

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change
Available Power : 5

Authority : 5

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

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Nobility : 3

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

Empathy : 4

Shift Water (1, Shape)
Imbue Mending (3, Civic)
Bind Willing Avian (1, Command)

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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)

I know how far we have gone, now.

Distant Vision, with its growing minimum distance, offers me an interesting form of comparative measurement. But it is still one that works. And so, as my vision accidentally brushes on our old camp just as it comes into view, I know that we have traveled twenty five hundred lengths.

And suddenly, with an application of old rote mathematics from the scholar's drilled education, I realize we are going to have a problem.

Yuea could make a one thousand length sprint in the dead of night. And I will offer that she was bolstered by the glimmer she carried, and also by whatever she *is* aside from my own magic. But still. We have been traveling for two days, and it was only this morning as we set out that we cleared just over twice her run. Even factoring in that Yuea is a terrifying presence when she wants to be, that is slow.

Children are the problem. And, as soon as I think that, I regret it. The children are a *logistical challenge*, but I am going to do my best to avoid thinking of people as problems just for not being able to put on a forced march every day.

But they are a challenge. They tire quickly, especially with the lack of proper nutrition. **Bolster Nourishment** has obviously been helping, but they had spent almost a month without food security before they'd met me, and the supplies they had were dwindling and heavily rationed. And even encamped and properly foraging, that doesn't equate to a full belly every night.

It's not just the children that slow down the group, though. The hiking party is only as fast as its slowest member, and it is worth remembering that Seraha is an *elder* among the survivors. She doesn't complain, as far as I know, but she does occasionally stumble and need regular rests.

This would be bad enough already. There is less time to seek out forage during a hike, less time to recover, to set to work on medicine or tools, less energy for language lessons around the fire at night.

But fear not. I can make it worse.

Distant Vision shows me our old camp now. And while I had not intended to look back at my birthplace, once I spotted it as I swept my arcane eye across our rear flank, I stopped and watched.

Because that camp is overrun.

Well, maybe overrun is a dramatic term to use. But there *are* monsters in it. Some familiar, some not. Those little amalgamations of flowing dirt and stone and bark crawl over the walls. Each perhaps five hands across, as I attempt to measure something without using *lengths*, they ripple as they leave troughs in the dirt they pass through, and crawl eagerly over the walls and clay huts.

Standing just outside the walls, there are two of those silkspinnners, their tall and angular black forms seeming to just *watch* the smaller monsters. Well, one of them does. The other is trapped in one of the pits.

And on the edge of the camp, a pack of red furred bugs chews through the soft dirt where we buried the dead, snapping at any of the dirt creatures that get close. Some of my old lives were firm believers that echos were not real, but every one of us is pretty sure that if a person can

persist in this world after death, these insectile aberrations will surely be haunted as they dig up and rip apart the corpses of the fallen.

We've moved since I started watching, and as the creatures haven't moved yet, I haven't felt the need to expend extra energy to alert the survivors. My expanded **Empathy** allows me to watch through my crows as they rotate soaring overhead, keeping an eye out for anything closing in with us. Aside from some sparse wildlife, there's nothing moving nearby though. For a lively woodland landscape, this place is uncomfortably quiet.

And my memories back that discomfort up. The soldier and the farmer were closest to the natural world, but the singer and cleric spent their fair share of nights sleeping on the dirt. And this is *not* normal, nor has it been for a while. The animals and birds of this forest have been making a quiet exit for a while now. Including my own, I suppose, as the crows that came to us more or less did so on their own escape path.

When we stop for a midday break, and I am set down near a pile of bark to work with, I set **Shift Wood** to smoothing out my writing surface and offering an explanation.

Monsters at the last camp. I tell them.

"Fuck." Yuea barks as she reads it. I listen through one of my crows, the bird trying to stand on top of my own spinning form and failing to keep itself oriented before it just hops to the ground and gives up. "Which ones?"

Silkspinnners, firebugs, and something else made of dirt. I write, trying to keep it simple. I hate how my consideration for if I'll need to build walls or spears limits how much I can 'speak'. *The bugs and the dirt don't get along.*

"Small forgiveness, I guess." Yuea sighs, earning an agreeable caw from my crow. I am reasonably sure the crow does not understand her. "How long do we have?"

They aren't moving after us. I tell her, and by association the couple other survivors who come to hand her a bark plate of roast rabbit and foraged greens. *Don't eat the thing on the left.* I tell her, asking my crow to pluck it away. It does so with a... lack of finesse. A seemingly deliberate lack of finesse.

"Hey!" Mela cries out, trying to snatch back her own plate before the crow can get to it. "Our lunch!"

