

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change
Available Power : 6

Authority : 5

Bind Insect (1, Command)
Fortify Space (2, Domain)
Distant Vision (2, Perceive)
Collect Plant (3, Shape)

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Nobility : 4

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)
See Domain (1, Perceive)
Claim Construction (2, Domain)

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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 : 4

Know Material (1, Perceive)
Form Wall (2, Shape)
Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)
Sever Command (4, War)

Tenacity : 3

Nudge Material (1, Shape)
Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)
Drain Endurance (2, War)

The gate is open, there is a hole in the side wall that appears to be from rot but is not growing.

The words are etched, carefully, onto the side of the smoothed wood and bark panel that I have made a rough map on. I cannot draw in the detail that I want with only **Shift Wood**, and it shows especially harshly when I try to give a visual outline of the fort itself.

There were eighteen teeth things that I could locate. Seven in the courtyard, six wandering outside, one laying in a ditch on the road to the gate, three in various rooms, and one under the stairs leading to a cellar.

I make tally marks on the map, trying to be as accurate as I can from just memory. Now that we are close to the fort itself, I cannot simply project **Distant Vision** into it, but we've made good time, and not too much should have changed. But then, with my kind, it is hard to tell; a single day could bring a wealth of new power and danger.

There was one forming in the basement cellar near the target. The arithmetic on the time to finish means there should be two additional teeth things by now.

The enemy apparatus was, until I lost sight of it, doing almost nothing except making more of its monsters. I timed it out, using the beat of a crow's heart to keep track of the physical world. I've noticed that I have a hard time with tracking time when I do not have a clear sense of something physical.

There are still seven total currently outside the fort. Three of them are in what I would call ambush positions. Here, here, and here.

I mark those spots with a different icon. These are not from my previous **Distant Visions**, these are from the crows overhead. Providing keen sight that lets me easily see the ambushes that have been set up. Though 'set up' might be a strong term. The soldier's memories think this is a child's idea of an ambush, and even the singer would look at the creatures barely concealed in marshy reeds and think there was no way those would surprise anyone.

The target has shown the ability to make these creatures, to either rot wood or produce rot, and to destroy doors.

The doors thing took me half a day's travel to puzzle out. None of the fort's doors had been smashed by claw or fang. Instead, they had all been broken by a single heavy blow. It took me looking at a dozen doors to decide it must be a very specific spell of some kind. Nothing else held that kind of overgun style damage. Though I felt nervous as I was essentially wagering lives on the fact that the other apparatus couldn't simply produce a magical strike wherever they wanted.

No other spells that I could find sign of.

Which meant, of course, that there could be any number of spells that I *didn't* see signs of. The vast majority of my spells, after all, didn't exactly leave a trace.

The sooner we act, the better.

The sooner we act, the less defended it will be. The less time it will have to make more monsters. The fewer victims it will claim and add to its own power. The more deaths we can prevent.

*I have open spaces for spells in my **Authority** and **Nobility** souls, and enough power to take up one of them. I have some ideas for a tactical approach, but I would like to hear what you have to say, and if you think we can fulfill this assault to begin with.*

Because it would be entirely reasonable, for these poor people, to simply say 'let us just continue to walk'. To move past the compromised fort that was to be our salvation, and continue into the wilds. To find somewhere new to settle down roots, perhaps find others who have escaped this end of their world, and build a home unimpeded by the likes of me.

So tell me. What are we to do?

There is a quiet that settles over the lightly trampled grass clearing that our group occupies now, this little temporary rest camp near the slope of the valley that leads down to the fort.

The rest of the valley is far more perilous to move through. We *could*, certainly, if we had time and perhaps some rope, and no one injured or exhausted. And while I am wishing for conditions to be perfect, I would also like my own sight back, and a pet revabel - the kind with the shimmer coat - please. Which is to say, we will be taking the constructed path into the valley, if we go at all.

We will be spotted, and we will need to contend with the ambushes. But we won't lose anyone to loose dirt or a single slip on a wet rock.

Right now, I am sitting physically near the bark that I am working on. Several bees are helping me see the details, while the rest of the hive industriously spreads out to pollinate nearby vegetation. The survivors, all of them, are gathered around. Even the children, who have had the importance of staying close impressed on them, and who sit trying to be Serious Adults while the rest of us talk.

The adults are circled around, with Seraha reading my words as best she can. Even when I'm trying to use simple language, I cannot help but slip in words that are somewhat out of date, it seems. Malpa and Muelly are leaning against each other, offering quiet comfort. Mela sits with Yuea, the younger girl fidgeting with the blade that Yuea has passed on to her. Jahn is cross-legged on the dirt by themselves, the quiet demon listening with their eyes closed as Seraha reads. Dipan and Kalip stand slightly farther away, making a space for the kids to sit; the young ones whispering to each other and constantly being shushed by Sivs, the boy who is at the cusp of adulthood and trying to prove it a little too hard.

