

**Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change**  
**Available Power : 10**

**Authority : 6**

***Bind Insect (1, Command)***  
***Fortify Space (2, Domain)***  
***Distant Vision (2, Perceive)***  
***Collect Plant (3, Shape)***  
***See Commands (5, Perceive)***

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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 : 4**

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

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**Animosity : -**

***Amalgamate Human (3, Command)***

I asked myself once, what is it that makes a community?

Across six lives, I had scrolls and tomes and tales worth of information to answer that question. The scholar and the cleric could give me texts both open and secret that studiously collated information on everything from tax records to last words. The soldier and the merchant *lived*

their experiences, in a much more intimate way; not that the others didn't live, but more that those two were a part of the social world. And the farmer and the singer knew community by its absence; this thing they were on the outskirts of, or wholly outside. Something to observe from afar with clean eyes.

All of them had something to teach me. Lessons learned they may never have realized would end up being used by someone, much less someone such as me.

And I add to their guidance the lessons that I have taught myself. Community is a lot of things to a lot of people. But what it is now, to me, is *this*. It is these people, together, hoping that they can make a better life tomorrow than they have now.

And for me, it is helping to realize that hope, under the late summer sun.

It's been over a tenday since I fell into sleep. Longer than ever before. But I am back now, and reconnecting with my community.

"...The walls?" Kalip is telling me. He sounds uncertain. My body is still back in the storeroom, but the beetles and bees that make up my eyes and ears are scattered around the fort, being led by survivors or exploring on my discretion. I need more bees. That's on my list of things to do. But first, I need that list to be fully realized. Which is why I asked Kalip what needed my attention.

He has answered like a soldier. The soldier I was pushes me to respect that. The person I am now is back to trying to figure out how to represent a sigh with a glyph that will be half as satisfying as the old gesture that I can no longer make.

*Do we need to defend against anything?* I ask, reserving judgment until I hear his reasoning.

"Yes. Eventually." Kalip gives a sharp nod, and this answer at least I fully believe his confidence on. Then that mask cracks. "But not now." He admits. "I don't... listen, you said you've got whole libraries in your... head... thing. But I'm a soldier. That's what I do. Yuea's the one who's good at the logistics, I'm just a scout."

I'm getting better at **Shift Wood**, and the elevation of **Spirituality** means I can use it almost indefinitely if I'm just writing, but it's still an act of careful direction. Still, I take the time to compose a lengthy response, like I'm writing correspondence to a distant fellow scholar, and not talking to a friend.

*To begin, I do not for a moment believe you to be telling the truth when you say that about yourself. I start. Regardless, you have been with these people, been one of these people, for long enough now that you should have caught the patterns. Yuea needs to rest, and you cannot rely on her to organize everything. There is a priority to the needs of every mortal, that bind you all no matter your species. Water, food, warmth, safety, each other, and Truth.* I use a very old

worldline script word that I am sure Kalip will not know, but that is okay, because it isn't the important part. *I can fix the wall, but is that the important part?*

Kalip looks at the small essay I have carved into the palisade, takes a deep and put upon breath, and carefully starts reading. Kalip is literate, in the same way that I am mobile; technically correct but deeply inefficient at it. His lips move as he puzzles over words.

I leave him to that, and pivot my attention to where Dipan is showing me the well. It's one of two wells in the fort; this one in a smaller courtyard behind the collection of buildings, up against where the rear wall faces out toward the endless expanse of the Green. The other well is collapsed; this one seems okay. He has a couple of my bees with him, and I can't hear well through them, though they *are* getting better at that. Instead, he communicates in gestures, pointing out structural damage, and some kind of vine that looks like it's growing out of the deep hole and trailing along the ground.

He taps his canteen, turning it upside down to show it is empty, and I catch his meaning. They're low on water. I know already from talking to Malpa that there is a stream close enough that they can haul water back, especially if it's just for their small population, but that leaves little for cleaning or bathing or a dozen other small tasks.

One of my bees takes off from by his feet, but an awkward grab from the man... well, doesn't stop the bee's curiosity, exactly, but I do call it back to see what's wrong. Dipan rubs the back of his hand over his crooked nose, the man's weasel like features scrunching up as he waits for the bees to focus on him, before he points over to the corner, where a few of the dull green vines have spread.

