

**Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change**

**Available Power : 12**

**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)***

“How are they doing?” Kalip asks as Oob lands on the crenulation of the fort’s wall next to him. He’s still got his bow with him on the cracked wooden shelf, one hand running across it even though he’s not quite strong enough to draw and aim at the same time anymore.

I check my **Distant Vision**. The expedition party, linked to each other by **Form Party** and packed with every magical advantage I can give them, have cleared two thirds of the distance to their destination, just as the sun is starting to set.

A sunset. I’ve seen many evenings touch the trees and grasses and valleys of the Green, but I haven’t ever had both the chance and the ability to watch one paint the sky since my new life has started. For the first time, I ask Oob to look *up*, and take in the colors. And the beetle, who has seemingly been spending all his time refining his senses into something of astounding clarity instead of putting his magical growth toward anything else, obliges me.

While I watch Yuea gleefully punch handholds in the mud wall of a small ravine, I also watch the sky turn to fire orange and soft blue. Colors of the sun setting the horizon alight in a painting that the merchant would have paid any amount of money to properly capture.

*They are proceeding well.* I write to Kalip. *They will arrive early tomorrow, and I will be with them to help us bring the other one back.* What I don’t say, but Kalip infers, is that I will also be there if they need to be defended. Though I’m not sure what I could do that wouldn’t simply be telling Yuea to punch things.

He nods, and twirls an arrow in his fingers, the glimmer in its broad bladed head flickering through the tether I have to it as he tests his dexterity. I don’t know if he knows that the magic is keeping him from fumbling the motion, but it doesn’t much matter, I suppose.

The weakened human man, no longer a magetouched, just another survivor, stands on the wall staring out into the Green around the fort like he can single handedly *will* the world to be safer for our companions. I sit with him, watching through Oob even as I am also working many other magics that require little thought. A routine of **Bolster Nourishment** and **Move Water** and **Collect Material** that I am trying to make into reflex, so I may practice them without interfering with my *life*.

“Find any good birds lately?” Kalip asks suddenly, with a strange form of emotion in the words. Like he’s uncertain what or why he is asking.

I think I much preferred Seraha and her utter unwillingness to engage in parlor talk. *No. There are many birds in the Green, but I have had no luck enticing any of them. Not that I have taken much time to try.* I admit it openly, **Bind Willing Avian** may not have been the wisest choice of spell I ever made.

Kalip pauses, the tip of the arrow resting on the stone of the wall as he balances the other end on a lightly shaking fingertip. "You aren't throwing it around?"

*I haven't been. Nothing has stopped me, it wouldn't take much time, but I have been distracted. And... I am not pushed into it. Songbirds, even hawks, would not fill a tactical role that is not already accomplished by my honeybee lancers.*

I get a grunt from Kalip that might be agreement, and words that certainly aren't. "You're wasting it, then." He says. "They don't need to be special, just an extra regiment for your army. Do you think you could have won either fight you got into if you'd had another supply of troops?"

His point isn't invalid, but I would never be able to treat my bound as simply troops, regardless. *Perhaps.* I answer, smoothing out the limited space of the nearby wood to keep writing. *I don't believe it would have tipped the scales. The problem was that my enemy was entirely willing to let their creations or bound die, and I was not.*

"You're a bad commander." Kalip says off handedly, setting the arrow back down with the others. He doesn't take his eyes off the horizon as I start to protest, but he does let out a long breath through his nose. "But a good enough friend." He adds.

*I'll take one over the other.* I tell him. *And speaking of. As a friend. What torture are you inflicting on Mela?*

Kalip snorts, and I think it might be a laugh. "The girl asked me to teach her to be a fighter." He says. "Because she's young, and stupid, and doesn't know what..." he breathes again, pulling back his words, keeping himself from opening up.

*Not every fighter has to be an offensive one.* I write casually.

"But she would be." He answers. "She wants to go back. Back to the Empire, or the demonlands, or whatever is past the borders. Wants to see the world, and see if she can save anyone."

*Yes. She's in the opening Steps.* I pause, and then ask. *Do you have that, now? Heroes? Or is that something else that waned, as the gobs did?*

Kalip looks at the words oddly. "Of course we have heroes." He says, confused. "But why would the girl... Mela... she hasn't done anything heroic."

*I think we might be using the same word for different things.* I wish again that I could sigh. *I should not explain. It is an academic distinction, and telling you too much might spoil what you will discover. There were a number of theories regarding the phenomena, and how it influenced different peoples.* Something suddenly crosses my mind. *It might be possible, now, for one of*

*the bees... yes, yes. I can see the potential there. Intelligence, but also a strong sense of community. The perfect recipe. But would pushing it intentionally break the natural magic?*

"I can't read half of this you fancy fucking rock." Kalip looks away again. "Except that I *know* you're talking about bees again."

