

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 17

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 : 4

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Stone Pylon (2, Shape)

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)

Another point of power that I don't know quite the source of. I suppose I should be grateful; and I *am*, truly. As time passes and I solidify my use of magic, it seems my acquisition of power solidifies as well. It's not stagnation, exactly, though I can see how that could be a concern if all I had was **Know Material**, and no new territory to investigate and draw those motes of power from. It's something else, something I can't quite describe the feeling of.

The memories of the merchant strike on an old sensation. The feeling of adding new guests to a party, and being obliged to undergo a fresh round of introductions of increasing length with each added person of interest. It's not perfect, but it does amuse me to think of every new piece of that outside power needed to go one by one to all my spells and give a formal greeting.

Whatever is happening, I have a surplus of power, and just under a tenday to determine how to use it to kill an aggressive force, then strike back. Which is why I am talking to Kalip, Jahn, Seraha, and Fisher while they take a break in the shade around the fountain I've kept going in the back courtyard. The gob doesn't seem to know why they're present for this discussion, but I wanted an extra voice, and they had the misfortune of being nearest to Jahn when he was called to join us.

Yuea is still bedridden. Not that she is sick; I actually can tell with painful clarity how she is doing through the bond between us now. But she has not yet adapted to how her new body moves or feels, and so casually walking around and being belligerent to me won't be happening this fine warm midday. Kalip serves as my military mind for this conversation.

I have a rough plan. I write to them on the thin board of wood that two beetles hold up. Figuring this out was a proper trick. The beetles are smart enough to hold things now, they're not the issue. But instead, it was learning to use **Shift Wood** in a way that doesn't topple them over. *But I wish to let you tell me how my plan is incorrect first.*

"If your plan involves more pylons, I think we have a consensus." Jahn says with a shrug.

"That, or some kind of mysticism based overgun." Kalip adds.

The two men nod at each other, silently congratulating each other on how smart they are while they ignore what I am writing. *Neither of tho- half of one of those. My plan is to improve both **Nobility and Tenacity**, and equip myself with **Drain Health** to kill our enemies, and **Congreal Memory** in the hope that it continues to act like glimmer or mantra and allow all of you to fight back when needed.*

Seraha clears her throat in the kind of polite noise that schoolmistresses make when you have said something foolish. "Is that wise?" She asks. "We have hopestone aplenty now, even with all that broke taking this place. And with your pillar making more..." The older demon paused, fingers running idly through the pink fur on her arm. "We don't have *time* to learn a new weapon. We need you to have something you can use, now, to multiply your strength. Not something that will allow *us* to play at being heroes."

Fisher raises their hand in a slow wave, Jahn noticing instantly and leaning over to let the gob know that they can speak whenever they're ready. "You let us, help choose your magic?"

“Yeah, she does this.” Kalip sighs. “And then everyone gets distracted arguing for hours on end.”

“What are the choices, then?” Fisher asks quietly.

It had not occurred to me, having heard through my gossipmonger beetles a few too many conversations about my own potential spells between people over the last tenday, that anyone would not know the list by heart at this point. I feel quite the fool as I rapidly work to carve a more complete list into the closest wall, flying a bee over to cling to the fort’s inner building just over where I write to give me eyes, and let the others know what I am doing.

Authority : 6

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)
Know Weather (4, Perceive)
Mark Home (4, Domain)
Verdant Pylon (5, Shape)
Shape Metal (5, Shape)
Bind Relationship (6, Command)
Make Meal (6, Shape)

Nobility : 4

Available :

Shift Stone (1, Shape)
Lock Portal (1, War)
Know Resource (2, Perceive)
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)

Empathy : 4

Available :

Feel Fear (1, Perceive)
Alarm Trigger (1, War)
Feel Love (2, Perceive)
Know Armament (2, Perceive)
Bind Fish (2, Command)
Hear Intent (3, Perceive)
Form Doorway (3, Shape)
Passage Trigger (4, War)
Damage Armor (4, War)

Spirituality : 5

Available :

