

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 4

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)

Bind Willing Avian (1, Command)

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)

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Tenacity : 3

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

It was only three points to learn **Bind Willing Avian**, which is regrettably something that is required in order to begin experimenting with **Bind Willing Avian**. But I won't miss the points. Nothing else stood out to me as something I could make heavy use of, even if I probably only think that because I'm not being clever enough yet. And the constant daily input from **Small Promise** is adding up. Unlike almost everything else, it doesn't seem to mind that I'm not doing anything new with it. **Know Material** has long since stopped drawing in those soft flecks of power from the things that surround me, and even things like **Congeal Glimmer** have slowed down somewhat, even if their production is still consistent. But **Small Promise** continues apace with my growth.

Bind Willing Avian slips into my mind from wherever my magic comes from, leaving no trace I can see of its manifestation ever having happened. Like all my other magics, it is as if it has

always been a piece of me, though this one comes with no tug of memory. And while the adults of the camp set to their roles of having tense arguments, I scoot the cage the crow is under, bit by bit with **Nudge Material**, letting the bird get some awkward hops in as I move it away from the middle of the walking path and off into a patch of grass and a few of those tall purple flowers.

The children follow, and I demarcate a line in the dirt with **Nudge Material** for them to stay behind. One of the younger boys looks like he's planning to start flicking pebbles at the poor caged bird, and I try to put a stop to that with a strategic **Nudge Material**, but that accursed barrier that keeps most of my magic from touching people stops me. So instead, I call on a few nearby bees, having them alight protectively on the cage, to warn the kids off. Though *they* aren't hugely appreciative of how the crow inside tries to peck at them, even if the jabs are futile through the wooden weave.

The crow, reasonably, is already trying to tip the cage over. It's not succeeding *yet*, but it will eventually. The farmer's old life has so many small moments of the feeling of a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth while a crow did something most people wouldn't think the animals were clever enough for. I try again with **Nudge Material**, beginning to truly put to use the expanded reservoir for the magic.

Typically, when I use this, I'm trying to apply a thin needle of pressure to material to move it. The spell seems to just be a push, too; unlike **Shift Wood**, there's nothing there about blending or separating what I'm working with. But what I've never tried before is splitting the spell into multiples, the way I now have with **Distant Vision** and **Drain Endurance**.

I still have too much endurance stored in me. I need to find a way to use that.

For now, though, I cast **Nudge Material** in a slightly new way, and I push down on the edges of the cage, in unison. And I hold it. Steady pressure, not meant to move or break, just to hold.

The spell latches on to what I want it to do. The cost is noticeable, but I'm not trying to write legible words in the dirt or topple an entire tree again, so it's nothing I can't handle for a while.

I pause, as something other than the black feathered terror in my bee's watchful eyes catches my attention.

Distant Vision. I have two of them active, one ahead, facing the territory of the known enemy, and one behind, for early warning against further attacks from those firebug things. I can maintain this for half the day, and while it is unfortunate that I need to sleep sometimes, it cannot truly be helped if I am to stay sane and healthy. And if I do need to be up longer, I can drop one of the portals of sight, and let my spell recharge.

And right now, one of them shows me movement.

I don't miss it, exactly. I can't really miss things. All the senses that I draw on, my soul can process side by side. But that doesn't mean that my own thoughts can always keep up. And so by the time I remember to actually *think* about what I am seeing, the movement is past the sphere of sight. A small flash of brown and red ducking through a trail between some ferns. And I don't know exactly what it is, but I *know* I saw something shaped like a person and not a monster.

I cast **Distant Vision** again, aiming through my own sight in the direction the movement, and follow. Giving chase unseen, my eyes wrapped around and through the whole circle of space I scout.

They've already moved on, but I can see signs of passing. Waving branches and a few broken fronds. They're not heading straight for the camp, but they'll pass into the blank range of my spell soon enough. I decide to try to cut them off, and cast again, urging the spell to land farther away this time, watching with a little anxiety as a sip of the vial that feeds it vanishes.

I catch up to who I'm following in a gully. A small brook flows at the bottom, just barely within my sight, with several fallen trees, blanketed in white and cyan moss, laying over it. The trees don't deign grow on the earthy slope down to the water, but form a barrier like standing ranks on either side. A whole legion of songbirds nests in the branches of the trees, actually showing themselves *now*.

The colors and vivid motion of the peaceful scene puts me at ease. And then, there, crawling carefully along one of the slopes, I see who I've been chasing after.

Three of them. I think they're children at first, stragglers who somehow miraculously survived. They're short, and move awkwardly. But it doesn't take long for me to process what I'm looking at.