*I like bees.*

"Yeah, we all know."

*You know, this is the longest conversation we've ever had?* I ask suddenly.

Kalip stops, and I see through Oob as his fingers clench on the protective raised wall that the walkway is built against. "Yes." He says, breathing out slowly. "I'm talking more. I *want* to be talking more." He looks down at the little beetle who is still giving me a good view of the sunset as the colors change and darken. "Why is that, do you think?"

*You're opening up to the people who you're pressured by circumstance to become close to?* This seems like the most likely track, from how six different lives have seen the world.

"Doesn't feel like it." He says. "I got that treatment a decade ago when some idiot girl snuck into the recruiting hall and ended up dragging half a clash of us through the magetouch treatment, into a hundred fights, and across half the Empire. And I never talked to Yuea this much. Not..." His eyes widen slightly, and Oob turns curiously as the man looks down at one of his hands, slowly clenching it into a fist.

*Not since they changed you. Correct?*

"Right."

I'm disgusted. But I can hardly say I am surprised. The court magi who applied the magetouched procedure to Kalip and Yuea - and others, clearly - had no qualms about putting in a failsafe that killed the bearer of the power should they overextend. I can't imagine that was the *only* method of control they exercised.

*They made you quiet. I write slowly. It would be... a shrewd maneuver. To prevent you from forming bonds that could support you outside of their power structure.*

"You don't even know who you're talking about." Kalip mutters.

*Tyrants are always the same. They're deeply uninspired. If they weren't, they'd be something more interesting than tyrants.*

Kalip *laughs*. The sound of his voice cracking in surprise as he barks out something that I don't think he's used for a long time. He holds a hand to his throat, silencing himself with a look of confused wonder on his face. "What the fuck is happening to me?" He asks.

I wish I had answers for him, but while I can see his magical infection being contained by **Small Promise**, and I can somewhat tell that his body is faltering within **See Domain**, I can't tell him what has happened or what will come next. *I don't know. But I know that I will be here to talk, as much as you want.*

"I don't want to talk." Kalip lies, hands clenching into fists on the wall as he leans heavily forward. "I liked how I was."

*Then I'll be here while you relearn how to be a looming silent nightcloak. Does that make you feel better?*

"No. Yes. *Why* does that make me feel better?" He glares at Oob as the sunset turns to thick purple behind him, the sky overhead fading to that dark blue that's almost black night but isn't quite yet. I admire it while we speak. "This was supposed to be a tactical conversation."

*Did you wish to speak of your future, and our future together?*

Kalip winces, his hand seemingly unconsciously going to rest on his bow. "Not especially." He says. We sit in silence as the night darkens, and Kalip stops talking entirely, and then starts trying to find where the tinder and lighter for the wall's flame lamps are kept. He moves awkwardly, and I realize that he has had a very long stretch of his life, he hasn't had to know where these things are kept. And now his ability to see in the dark is *gone*.

I take pity on him, but don't express it directly. Instead, I send a bee that *can* see well enough in the fading light to bring him what he needs. Kalip doesn't comment, but I can almost feel his frustration as he flicks the flint to bring a small fire to life.

*You know, it's strange.* I write as Oob watches the night sky. Watches as the sunset vanishes, and the stars start to come out, along with something *else*. Something looming and horrifying, a reminder of the world that I was not meant to be a part of. *Jahn and Mela told me about this. I knew the moon was wrong. But I haven't... looked.*

Kalip reads the words closely, and I decide to use **Shift Wood** a little broader next time so his weakened eyesight doesn't have to strain in the firelight. "Auor, right? Mela said you were confused about it." He tilts his head up, matching where Oob is watching.

Overhead, what *should* be the pale white disc of a full moon is instead something more like a warped crescent. A ring of sparkling dust and stone, floating high overhead, makes up what I assume used to be most of the third of the moon itself - Auor itself - that has been carved away from the whole of the celestial body.

It would be beautiful, if it was not something I knew was wrong. It is the *moon*. My lives knew it by a few names, but for all of them, no one called it anything but its title. And now it has been wounded, perhaps fatally, by something on a scale that I cannot begin to imagine.

The band of debris casts dim light from its pale river of reflections, a band around the world and a reminder of what used to be overhead. The moon itself sits in place as if nothing were wrong. And why would it think otherwise? The idea that the moon was a living dream was obsolete long before any of me were alive. Though I know some still thought of it as a watcher, or a divinity, or a true totem. To think of it as wounded is a twisted nightmare.