There's a pile of bones. Picked clean and many of them bearing the marks of having been gnawed on.

Dipan throws a chunk of broken masonry from the pile of rubble that used to be the doorframe from the central hallway out to this back courtyard. The rock thuds off one of the vines, and it twitches, coiling a little too quickly, with glistening thorns extending from its length.

I make a note. Not of the plant; I've seen this before and I've already flown a bee overhead to aim a **Collect Plant** through so I can ensnare the vines both above ground and hiding within the well in ambush. No, I make a note that the things created or warped by an apparatus do not die with them.

Dipan gives some kind of twisting hand salute to my bees as he starts to move closer to the now clear well. I use **Move Water** to make his first draw from it easier, but then shift my focus back as he sets to work checking lengths of rope and filling a barrel.

I manage to bring my mind back to a different window to the world as Kalip starts talking this time, rather than as he is finishing. "Could have just told me 'no wall now', kid."

*I'm older than you six times over.* I write, wondering how indignant that's going to seem, and deciding that whatever it is it will be acceptable.

"Can't get away with that. Yuea already told us that you're new." Kalip scoffs, turning to stare out over the half-cleared dirt road and the encroaching trees visible from the platform up on the fort's wall. "Okay. We need lots of things. I have an idea." He says.

Yes? My writing prompts.

"You figure it out." Kalip says. "I'm not... I won't start calling you commander. That's *hers*. But you tell me what you need. And I'll make it happen."

I was expecting very little, when I woke up again. This was not on my list. Kalip has never really been opposed to me, but he's... distant. He's quiet, solemn, and fiercely devoted to Yuea. He's also a highly effective killer, and quite possibly the most dangerous thing within ten thousand lengths of us. *Including me*. I had expected him to tell me what he thinks we should do with the armory, or maybe where the nearest settlement to this fort is that we can check for survivors, or something. Not 'you figure it out'.

As I think about how to reply, I spin my attention to another insect. **Bind Insect** is getting a true amount of exercise today, but not so much that I cannot keep letting my bound siphon off bits and drips of my power to enhance themselves. And Oop, the other beetle that has followed in his brother's footsteps of being a highly efficient listener, is along with a pair of cat-sized bees and also Mela as she carries a lantern down stone steps into a cellar.

It's not the cellar where my opponent died. But it looks rather the same, really.

"Food supplies." She sets the lantern on a barrel. "We try to keep the kids from playing down here, we don't know if there's more traps..." Mela glances expectantly at one of my bees, who I instruct in the art of how to shrug for me. It comes across as a wiggle, which is certainly adorable judging by the look on Mela's face, but is not helpful for conveying information. Still, she carries on. "The brats get down here anyway. I think they hide sausages in their pockets, in case... you know." She lets out a puff of breath, moving a strand of unkempt hair out of her face. "Anyway. Seraha said you'd want to see."

I did. I do. *What have you been eating the most of?* I write to the young girl. She struggles through the words, and I help her when she has questions, using symbols and gestures from my bees to help her see the meaning of the written words.

"Oh!" When she figures the whole thing out, her face lights up as her shoulders relax. "Mostly the oats and stuff? Did you know the fur- the demons don't eat meat? So, when Muelly cooks, she just makes big meals for everyone." Mela shrugs. "It's not bad. There's some spices and

stuff here, though not much. I miss butter. Oh, we also keep getting fruit and stuff from nearby. Most of the berries and stuff are kinda thin, Jahn says the soldiers probably did the same thing.”

*I did know that about demons, yes. I write. I used to be one, once.*

“What?” She seems surprised. “I thought... we thought you were... you know...”

*Human?* I ask, a wry humor bouncing around my thoughts.

“Well yes.” The fishergirl crosses her arms. “Isn’t that why you helped us?”