They aren't wearing clothing, except for one that has a tattered red scarf tied around an arm, trailing behind them, and another with a head wrap. Long curved ears that grow off the sides of their heads and sweep backward, hair like tangled briars, and fingers curved and pointed like claws. Their skin is dark brown and dull red, patchy like they were put together from different tones of clay. And in a way, they were.

I watch the three gobs claw their way onto a log so they can cross the gully, the larger one helping with pulling one of their friends up.

They've come from the direction of the villages. Which partially makes sense, and partially does not. It does, because those places would have been absolutely littered with abandoned tools for gobs to grow from. And if they're here, that means that magical phenomena wasn't quite as temporary as the scholar's peers had assumed at the time.

But those villages should have been equally swarming with monsters. Overtaken by the other things like me. For these three to escape that, would take either a heavy boon from fate, or...

Or at least one of the villages stand empty. Full of what we need, to keep everyone alive as the seasons change. Hopefully.

I shake away the thought. No, I cannot lunge for foolish conclusions. There is a more likely and far worse scenario as well. That another group of refugees died somewhere in the woods, and their tools were left forgotten and outside the easy reach of any monster. Even as I think it, that seems all too realistic.

At the camp, the children are still watching my... *the* crow. Not mine yet, I remind myself. Maybe not mine ever. The adults... well, Seraha and Dipan mostly... are still arguing. Others have move on. Yuea, especially. She is lost to my sight for a while, until a fight of bees heading out to a blossoming tree inform me that she is lain atop the wall taking a nap. She has earned it, I do not wake her.

Oob wants me to listen to the argument. They are going back and forth. Dipan sees it as a mechanical issue to be solved; a bird was needed, now there is a bird, *there*. Problem solved. Seraha, for her part, reveals a deeper pain and suspicion that in truth I know is there in many of them, but that the adults try their best not to show in front of the kids. She says, yells really, they cannot truly believe that the bird will stay a bird, that he may have doomed them, that I could kill them all and they'd never know why...

She stops herself. But the damage is done; you cannot really put words back once they are said.

And yet, I am not angry. How *could* I be? Maybe if I were younger, or pettier, or angrier. And I am angry, but not at her. And I am hurt, but that isn't the demoness's responsibility to fix. Everyone I have ever been has not only seen pain like this, we've *lived* it. Not me, now, the new me. But everyone I was has pain enough to share with me.

I get the impression the Seraha views me as a needed evil, in some ways. A tool that they cannot risk not using, but a dangerous one all the same. I understand. She is wrong, but I understand. The farmer's old memories of fatherhood nudge me to go to her, to give her a hug. But I cannot, and I will not scare her with a swarm of bees, no matter how large and adorable they are.

Instead, I address two things at once. On one hand, I catch Kalip's attention with a bee, guide him to the map, and mark out where I think the gobs will be passing. *Potential allies*. I write with **Shift Wood**. I am running out of clear space to write; I need to ask the children to bring me more flat bark. Or practice smoothing out my own etchings. *Gobs, three, new. They don't seem to be being cha-*

I stop as an orange and red plated form slams through the edge of my **Distant Vision**. The gobs have moved on, but the bug thing that follows is a horrifying variant of what we've been killing here. Six legs that seem to stick to trees and rocks as it scuttles forward in bursts of motion. It is low to the ground, but looks to have rows of mandibles and grinding teeth placed across its body segments in multiple different maws.

It moves like it's sniffing the air. Then closes a two length gap to the edge of the gulley and the fallen log the gobs crossed in the span of heartbeats. Before I know it, it is crawling along the underside of the log, scraps of dirt and moss falling into the water below.

Okay they're being chased. I append to Kalip. One monster, small, sharp. Will you help?

Kalip says something that I can't make out through the bees with him. Then he pauses, and looks around like he's searching for something. Not finding Oob, he lets out a sigh, and idly taps at the map with one finger as he tries to figure out how to communicate with me. Then, his eyes light up, and he leans forward, gently nudging a bound bee to follow his finger as he points to the number 'three' that I wrote, then back to himself, then back to the bee in a gesture that seems very threatening to the relatively small creature.

I think I understand. I call out to my lancer bees, the ones with the developed mantra, and I ask them for something new.

The three of them land on Kalip's shoulders, large enough to be startling, glowing enough to seem intimidating. If the man is worried, though, he doesn't show it. Instead, he has a grin that would make a shriekedog proud, and he stands to string his bow.

Before he goes, I offer one more gift. **Congea! Mantra**, pouring the power into a single stone I make on the map table. The disc of material, with its unreadable letters, pulled out of dust that wasn't there a second ago, and into a solid shape. Kalip tilts his head as one of the bees pushes it toward him, but pockets it without trepidation. And then, checking the map, and a few marks I make with **Nudge Material** on the inner walls for guidance, he sets off, only barely taking the time to let people know where he's going.