My bound are woven into the group. Bees and beetles that are smarter than they should be providing eyes and ears, alongside crows that simply want to be present with the people they've decided are okay.

If I had perhaps ruined what could have been a cozy atmosphere by outlining a tactical plan, Yuea shatters what's left when she starts talking. A rasping, exhausted voice taking the lead as

the ex-magetoached fighter tries to lean forward and take the lead. "Frontal assault is suicide." She says, in the first case of her understanding her own limits at any point in the last tending. "Too many of the things, and we don't know how strong they are. Kalip and I can take the flank, slip in the breach in the east wall, if you can pick up a spell to act as our gunner."

Ah, okay, the comment about her knowing her limits was a lie. I see.

Jahn sees too, the demon leaning over to pat a furred hand on her knee. Yuea glares at them as Jahn speaks. "We will call that a reserve option." They say. "We will keep it in reserve for when we get tired of you and wish to dispose of your body easily."

"You little-" Yuea starts to snap.

Malpa's voice cuts her off, the man's strong words overwhelming Yuea's weakened tone. "We should ask if we want to fight." He says. "There's plenty of chances for us to die here."

The words ring true, which is uncomfortable. Strangely, it's Mela who replies to him, the young fisherwoman answering almost instantly, like she took the comment personally. "It's a chance to kill one of them." She says quickly. "While we still can. A chance for *revenge*."

Well. I can't say I like that motivation. But I understand. Her face is twisted into an angry glare, a match to Yuea's but directed outward and not at anyone sitting here. Seraha gently leans over and sets a pink furred hand on Mela's shoulder, and the girl barely flinches at the demonesses' touch. "I would rather we not throw away your life for revenge." She says quietly.

And Mela stills, a look of guilt stealing across her eyes. I recognize it, from a half dozen different lives. The moment of realization that someone else might actually care enough for you that they wouldn't want you to die. It's a strange feeling. Especially from someone you might have seen as an outsider, or an other. Like an old demon who would have every right to be bitter at the human girl, but instead, who simply reaches out to tell her that she matters.

"We should still fight." Kalip says. "We won't have a better chance, and we can do this *now*. Secure this area. Use it to push back, to collect anyone else who made it out of the border territory." He flicks a finger across his nose, wiping away a persistent gnat. "What, you think we'll find anything better if we keep running? It's taller and taller trees, all the way to the end of the world. No one crosses the Green. Why bother pretending we're discussing this?"

Dipan leans over to Jahn, muttering in a voice that Oob feeds me with a small burst of amusement at catching the quiet words. "Did you know he wasn't mute?"

"Mmh." Jahn replies. But then, louder, speaks up to the group. "We have an opportunity. We seize it. I am with you, the only question is how. What tactics and magics can we bring to the crest?"

“Yeah, Shiny, what do you have that you can add to your book of decrees?” Mela asks energetically.

It takes me a second to realize that she has decided my name is Shiny. I check with the words that are dripped into my thoughts like liquid truth; they still call me Unnamed. Perhaps that is simply my name, in a twist of poetry. Regardless, I answer.

Authority : 5

Available :

See Rank (1, Perceive)
Shift Dirt (1, Shape)
Drop Trigger (1, War)
Shift Metal (2, Shape)
Make Clothing (3, Shape)
Know Abstract (3, Perceive)
Bind Crop (4, Command)
Know Weather (4, Perceive)
Mark Home (4, Domain)
Verdant Pylon (5, Shape)
Shape Metal (5, Shape)
See Commands (5, Perceive)

Nobility : 4

Available :

Shift Stone (1, Shape)
Lock Portal (1, War)
Know Resource (2, Perceive)
Stone Pylon (2, Shape)
Know Stone (3, Perceive)
Make Low Tool (3, Shape)
Mark Threshold (3, Domain)
Improve Tool (4, Shape)
Imbue Motion (4, Civic)
Drain Health (4, War)

“Imbue motion.” Kalip and Yuea say instantly, before she loses her breath and the bowman continues. “Yuea’s right, we need a gunner for a real strike force. And that would let you do it, *probably.*”

“Eat health would be good too, right?” Dipan asks, having listened intently to Seraha read the list I wrote and only misinterpret a few of the words. “Like he can for energy, but worse, maybe? That’d be nice.”

Mela scoffs. “*She* doesn't need it if she can do something like it already. Besides, didn't you listen last time? The farther ‘up’ one of these is, the less she can do it. So why not one of the early ones, that we can scatter all over the place? Move dirt or move rock or something easy. And! And! Then if we don't die, it'll be useful after!”

I find a number of worrying statements in that sentence. I write carefully. I know Seraha reads it, but I think her repeating it out loud is covered by the escalating argument. I listen with half a smile in my souls, while the rest of me worries about the loop of the clock. Yuea and Kalip are arguing for **Imbue Motion** still, while a few of the kids who convinced Seraha and Dipan to help them read the list are now trying to get me to take the ones they think sound coolest. And really, at *any* other time, I would be convinced by the argument that **Bind Crop** would let me make pretty flowers from the tiny demon girl.

