming as I can be. It has not escaped my notice that this apparatus is traumatized in some way that I cannot fully understand. But I do not wish to be the prompt for a breakdown while any of my people are trying to pet the creatures they have modified. “Do you have a name?” I ask, trying to distract them.

“I’m sorry.” They say back instantly, their voice through **Form Party’s** looping connection sounding pained and panicked. “I’m sorry. We can’t remember. Please help. I’m confused. What’s happening to me?”

“You’ve had a hard time, haven’t you?” I ask sadly, without thinking. “Do you... know what you are?”

“I’m a... a... an... I was... I am...” Their voice resounds a sob. “What am I?”

“I can tell you what I think we are, but it might be scary. I might not be right, either. But I want you to know, that I am here to help you. I promise...” I let the magic spool out of me. “*I promise I do not want to hurt you.*” I make a **Small Promise** to the other apparatus.

“Tell me. Please. Please.”

“We are several people who died long ago.” I say. “I believe you are five souls, from your shape, but I may be wrong about that. It is very possible that none of this makes sense. I have all the memories of six lives, but I do not know their names or how they died.”

“You died. You died. Six times, you died.” The other apparatus says. “I died too. We died, over and over. And now we’re trapped. Why aren’t you trapped like us?”

“I’m not trapped.” I agree. “Because I am not the people I once was.”

“Who *are* you? Who am I?” Their voice is curious. Calmer. Talking is helping, if only a little bit.

"I don't have a name yet." I tell them again. "Though 'Shiny' has been growing on my, like some kind of aggressive fungus. Mela has been calling you Lutra, but I know that's just an old word for 'river'."

"Lutra." The other apparatus' voice stabilizes. "Lutra. I could be... a Lutra."

"I don't think I could be a Shiny." I admit. "You've been alone for a long time, haven't you?" I ask slowly. Cautiously. "Did you wake up in the river?"

There is a long stretch of quiet, but eventually, Lutra answers me. "Water. Fish. All I can feel. The water. The fish. *You*. Nothing else. Too much. I can't think. I can't... I am scared. I want to do things. The power wants to be used. How do you resist?"

The question catches me off guard. "I don't." I tell them quietly. "Resist, that is. I don't resist at all." I think back to what I told Muelly, on a hot summer night a tenday or two ago. "Maybe all I'm here for is to change things. But that doesn't have to be bad, does it? Things change. That doesn't mean we have to hurt people. You changed your eels. Do they hurt?"

"They hurt anyone who gets too close. Things hurt them. Things kill them. Sharp sticks and strange fangs and twisting air. I don't want them to die. I die with them. I hurt them. I killed them. Made them scared."

"I understand." I reply sadly. And I do, too. I often wonder if my bees might not be better off if they'd never had the misfortune of my appearance under their small hive. "But what has happened has happened. And now, they are..." I check through a watcher bee, just to make sure, "...absolutely ruining one of my friends in a game of water tag. I think." I sigh across the link, savoring the affectation. "They've changed, just like we have. It doesn't have to be good or bad, it just is."

"I'm sorry." Lutra repeats again. "I am. Sorry. I'm scared. I'm sorry, please don't kill me. I don't want to die."

I've already promised that I won't hurt them. They know. Their fear is too overwhelming though, I can sense it through the link even. A palpable thing, like feeling a fever when I was something of a medico in an old life. I can tell that some of what I'm saying is getting through to them, I can hear it in their responses. But I know that pushing now would crack them rather than help.

"You're as safe here as we can make you." I say softly. "Rest, now. Explore the lake. Take it in at your own speed. Your fish are here with you, all of us are friends. Even Yuea." I refrain from making a sarcastic comment that might be taken the wrong way. "Take your time. We will be waiting for you when you're ready."

"I'm... okay." They sound like a *child*, I suddenly realize. I had made the connection that their voice sounded much like an elf, but it didn't occur to me until just now how much it resembled the way a very young child would speak. Like they're grasping for words, not sure quite how to express themself.

It is no wonder they're afraid.

And I fear that I don't know what I can do for them. Aside from give them time and space, and a place to grow.

I *will*, too. Lutra - a name they seemed happy with, thank you Mela - is a person, and therefore worthy of all the help I can offer. But, the calculating part of me worries, they are not an ally. Not a weapon in the fight that still hovers around us like a deadly fog across the land.

I want to sigh again, but I am no longer speaking across **Form Party**. As the summer day stretches to an earlier evening, and I start to wonder how far from the storm season we really are, everyone begins to make their way back to the fort.

Tonight, I have one last magic to perform, and tomorrow, we have a war to plan.

I am done being the defender in every fight, and I am done not asking for help.