That's poison sivi. I write patiently. *It will cause indigestion. Because it is poison. Like in the name.*

“...Kakoa said, before he... died.” Muelly dances around the words, taking a step back from the bark and my spinning crystal body as she flicks the poison sivi off her own lunch tray. “He said you were older than you looked.”

I used to be other people. I write, waiting for Yuea to read the words before I write over them, trying to use thinner scratches so I can let **Shift Wood** recover faster than I use it. It is a partial success. *One of them was a farmer.*

“Explains a lot, I guess.” Yuea says, tearing off a chunk of rabbit in her teeth while Mela runs off to stop anyone else from eating the poison they added to their quick lunch. “Is this why you made us haul a beehive along for the trip?”

No, I just like bees.

Yuea reads the words slowly, and my crow hops back as Muelly bursts out a near hysterical laugh before clapping her hands over her muzzle. “I’m sorry!” She says. “That’s just... I wasn’t expecting it to be cute!”

Don’t apologize, it was a joke. I wish I had a way to smile within writing, to show my own amusement. *I do like the bees, but they are bound to me, and I promised to keep them safe.*

“Like us.”

Like you.

Yuea cuts us off, which bothers me, as the demon girl has started to inch closer and was just starting to get more comfortable with... well, with me. “You were talking about monsters.” She addresses the crow, who tilts his head up at her.

Technically, I *do* see and hear through the crow. Much better comprehension than from beetles and bees, no matter how much Oob enhances his own hearing. But the crow is smart enough to be confused as to *why* it is supposed to listen to his human. Still, he’s being very patient with me. *I’m keeping an eye on them.* I write. *I don’t know why they’re all waiting around at the camp, though. If they were tracking us, they should be moving by now.*

“What was different about the camp?” Muelly asks quietly. “And... can I pet the bird?”

I ask the bird if it wants to be pet. It doesn’t seem to know what that means, but crows appear constantly curious, so I offer it some trust and it hops over to where Muelly has settled against a tree trunk and climbs its way awkwardly into her lap. She seems delighted, and the crow definitely is as well, as she starts running slim furred fingers through its feathers.

Her question is interesting though. If the monsters are staying around the camp... why? From all the behavior that I've watched them show, they do two things; they find people, and they kill them. Why do they want to take up residence where we left?

I will see if I can find out. I write, already focusing on ideas. *I will be able to watch them for the rest of the next two day's journey.* The words seem to reassure them.

I leave my crow to Muelly's tired ministrations, and send my focus into my spells.

I don't have many ways to observe the world, which hurts me every time I am reminded of it. I have to guess distance by how inconvenient my spells become, and watch motion by how the amount of dirt near me changes. But I do have some ways to see things.

And with **Link Spellwork**, I can use those spells from far longer distances than I otherwise would. No longer tethered to my body, I can pour perception arcana through **Distant Vision**. And since **Distant Vision** can see the old camp, so too can any other tool in my arsenal.

Know Material is first. A quick sweep of the spell to tell me if anything there is out of the ordinary. Nothing is, though I *do* note with some interest that the dirt creatures actually count as dirt and soil and plant matter for the purposes of the spell. Unlike living things, which do not register as meat and bone until they die. Something is different about them.

It is as I turn to my only other option, **See Domain**, that I realize how much I have begun leaning on my bound creatures for watching and listening. Because I have forgone many other perception spells in favor of other tools, and it leaves me nearly blind without them.

See Domain is still worth trying, though. I did have a domain, back at the camp. Most of my domain, really. **Fortify Space** and **Claim Construction** left me with nearly the whole place somehow connected to me. And though I cannot see or interact with it normally as it is too far from me now, I can still look in through **Distant Vision**.

Link Spellwork starts draining as I cast all three spells together, and peer at the shattered remnants of my birthplace.

The domain is crumbling. Breaking to pieces, the careful impressions and lists and topography of the domain in my spell's artificial sight is an absolute shambles. Even as I watch, cracks form around the patterns of where I claimed the walls, where I made safe the ground. Bits of it sloughing off like dead scales.

I don't understand. Is it because it is far from me, no longer being held up by my actual body?

No, I already know the answer. I've seen this before. I saw this when the firebugs tried to scale the wall and were repelled. Their touch on my domain didn't instantly destroy it, but their presence began to crack at the edges.

This is what it looks like when the enemy is allowed to roost within my domain. A slow breakdown to nothing. Not reclamation or conquest, just slow destruction.

And I am forced to wonder. If I did this to another apparatus... how much would I grow? What would I siphon out of the world, for the feat of breaking their domain and taking their territory?

Because whatever it is. They are earning it now.