But then Jahn talks, and their idea sweeps the rest away.

“Watch commands.” They say, tapping the table. They say it with a voice that has *noticed* something, and the others go silent. Even the crows, who were excitedly cawing to join in the discussion, stop and turn their heads to them. Jahn notices the attention, and shrinks back a little, and I remind myself that they are no strategist or champion, but a *baker*. “We...” they tap their chest and gesture with a finger at Kalip and Yuea. “We are hooked together. But the gemgeist has told us they can merge their spells. Can you think of anything better, than knowing what the enemy will do, as they are told to do it?”

I... hadn't thought of that. Mostly because I hadn't been considering what I could do with **Link Spellwork**. But now I certainly am. There is only one problem. *I don't know if it would work that way.* I write. *But we can test it, right now, with another magic of the same category. If anyone is willing? I will not have more than one use left afterward, so I would like to form as many pairs as we can.*

“Us.” Muelly says instantly, a hand laid on Malpa's shoulder. The scarred man tenses up, but then glances with soft eyes at the demoness at his side, and nods. Well, I think he nods. The crow sitting on his shoulder feels the motion.

Very well. This won't hurt, don't worry. I write, and realize that I have just said exactly the last thing anyone ever wishes to hear from a healer. It's almost always a lie. But as fast as my magics recover, I do not have the spare empty liquid in **Shift Wood** to spare to correct myself.

Form Party, Link Spellwork, Know Material. My first spell, my first window into the world. And now I share it, for the first time. I feel the magic seep into **Form Party**, see the looped connection of magical cord between Malpa and Muelly form, and then tether itself to **Know Material's** spellform within my souls almost as if it were bound like a bee. But the texture of the connection is different, and so is the flow of vibrancy and knowledge through it; I cannot see through this little tether, only barely can I tell that something is moving through it.

Outside, in the world, the two of them gasp together. Everyone watches as they sweep their vision around the small patch of grass that we've stopped in. Muelly reaches out a furred hand to the ground, touching it with a confused look before Malpa kneels next to her and does the same, and through my bees I watch their faces light up.

"We can feel it." Malpa says slowly. "The dirt. It's... strange. We can tell how much there is. Same with the rocks or trees. But only when we're focused on the same thing." He snaps his eyes upward to the afternoon sky, and Muelly starts as she loses whatever my spell was whispering to her. "But it works. Jahn's right. Th' magic works."

I check the spellform of **Know Material**. It's draining, but *slowly*. A tiny trickle of magic moving out of it; the cost to share it like this a fraction of the cost to use it myself, and recovered so fast that I barely notice. *Then I agree with their suggestion*. I write. And before I can second guess myself, I fill the soul of **Authority** with the five points of power needed to form the constellation of **See Commands**.

Later, before we act, I will apply a recovered **Form Party**, and my last use of **Link Spellwork** for the day, to create a loop between Dipan, Mela, and all four of my crows. The birds, strangely, take to the spell easily and with far less use of stamina than a human or demon. They will be our spotters, ensuring that whatever action we take, the enemy does not respond so fast that we are overwhelmed.

There are more plans made. Ideas that solidify into tactics. Rough estimations of our capabilities that shift into assigned roles.

There is a harsh argument that ends with a harsh truth. That not matter how it feels right now, we are at the edge of our collective ability. And this fight is all or nothing; there is no room for us to not use every resource we have. Every *person* we have.

I make what I can to help. **Make Low Blade** with **Congeval Glimmer** in them, added to the work of regular mortal hands to make spears. **Imbue Mending** to put back together the scraps of armor we have. **Bolster Nourishment** so everyone can have one last meal together that won't leave them feeling starving.

We leave the hive on the top of the hill, and I send a **Small Promise** to the hundreds of bound bees and the hundreds still that are not my own. *I will come back for you, if I can*. And then, with a push against the spell, I release the majority of them. I watch as **Bind Insect** begins to refill the reserve of empty nothingness that fuels the spell, what was before a claw's width of available space now the majority of the spell for me to work with. Another push begins sending that renewed power to the remaining bound.

I give my crows the smallest piece of what **Congeval Mantra** can produce, apiece. Their wings lengthen, their feathers trace dusty yellow lines of glowing words across their bodies, their

bearing becomes prouder. Their voices echo excited caws, as loud as ever, as the changes take hold.

And then we find ourselves standing at the mouth of the valley. There is only so much time to speak, so many ways to say good luck, and we have said them all. Now there is only a series of optimistic plans, and the hope that we can adapt fast enough.

And I say we. Because I am here, too. Slung in a cloth wrap across Seraha's back, the old woman having insisted on doing something useful. I have a role as well, and one I cannot perform from far away.

The crows take flight. The survivors begin to *march*. And we go to see if we can kill a monster.