*I helped you because I wanted to. I tell her, after taking the time to smooth out the top of the barrel that I’m making my words on. I helped your demon friends too, you know. Also, demons can eat meat, it just tastes unpleasant. Just as humans do not need to eat it, with the proper diet. Personal taste, and sometimes cultural aspects.*

While Mela reads, I scout the basement space with my bees, finding the sacks of dried oats and grains, and using **Bolster Nourishment** on them until the spell runs dry. They’re stacked on shelves with rows of jarred fruits and vegetables, lines of sausage and smoked meat, and a couple sealed discs of cheese. This fort would have had food for at least twenty people, for *months*, and it’s good to see that enough is left to feed half that number for some time. Especially if they dedicate themselves to their own survival and not military presence.

Eventually, the girl looks up at the beetle who has been patiently waiting for her, and the bug sends me an impulse of attention as she talks, bringing my mind out of my indexing and use of magic. “I guess... I just thought you...” She stops, and adopts a small grin. “I didn’t think, did I? Yua’d be mad at me.” She says it in a tone of clear admiration. “What else were you?” She asks me.

The question catches me by surprise. But... there’s no harm in sharing, is there? The large bee guides her to a new barrel, and I carve onto the lid with **Shift Wood** a simple piece of art. A crystal in the center, with six lines leading out to my different lives. Basic figures, the tried and tested way that anyone making doodles would represent humans or demons or lamia or anything else. All of them, the different species I was and things I did. A pitchfork for the farmer, a pistol for the soldier, a quill for the scribe. I write out the lives that were gifted to me, and share them with her.

Her fingers trace one of the lines. “What... was this one?” She asks, touching the simple carving in the wood of the merchant’s form.

*She was a trader, a dealmaker. I write. Not a very good one, she would say. But she won her way with skill and guile, even as her house and husband failed.*

“You were a snake?” Mela asks with a tone of slight wonder. “A snake lady?”

*A lamia, yes. I write. Don't call them snakes, if we ever meet any. It is rude. You would not like if I called you an ape, after all.* Something catches my attention, and I get my bee to start poking her toward the stairs. It's not a big hurry, but the girl is Oop's current ride around the fort.

"Why, what does that have to do with being human?" She asks, rising up and taking the lantern again. "And... I want to ask more. But I guess we can't stay down here forever. Can... can..."

*Later.* I start to write. And then, with a personal smile, I spin a **Small Promise** into the air. *Later, at shared meals, I will make myself available to answer what I can.* The words echo off nothing in the air, and Mela raises a hand to her neck as the spell layers onto the world. It is certainly easier to speak this way, even if it does bind me to my words.

I will simply need to never say anything I do not mean. Which I believe I can do.

My attention spins back to Kalip, still standing on the wall, waiting for me with a patience I can't hope to match even with my new life as a piece of rock. He's sharpening one of the surviving arrows that I made for him. I should start working on more of those when I have some time, but he's fine, and can wait a bit longer, while I check something else.

Malpa and Muelly are talking to Jahn about something, and I cannot hear them. Though their voices start to come into resolution as Mela's footsteps slap across the smoothed stone of the fort's interior, getting gradually closer to them. I lose the line of conversation as a pair of children chase each other past the line of shattered doors, screaming in excitement, but catch up as she arrives in front of the trio, panting.

"I'm here..." Mela gasps as the bee that was guiding her takes to the skies of her own accord. "H-here." She gently grabs the beetle off her head, and hands the slightly indigent insect to Jahn, who takes it with a single raised eyebrow and an unmoving furred hand.

"Hello, little dream." The demon addresses me through my beetle. "We have a question to ask."

I look around for any wood to use, and find nothing, so I settle for scrawling in awkward letters into the dirt of the fort's central yard. *I am learning that everyone has a different name for me.* I start, before wondering if perhaps now is not the time for idle conversation. But then, when better? There is food enough for some time, walls that are mostly secure, and though the future is uncertain, at least sometimes I must take a rest from constant aggressive assault against the forces of entropy. But maybe they are in a hurry, so I don't dwell too long. *What is the question?*

"Some time ago," the demon says with a dry chuckle, "you told us you could grow crops. Was that true?"

I vaguely remember that, yes. *I vaguely remember that, yes.* I write. *I selected a different spell, to keep us alive, but I could certainly acquire ways to improve a farm. But....* I let my words trail off.