See Worship (1, Perceive)
Confusion Trap (1, War)
Drain Purpose (2, War)
Congel Sin (3, Command)
Small Trade (3, Domain)
Delay Spellwork (4, Arcane)
Seek Resource (4, Perceive)
Bolster Warmth (4, Civic)
Observe Civic (5, Perceive)
Aggregation Trap (5, War)
Form Caravan (5, Civic)

Ingenuity : 4

Available :

Collect Material (1, Shape)
Invite Low Mammal (1, Command)
Make Spike (1, War)
Collect Focus (2, Civic)
See Lineage (2, Perceive)
Know Ingredient (3, Perceive)
Create Fire (3, War)
Bind Low Mammal (4, Command)
Refine Material (4, Shape)

Tenacity : 4

Available :
Domain Map (1, Perceive)
Subvert Low Summon (1, Command)
Separate Material (2, Shape)
Pressure Trigger (2, War)
Learn Stability (3, Perceive)
Congeval Memory (3, Command)
Drain Trust (3, War)
Hear Plots (4, Perceive)
Subvert Low Glimmer (4, Command)
Share Abstract (4, Civic)

*At present, I explain the occult rules as best I can peel back the veil on them, I have seventeen collected and hardened points of power, and one open slot for **Tenacity**. It requires points equal to the slot number to fill it, and points equal to the soul's current measurement to improve it, which opens a new slot. And gives more options, all of which are quite good at spoiling plans.*

Fisher gets help from Kalip and Seraha in reading off the list, with Jahn adding more commentary as they quickly cover rough reasons why many spells have been dismissed for so long as options. But eventually, the orange-scored gob starts to have questions. "The... power dots. Where do you get them? Is that what we are farming?"

"That... no." Jahn shakes his head, braided black fur tossed around slightly as he does so. "We're farming yams. And maybe some other things. They don't give..." He looks up at the bee nearest them, eyes questioning. "Does our farm give you more power?"

*Actually, yes. I answer. In a way. I am not sure what the strange emptiness that my magic utilizes is, but it isn't the same as my power. However, it feeds through the spell of **Bind Crop**, into the yams, and then when the crop is harvested, it releases a burst of power, much of which I take in. So in a sense, you are quite rightly farming points for me.*

"Tar, that feels quite properly strange." Jahn grumbles.

"We are being useful..." Fisher whispers, stretching out the last word and getting a worried look from Seraha behind them.

Kalip gets them back on track. "I agree with drain health." He says. "Because it's obviously a weapon, and we can use that. But I'm on the same cart as Seraha. We don't need another magical rock. We've already got mantra we don't have time to drill with, and a whole basement full of vim that most of us can't safely use. Pick a different soul and take a spell there."

"Can't..." Fisher mutters.

The Bowman glances at the gob with a motion that's a little too quick, and Fisher flinches back. Kalip notices instantly, but doesn't say anything, instead opting to just reassuringly act normal. "Why's that?"

The gob's hands flex as they look at the ground. "The... numbers. Not enough of the spots." Kalip tilts his head and gives a questioning look, encouraging Fisher to go on. "I... it does not add. It only works for the useful one to pick two, because there is already an open space. So it must be a tenacious magic."

"Hrm. Okay, that's good to know. Thanks." Kalip raises a hand to his chin and stares at the deep carvings I've inflicted on the fort's wall. "Wait, what about this one, and then the fire spell? They'd both be fours, so that's... sixteen? And then you'll have two weapons."

I don't bother to write an explanation to Kalip, trusting Fisher to do the math for me. And they do, almost right away. "Four and four, but then five and five for the spells, yes?" I get my bee to give a bobbing nod for me. "That is one too many."

"We could merely go pick a bunch of yams." Jahn offers easily. "Since that seems to be a potential option now. Not that I look forward to a life as a farmer."

That might be the longest piece of dialogue Jahn has ever said to me. *We should find some traveler's grass.* I write as idly as is possible for me. *I'm sure I could modify it to be something worth making bread out of.*

The demon gets a faraway look in his eyes. "I miss hot bread..." He mutters in a lilting voice.