The hole in the moon is visible to Oob's enhanced eyes. Not closely, he is no lenser. But enough that we can see the jagged edges of where whatever destroyed the small world made its mark. It looks almost like the kind of wound a living person would receive from a pistol shot; ragged and uneven, though mercifully without all the blood. What, I wonder, could have *done* that? Could have shot a hole in something so far away, and so enormous?

*Do you know what happened?* I write to Kalip.

"You mean why it has the Grin?" He asks. "No. My brother used to take me up to the roof to watch it though, on clear nights. We'd make up stories. But no, I don't know."

*It's murder on the scale of a world.* I write. *All those people... did anyone survive, I wonder?*

"What?" Kalip's voice is suddenly very small. He slaps a hand against the shelf I'm writing on. "Hey. What? What do you mean... survive?"

*I can't see from here if the groves are still there, but yes, survive. We had cities up there. The greater sorcerer queens were working with academy towers to explore the surface. To push the limits of what our world could do. Well, not only them. There were others.* I wish I could look at Kalip properly. But it seems even Oob is transfixed by the view of the shattered moon, especially with the bits of knowledge I feed him in answer to the questions Kalip is asking. *I can't imagine they made it. Not through that. Certainly not.*

"People... on Auor? Walking around?" Kalip's eyes water as he turns to stare up at the sky with me. "We did that? Humanity?" He realizes what he just said quickly, and cuts a hand through the air. "I mean... I mean the world. Everyone down here. Us."

*It does that, doesn't it?* I say. *Nothing quite like a shared triumph to turn us from tribes to a worldly community. And what greater triumph than to stroll the sky?* The reality of what has been lost has started to truly sink in. I don't ask Oob to look away, but I do pull back from **Bind Insect** and let my self not see. Choosing to cast my focus into other bits of perception. Checking on the expedition, checking on the children, being elsewhere.

Minutes pass, and I let my mind drift to the process of using my magics as efficiently as I can while I keep much of my focus here with Kalip. Bits and pieces of soft motes, all of them add up over time, and soon I will have enough power formed into small points that I can have a wealth of new options once again.

“Can...” Kalip’s voice startles me with how it wavers, coming suddenly perhaps a half a candle after I had begun to drift off to shape a **Stone Pylon** to produce mantra. “Can you let me do that?” He asks.

*Do what?* I must be misunderstanding him.

“Walk there. Be there.” He points up with a shaking hand. “Tar and ash, little stone, I am so *tired*. If Yuea didn’t need me, I think I’d let myself be dead by now.” He keeps his hand extended, fingers curling to a fist as if he’s trying to grab the moon from the sky. “But... I think I’d like to walk on Auor before I go. I think that sounds like *peace*, do you hear me? Can you make that happen? Can you let me do that?”

I think about what it took whole nations to put the smallest of settlements on the planetary body above us. The treasuries of panoply cities, the will and combined magic of the sorcerer queens, the minds of so many scholars and academics, the last living grand devil of the cycle, wealth and power beyond what I can even start to measure. Every one of my old lives sees the memory from a different angle. What would it have *taken*, just to put *one* person there? You would need magic for everything from eating to breathing to simply being able to walk without snapping your body in half.

It’s impossible. I wouldn’t even be able to get past bridging the gap between here and there.

And yet.

*I don’t know. I tell Kalip. I don’t think I can. But I also didn’t think I could live again. Didn’t think I could keep you all safe. Didn’t think I could fight and win against the things out there around us. So... perhaps I don’t know what I can do. Perhaps I can place your feet on that shattered surface. But I don’t know, and I don’t think I will for some time.* I let Kalip read, and then smooth the pane of wood out to ask one question. *Would you like to find out with me?*

He rises back up and takes his time before answering. “Yuea said when you changed her she shit herself.”

*Really.* How sarcastic can I make a written word sound?

“So I figure I’ll not eat for a day first. Maybe not wear pants. Go find a spot by the lake, so if I die, at least I have a nice view. And if it goes wrong... you can drown me in the lake.”

*You can’t just let us have a moment talking about the stars, can you?*

"I'm a practical man." Kalip says with an edge of a smile. "And it's rude to take off your pants around a lady without telling her."

*That is a fair sentiment. I'm not sure it applies to me. But I understand. Shall we speak of what I can change you with?*

"I think I'd like that." Kalip says quietly.

We pass the night, watching the Green, watching our friends out far from us, speaking of changes and potentials.