This takes half my attention. I'm sure Kalip can handle himself against one monster.

The rest of my attention, I turn to a crow, who is not to *blame* for any problems, but would be the fulcrum to resolve at least one of those problems.

The crow is still pecking at the bars of the cage, aiming to snap at the bees on the outside, seeing them as snacks more than anything else. I do wish it would stop that. The children have sort of moved away, the argument between adults as always driving an uncomfortable spike of anxiety into their smaller forms. I think Mela is talking to them now, and while I am glad that at least one of the older ones cares for them directly, I do wish I could help. She is a fine and fiery personality, but I suspect that she knows less about childcare than I could.

Bind Willing Avian will not work on the crow. I can tell this just by looking at it. I have never seen a less willing bird in my lives, and many of my old lives have eaten birds. The merchant, I think, once ate a whole crow much like this one just to prove a point. If I am understanding that memory properly, which I cannot possibly be.

How do you communicate with a belligerent bird, though? I have exactly one tool, and right now, I am glad for it. **Small Promise** echos around the camp, the words of what I ask now touching on the ears of those who I am not promising to directly, but are part of the ripple of the oath that I give now. Bit by bit, I come to understand this spell; slowly, I will form a picture of exactly what it can do. But for now, I say this.

If you would join with me, I will give you the power to grow as you choose, and the best home I can make. But if you choose otherwise, we can part ways without remorse.

It's the most complex **Small Promise** I've made so far, and it eats up almost all of its stamina. The increase to **Spirituality** being the only thing I think that lets me even have a dual option like this. And also, to know that as complicated as it is, the crow on some level *understands*.

It settles down, and looks out from its cage like it is evaluating the camp and the people who have turned to look at it.

And *now* I cast something new, letting **Bind Willing Avian** spin and whorl into the world, the tether of magic reaching out to the crow from myself and from nowhere at all. This one instantly feels different than **Bind Insect**. There is a paradoxical complexity and simplicity here. That 'willing' can be something that means a thousand thousands of different things, but fundamentally distills to the words 'yes' or 'no',

The magic touches on the crow's mind.

And is pushed away.

The crow squawks out a sharp series of noises, beak prodding through the bars of its cage.

Yes, yes. I hear you. Both physically, through Oob, and emotionally, through the spells I have woven. And as much as I'm sure it will frustrate Dipan and his heroic efforts to somehow catch a crow by hand, I am an apparatus of my word, always, **Small Promise** or not.

Shift Wood still has plenty of use left in it, and it takes almost nothing to let go of my **Nudge Material**, and then split the cage in half, peeling it back to offer an opening. My bees take flight as I do so, getting clear of the feathered menace as it hops out. The crow even takes a moment to look around, like it owns the whole clearing, before it caws again in what must surely be an ear piercing sound, and takes to the sky with heavy beats of its wings.

“It took me *hours* to catch that fucking bird!” Dipan complains as he watches the crow go. I hear him, but I do not care. The look of relief on Seraha’s face as she rubs rough tears off her muzzle is enough to make me not care. I am sorry the crow did not wish to join us, and that I could not prove her wrong. But right now, maybe it is just as well that it worked out this way. There will be another crow, in the future, perhaps when she trusts me more.

The flood of soft white dust from the promise in the wake of the crow’s flight, filling my form and concentrating into another point of power, is certainly enough for me to think it is alright.

Though a worrying thought strikes me. Why, exactly, is the simple act of respecting someone’s denial, enough to form an entire crystallized spot of magic like this? I have compared the speed of some of my spells; **Distant Vision** would need me to cover a quarter of the woods within its range before it would produce even a single one, if that is all I were doing with it. And yet, a simple oath to a *bird* is enough to accomplish the same thing.

It has not escaped my notice that the things that challenge me grow my magics faster. But now I wonder, grimly, if the species of creature I find myself born as, is supposed to find it a challenge to respect the boundaries of others.

I think I already know the answer. And I don’t like it.

But regardless, I do not care. Whatever I am ‘meant’ to be, all it can do is make things harder for me. It will never take away who I have chosen to be. And I have chosen to be someone who will not live in the dark, live in fear, live *alone*.

I will not make anyone obey me. No matter what Seraha thinks of me, I will never let myself be the monster she fears. Instead, I will simply let them trust me. Let time, and familiarity, erode all barriers. After all, it took less than a tenday for the human and demon survivors to go from suspicious and terrified to working together. Though to be fair, half of that might have been switching their suspicion to me.

That is fine, too, though. Because for all that they are suspicious, eventually, they will find themselves more bored than angry again. And even Seraha will be back to argue with me about what new **Ingenuity** spell I should reach for.

Though I suspect she will not pick anything with ‘bind’ in the title.