

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 19

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)

*Now, the **Move Water** should keep itself repaired for almost a tenday, so don't worry about that too much, but also please don't try to tap into my magic.*

"Yes, little dream, we know. You have told us already." Jahn's smile is patient as he reads the words I scratch out on one of the smooth bark tablets the people of the fort carry now. "As well as..."

*The crops! Yes, of course! **Bind Crop** is open to you, should it be possible from so far. But if it does not work, please pay special care to the wild rhubarb that Dipan brought back. It needs more water than expected.*

Dipan coughs once into his hand and looks off to the side at nothing in particular. "Ya can also just let it die, since it tastes like spite." He offers questioningly, like he regrets bringing it back.

A thin hand pats him on the back as Seraha shakes her head. "Ah, do not worry, child. We'll have you loving it soon enough."

"I don't believe you." Dipan grumbles.

*And make sure to not let the glimmer from the **Stone Pylons** pile up, and of course I will try to keep watch in case of a crisis. Oh, and tell the children I will be back, and...*

"Tell them yourself, you coward." Muelly snorts a huff of a laugh at me. "Or do you think that Seraha hasn't noticed that you pass them notes in class?"

I will deny everything. And also, saying goodbye is not the same as being reassured from an adult that everything will be okay.

"No adult ever told me that." Yuea says with a faraway grim look in her eye.

Kalip pats her shoulder, trying for gentle and still hitting her so hard it cracks the subdermal bark of her body. He knows instantly that he's made a mistake, but I let the reserve of **Amalgamate Human** work its magic to put her back together while he speaks. "You had a bad childhood." He tells Yuea simply. "And you know it."

"Yeah, but you don't have to just say it, you tarfu... you... bad person." Yuea withers under Seraha's glare as the older woman gestures subtly to the flock of children watching in what they probably think is an inconspicuous way from one of the fort's upper windows. They would be stealthier if they didn't have bees with them, and one beetle listening in on their conversations in search of the new insect currency of gossip. "Look no one cares. The point is, we've been lying when we say it's gonna be okay."

“And now we’re not lying anymore.” Mela adds. The girl is shifting her weight from foot to foot, bouncing the sling pack that Muelly wove for her on her side. She has another backpack with camping supplies and a set of chainmail in it, and the part of me that used to be a soldier wonders if the girl knows how much she’s going to hate that chainmail over the next few days of walking.

Yes, because we will be back. I write to them all. Ah, last minute thoughts. I have so many things I should be doing. Vestment, Sharpen, keep to your studies, and know that I will watch over your sibling. The other kids want to be friends with you, and it is okay to let them. Make sure that you check on Lutra; they say that they are doing alright, but I do not trust them, and their eels might get lonely. Oh, Yuea has rigged a tripwire in her bedroom, so no one go in through the door...

“Hey!”

If there is anything that anyone needs...

It takes me a short moment, through the ears of my bees, to place the sound that I hear. Because it is something that has been in short supply for some time. Laughter. Something bright, and wholehearted. Jahn stands among those staying at the fort, and throws his head back, a braying laugh echoing off the inner walls. The others bite back on smiles or chuckles of their own, while Jahn calms himself, wipes a tear from the corner of his smiling eye, and faces the people standing by the gate with a wide grin.

“You have taken care of us through the worst our lives have offered.” He says with a contrasting solemnity. “And now fret that you have not done enough. We will *survive* without you for a short span. See to your war, and we will have a home for you when you return.”

Malpa gives a short nod of agreement. “What he said. We’ll be here when you’re back. Just don’t die.”

“Please don’t die.” Muelly whispers softly, standing between the two of them and leaning on Malpa’s side.

There’s more to say. There always is. But I stop making the goodbye harder, and move back to wait for the others as well.

And then we leave. Out the fort’s gates, which tend to sit cracked open during the day. Past the acres of farms and their growing crops, the yams that are being collected daily and stored in a cellar for the upcoming stormtime, the other food we’re still experimenting with. Out past the line where the open field of grass ends, the bones of the amalgams killed out here long since reclaimed by the Green. Out of the valley, and up into the treeline.

And from here, outward, to face an enemy again.

Yuea and Kalip. Mela and Fisher. And myself, carried in a sling at Mela's side. The unspoken hero girl's excitable gait causing that distortion in many of my perception magics that brings me something close to nausea. I know she will level out over time to something like a march, especially as Kalip knocks instruction into her. But for now, I turn down many of my arcane eyes.

Around us, eight of the largest bees move in strange bounds. They *can* fly, but only in bursts now, and only by using one of their glimmer. The sky is closed to them, and I worry that I have ruined their futures. But they don't care in the slightest, and instead move like they are living arcs of sunlight, hopping from plant to plant, testing their long antenna on every passing tree. Endless fonts of excitable energy, they bring a levity to our march.

Another twenty bees with a single glimmer ride along, on various shoulders or bags. They are growing smarter still, and know that they are coming to protect their hive, but have not yet started to ask questions like the others. Still, we have a bag of water-filled arrowheads with us, so that I can share my magic with them and give them a swarm of additional stingers that they have practiced with.

And then, devoid of any emotion at all, my glimmer constructs march in an even arc around our party. Five lengths out, I have forty of the small resin-skinned scouts. They move with purposeful intelligence even without my direction, and with them watching, nothing gets within eyeshot of our party without us knowing.

I do dearly wish that I could be included in the **Form Party** that connects the four people, or the cast of it that spins a web between the bees. But I know that to do either would kill them, and so I must be content with the limited form of communication that comes from **Bind Insect** and **Amalgamate Human**.