“But?” Malpa asks, the big man on one knee to read my words on the ground, Muelly leaning on his shoulder as he sits unmoving, like a rock in a storm. “Is there a better choice?”

*Uncertain.* I write, trying to keep from grinding too much of the yard to thin dust as I do. *But we should, tonight, when you gather, discuss it. I worry at using a spell on farming, if it is something that we can simply... do.*

Malpa nods. “Thought so.” He rumbles. “Easier to use hands than magic, and leave the power for the big things.”

“We don’t have hands, though.” Muelly says softly. “We’re still trying just to sort out the fort. We still have trouble making time to cook supper.”

*I understand.* I say. *We will see how I can help. But...* I pause. *This disaster, this shift in the world. You are not, **can not** be the only survivors of it. There must be others. And now, we have this small place, at least someone cleared of danger...*

“And you want us to share it, now that we’ve done the hard work?” Muelly asks. Maybe a little harshly.

Jahn taps her arm with an open hand. “Yes.” They say. “Share *everything*. Including the work.”

“Oh.” Muelly scratches at one of her horns. “Well, that’s fine then.” Malpa strangles a laugh at her words, but the bee sitting with them can see the humor in his eyes. “We *do* need to start planting what we can, though, before stormfall. Collecting squash seeds and rice plantings. My gram told me enough about farming life that I remember... remember... that.” Her voice chokes suddenly, and just as quickly, Malpa is standing next to her, an arm curled protectively around her shoulders as she crushes her eyes closed and tries to breathe.

Jahn presses on, trying to move past the painful memory of loss. “That is true. It would help if we had a mantra for tilling, or seeding, or weeding. But I know you can only do so much.”

*A... what?* I ask, my bee tilting to help me convey confusion to them. *You know the mantra’s purpose?*

“I... do not.” Jahn admits. “Not fully. Yuea says she has some understanding, and would be the better one to explain it to you. Perhaps, tonight, when we speak of magic?”

*I would like that, yes. I say. And then, I remember that someone is waiting for me. Excuse me. I need to go. I will see if I can fix at least one problem. I write.*

Leaving them, I move my attention back to the window to the world on the wall, next to an eternally patient Kalip. *I have a job for you. I say.*

“If I can do it, I will.” He speaks as he reads, barely processing the words before he’s answering.

*The same thing we tried, roughly one lifetime ago. I tell him. The survivors, **you**, need help. And we have the power to offer help in turn. With **Distant Vision** I can work to find others who are fleeing or resisting. I want you to go to them, and bring them here.*

“...Without support?” Kalip asks. “Just me, to convince strangers that I have a magical home at the end of the world?”

*...I will give you a bee. I offer.*

“I hate you.” He lies. I sit there, listening and watching with him as he stares out over the Green, fiddling with an arrow in his palm. The shaft spins back and forth, the arrowhead grazing tiny marks into his leathers, but never cutting. “And I’ll do it anyway.” He eventually says.

*I know. I write. You’re that kind of person.*

“You don’t know anything about me.” He whispers. A voice I don’t think he knows Oob can pick up, a tiny sentence, laced with so much ancient *hurt* that it echos against my souls when I hear it from him.

But he’s wrong. I knew everything I needed to when he said he’d risk himself for whoever I pointed him at. That, in the end, was all I really needed to know about him, or Yuea, or Jahn, or *any of them*.

They had a whole lifetime to build up anger and hostility. And it took less than a tenday together for them to be willing to fight for each other.

I know what matters about them. I also know what matters about me. That I have a dozen spells now that I could use to *take what I want*, to grow stronger, to feast on the world itself.

But that I mostly just want to use them to build something strong with the people I’ve found.

I have some time before tonight. I use it learning that I can, indeed, pull material from wherever **Collect Plant** has left it, if I am using it for **Form Wall**. My repair to the somewhat rotting hole in the wall of the fort is incomplete by the time I run empty on the liquid nothingness that powers my spell, but it is a start. It is also a start to **Claim Construction** on parts of the fort, to **Fortify**



**Space** the gate and some bedrooms. It is a day of starts; of renewing my promises, magical and mundane, to *do my best*.

It is a good day.

And that evening, we sit together, and my bound insects share a meal with the others, and we speak of the secrets of magic.