"I made fry bread this morning, you ungrateful deviant." Seraha flicks a finger off one of Jahn's horns. "And we are once again diverted from our subject. I must ask, *why* do you think drain health is a needed weapon? What makes it any more useful than your similar spell for fortitude? Not, of course, that there is an explanation of the difference in words."

Yuea. I write simply. *And the rest of you. With the knowledge I have on turning **Drain Endurance** around, to return what was stolen, I am certain that I could do the same with health. And with that...*

I don't bother finishing. Kalip does it for me. "You could put me back together, when I get hurt."

That is my hope.

"Then I vote for that." He says with a shrug. "But also, is there a reason you don't just take that last tenacious magic? Fortitude and health sure seem like abstracts to me."

It would be a specialized tool, when I can already accomplish what I need. I explain. Something more general would be more useful. Something that will continue to be useful when our war is over.

No one comments that I am looking forward to a time that may not be. The gob among them, still looking partly lost as Seraha reads my words back to them, doesn't even acknowledge that though as they speak up again. "Why not... separate material? So you can make more pillars, so they can make more useful tools."

*I can already make the pylons using **Nudge Material**, though I admit it is tedious and time consuming and the spell is truly not meant for it. Specialization, again. The biggest issue with **Stone Pylon** is the inability to give them real orders, like with my bees, or Yuea.*

"Wait, you can give Yuea orders?" Kalip snaps to attention.

Yes, though I doubt she would listen. That is... a lie. Not even a partial one. She would be obliged to listen. Which is why I will not give her orders, and test it.

"...she's going to hate that." Jahn mutters under his breath. I don't bother saying that she already does. I'm trying to not think about it. "But you can't give the pillars orders? I thought you could tell them to repeat your magics."

I can, but all I can do is tell them to either be on, or off, and where to aim the spell.

Fisher speaks up, their voice suddenly a lot more understanding and mature than the tentative questions they were asking early. "You need more complexity. Tools to make better tools, to do the things the original tools cannot. Yes. I understand." The others look at the gob with curious eyes as they trace a clawed fingers over the list of written spells on the fort's wall. Fisher can't read yet; none of the gobs can. But young gobs learn structured knowledge at a rate that is often alarming for people who don't know them, and it's only a matter of time. "This one, then. Pressure trigger, or another like it if you unlock something more complex."

"Why that one?" Kalip asks instantly, the man really only having one blunt mode of conversation that doesn't change just because the person he's talking to is less than a month old.

The gob runs a claw over their arm markings again, before answering with the nervous energy they've found a new reserve of. "It... it allows for more complexity. The useful one can connect magic. So connect it to the pillar. Now you do not need to tell it to be on or off. Is... is that not correct?" They have a slightly lost look in their eyes.

*This isn't actually a test. I clarify, and Seraha reads the words out loud with the knowing tone of a schoolteacher who has had to say that before repeatedly. *We know the same amount about what will happen. But... that does sound correct. I may not even need to spend **Link Spellwork** on it, since I can't imagine what it does on its own.**

“Oh.” Kalip folds his arms, glancing at the bee sharply. “You could make droppers.”

Seraha and Jahn suck in hisses of breath. Fisher and myself are unaware of what that means. *Explain that?* I write, but by the time Kalip reads, Seraha is already talking.

“Absolutely not!” She snaps out. “If there’s one good thing about our villages burning, it’s that we never have to-“

“I didn’t mean... not exactly that!” Kalip takes a single step back, his tone holding the dull edge of defensiveness. “I mean any kind of step-trap.”

Hello. I write, punctuating it with asking my bee to beat their wings enough to produce a sibilant buzz. *I was not alive when those existed, would you care to explain to me?*

“Droppers are an affront to common sense and the end to any hope for peace.” Jahn snarls. “They are zoetic artifact guns that are scattered by the Empire’s scouts along roads and fields used by their enemies. They burrow, grow, and when stepped upon, create a caustic explosion that is designed to cripple their target.” The demon does not look at Kalip. They look anywhere but at Kalip.