Nothing stops me from listening in on Mela and Fisher as they talk to each other, though. The gob has a million questions still about the world, and Mela, for all that she grew up in a fishing village, has seen more of this realm than even I have. My life experience is, let us say, somewhat outdated. She's explaining to Fisher that she used to have a dream of leaving her village to explore the world, and how this wasn't really what she meant, while the gob tries to politely ask probing questions about why you'd want to leave somewhere that you had a job to do and Mela tries to grapple with actually wanting to fish.

It's relaxing, in a way. The old lives of the farmer and cleric both have fond memories of hikes that looked quite a bit like this. Although the cleric's were more often alone, and in places with a fair fewer trees. More mountains, more rocks, harsher winds, not that I can truly compare how the wind feels as I am now. Even borrowing my bee's senses doesn't give the same impression to compare. Still, the steady forward motion is pleasant. The company is good. And once Mela realizes she's going to have to walk a *long way*, her gait evens out as she starts to find a comfortable pace.

There is no trail here to follow anymore. There was barely one when we first came to the fort, and more recently there was something *like* a clear line that some of the survivors followed to retrieve Lutra, but now, nothing.

The Green has a habit of eating roads. It is difficult to get answers as to why from my companions; it is simply seen as something that *is*. All attempts to cut back the Green fail disastrously. All attempts to build in it crumble. I'm still not sure how the fort itself is still standing; perhaps the Green simply hasn't gotten around to it yet. Or maybe it likes us. The thought is sarcasm at first, but there is no good reason why the whole forest *couldn't* have a personal opinion on our group, so perhaps that is exactly it. Maybe it just *likes us*, and that is why our home is allowed to stand.

The trail is gone though. And so the glimmer scouts guide the others through the easiest patches of underbrush, across stones and fallen trees that bridge gullies and streams, away from the dens of large animals that do still lurk here even as the other apparatuses disrupt the ecosystem.

Progress is slow. But we are in no hurry. Strategically, we know the general location of a dozen silkspinnners somewhere along the calcified stretch of destruction the enemy apparatus made - a road the Green has failed to reclaim as yet - but until they make it past the end of where the enemy **Fortify Space** ends, they are de facto too far away to matter.

Once we can see them, we can adjust how fast we travel. If we don't see them before we arrive at the line, then we've beaten them there and will kill them anyway. Perhaps. The plan depends on where they actually are. If they are still several days worth of travel from the fort, we may simply sneak past, ignore them, and aim for the apparatus itself.

This is what I was missing, in my own assault. Flexibility, a proper plan, and trust. Actually being here gives me a hundred more options, and having the others with me multiplies them a hundred times again. It may be possible for an apparatus to make creations that can do everything a person can do for it, but I think I value more Kalip's eye for archer perches, or Yuea's mind for when to press an advantage in a fight.

I talk a little too, though it is hard with everyone walking. Mostly I leave small messages for them when they pause for breaks, or when we camp for the first night. Comments on what has been said, or my feelings on certain things. Sometimes I talk about the plants we are passing, especially the ones I **Collect Plant**. I have a good number of memories of cooking and brewing from my lives, and the merchant especially knows what had value even if she didn't know how to turn it into the final product. Fisher takes to those comments especially well.

It is when we do stop for the night that I make a choice, too. We have guards we can post, my glimmerlings do not get tired, and Yuea pretends she has the same power. But in preparation

for the coming fight, and also to add another layer of security to our makeshift campsite against the trunk of a massive mora tree, I paint a spell onto one of the empty spaces of a soul.

Tenacity : 5
Nudge Material (1, Shape)
Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)
Drain Endurance (2, War)
Pressure Trigger (2, War)
Blinding Trap (5, War)

It leaves me with a still-staggering fourteen points of power in a constellation inside my mind, and a growing roar of an old life. But I set that aside for what I need to quickly do first.

Secure our resting spot.

After a quick test, where we determine that the trap can cause blindness in a surprising range of ways, I settle on a form of defense that is useful for our party with one master archer and two of his students in it.

I create a single large instances of the trap, set to blind through a flare of light, in the branches of the tree overhead. Tethered to a handful of thin lines of **Pressure Triggers** on the ground around us, so that anything approaching will cause it to activate. The light is strong enough to blind whatever tries to look toward us, and also to highlight whatever Kalip will need to shoot.

It's one extra layer of protection, but as everyone settles in for the night to watch the stars rise in the warm sky, I remember that every bit can be the difference between life and death out here. And has been before.

While they sleep, I consider what else to do with my power. And I watch the distant places. And I try to remember how anyone I used to be handled moments like this. The quiet nothing before a crisis, knowing that soon everything is going to be a riot of action and deadly choices.

None of my memories have a good answer. And I can't even sleep through it like everyone else.

So I keep watch, instead. But first, I give a little time to let part of an old life become part of my new soul.

She finds me covered in gore. One of my father's men found me. I don't know how, but it doesn't matter; a childhood of abuse disguised as training made it all too easy to turn dining prongs into weapons, and I've carved his eyes out before she opens the door. Which is how she sees me. Panting, gripping a fork with half an eyeball stuck to it, a corpse at my hooves. But she doesn't look at me like I'm a monster, or a killer. Instead she rushes forward, embraces

me, uncaring of the blood staining her skin. She whispers my name, and the rush of the kill fades away. Everything fades away. And all I can see is her.