See Domain shows me in detail as part of the astral structure of the wall is splintered into pieces so small they are no longer real. I layer another **Distant Vision** on top of the combined spell, seeing the physical and the domain at the same time, heedless of the drain on my spells. And I watch as the coiling rippling dirt things scatter from that piece of the wall, moving on to the next one that has yet to break.

Oh, scholar. I am sorry I disrespected your memories before. Because right now, I need to know how to do math, and I'm going to sort through your lessons with diligence.

Bit by bit, the domain is falling apart. And it's going quickly, too, though not in wide swaths. They can only chew up small chunks of it at a time. I make some quick guesses as to how long they've been there, and come to a conclusion.

We have two and a half days at most before they scatter. I write, opening crow eyes and asking for a few loud caws to get someone's attention. *And then, I fear, they are going to follow.*

"Why do you think that?" Kalip asks. He's steady. His voice doesn't accuse of anything, he just needs to know the information. I like Kalip.

Because they are eating the safe spaces I create. I tell him. *And I've been using them every time we stop.*

The bowman nods once. "Oh." He says simply. Then, a second later, looking around at the others, he looks back at me. *Me*, not the bird. "I'm going to need more arrows."

"We're going to need to move faster." Dipan says. "We can't let them catch us. But we're too slow. Can you help with that?"

Can I?

I am going to try something. I say.

Link Spellwork is a very silly spell, and I still have half of its supply left to me. I've been holding off on experimenting with it, because everything I would experiment with has been needed for more important things. But now...

Now, what we need is a way to speed ourselves up, or slow the enemy down, and I have a living ink that I can do at least one of those.

Fortify Space as the base. I need this to span an area, that can be rested in, or left behind us as a kind of metaphysical caltrop. To that, I reach out and connect **Drain Endurance**.

Drain Endurance is, on its own, something that could easily slow down the enemy. Applied to a space left in our wake, that they are naturally attracted to, it is even better. But there is a function to the spell that I seek to understand and adapt. Because, you see, it does not simply take vigor from the target and throw it to the deeps. It *drains* it. Into itself. Into its own supply, which I can see and feel and even measure, floating in a growing sphere of something around the mechanisms of the arcane device.

And I seek to turn the channel back upon itself. **Drain Endurance** *out* of the spell and *into* the world again. The language of the magic is an expressive verb, but it works this way, I *think*. And now is the time to find if the language is my own mind's reflection of a deep mysterious universe, or if there is perhaps something out there giving a small guiding nod to my actions. This would, I know, never work with **Collect Plant**. But it could work here.

Link Spellwork puts the two together. And I splash my modified domain across the ground around me, like a painter pouring oils in a swirl, soon to become something artistic. I watch and prod the arcane mechanisms as they connect and create and work, and then...

Then it is done. The drain on the spells cuts suddenly, and I feel a sensation like letting out a held breath.

And the stored substance from **Drain Endurance** begins to trickle away.

"Yah." Kalip perks up slightly, shaking one of his hands as if he itches. "What the..."

"That'll do it." Dipan nods, moving around the space with a bit more of an easy spring in his step. "Okay. About this far." He waves his hand around what I assume is the boundary. "I'll get the kids over here. How long can you hold this?"

Ah, more math. I watch the orb of stolen endurance as it drains, the measurement alien to me but somehow known to be accurate. *An hour, maybe*. I write, assuming the added burden of sharing with multiple people will take from it faster. *I don't have much saved. Only from the one fight*.

"I'll be something." Kalip says with mild disappointment. "Too bad you can't take more."

...Ah, Kalip. What a marvelous idea. Because if I cut my second forward **Distant Vision** for an afternoon, and commit to this course of action using up the last of **Link Spellwork**, then I will have more than enough.

To reach behind us, to where the enemy are shredding the arcane layer upon my birthplace. And to *take* from them, as they try to take from me. **Drain Endurance** ripping away their stamina, their vigor, adding it to my own growing ball. Fueling our flight forward, and stalling their pursuit behind.

Link Spellwork runs out rapidly under the constant use. But I don't care. Because for the first time, I am starting to feel like I am hitting back on my own terms. Not just desperately hoping that the people around me and a handful of enhanced bees can do the job, but taking action myself.

I've lived a lot of lives, in one form or another. But I recognize, in all of us, one shared trait. We are survivors, and we are fighters. In our own ways, always; but when it comes time to act, everyone I have ever been has found grim satisfaction in being the one doing the acting.

I reignite a **Distant Vision**, a normal, unempowered one this time. And I watch as a swath of monsters sluggishly move about the business of dismantling my last home.

When I recover, I'll take from them again. And again, and again. Fuel for the trek forward, until we are strong enough to cut them down and remove the problem.

A point of power forms in my core. And my thoughts mirror a wolf's grin.