Seraha is much less circumspect, and is glaring at Kalip more directly. He doesn’t seem to notice. “Of course,” her tone is acidic, “the Empire considers every demon to be an enemy. Which is why droppers are often found around ceremony sites, forestry camps, and roads used only by farmers and artisans.”

That does sound horrid, I’m sorry Kalip.

“It...” for the first time, his neutral expression cracks, and he sighs briefly. “I know.” He says. “But I’m not asking you to make weapons to use on fishers and stock runners. I’m saying you could make traps that kill monsters. The specific monsters that are coming to kill us, right now. Not whatever monster is politically convenient this week.”

“That’s more self-awareness from you than normal.” Jahn’s words come out mean. I can *tell*, the exact moment the demon realizes that he didn’t mean to say that. But he doesn’t correct himself, instead just letting his shoulders slump slightly. “I have work to do. You know my advice.” He turns to leave, stalking through the archway into the hall between fort buildings that leads back to the front gate, hooves striking the stone walkway with sharp cracks.

Kalip starts to follow, and I take the chance to write a note at eye level for him. *Let him go. Give him some time.* I say, drawing on the social expertise of several old lives.

“Yeah.” Kalip agrees, stopping with an abrupt fluidity. “Wait, him?” He glances at the wall again.

Seraha shakes her head. "Them." She says, ignoring my written confirmation in the wood.

"Him." Fisher instantly corrects. When the older demoness turns to give the gob a correction of her own, Fisher doesn't look away though. "Don't dull your blades." They say. The words catch me off guard; it has been a *very* long time since that was a gob saying. I don't actually know *where* Fisher would have gotten that from.

"But..."

Seraha, maybe you should actually talk to Jahn about this. We may not be the right people for it. But do remember, we're at the end of the known world, beset on all sides, and perhaps now is not the time to begrudge your friend a small thing that makes him happy. I wish I could sigh, I truly do. Perhaps I can make a body for myself with lungs soon, and use them. I am going to empower my souls now, and then return to my glimmer testing.

"After that, if you have some time, I want to take a shot at the silkspinnners." Kalip says.

"Where've you been stacking those arrows?"

I'll come with you, in my own way. And they're in the armory. I suppose that no amount of conversation can have me putting this off forever. I pour power forth, and expand the reach and scope of two of my souls. New openings in my magic, new depth to old spells, I don't *feel* anything exactly. But I know. And in knowing, I am confident in myself and my place in the world.

I check what new magic is offered.

Nobility : 5

Available :

Spawn Golem (5, Command)

Shape Stone (5, Shape)

Draw Text (5, Shape)

Tenacity : 5

Available :

Spawn Viscera (5, Command)

Follow Paths (5, Perceive)

Blinding Trap (5, War)

I will not lie to myself. I am mildly offended that it took this long, *this long*, for an option to simply create text. I *covet* that spell, like nothing else I have before. How easy it would be, to no longer need to focus my mind down to a small point to write to people through careful, myopic carving in wood or dirt.

I don't know what a golem is. Or a viscera. The words resonate with me in the same way glimmer and mantra do, but... this does not congeal, or create. This *spawns*. And that fills me with an anxious worry.

From **Tenacity**, I will have another chance to try this. Perhaps a viscera will be a bird of some kind that I can then empower with my currently unused **Bind Willing Avian**. I think we should talk more about the potential for **Shape Stone** before I commit to **Drain Health**, but for now, I am comfortable adding **Pressure Trigger** to my growing series of connections and arcane motions.

A memory starts to pull, but I delay it briefly. *Thank you for your time*. I write to the two remaining advisors, one of whom is running a claw through the self-moving fountain. *We'll need to talk more, but-* I stop writing. One of my bees is trying to get my attention.

Actually, several of my bees are trying to get my attention. I open the connections between us, borrowing their eyes and seeing the supply of the spell dip ever so slightly. I could sustain so many more bees, a piece of knowledge I set aside for later, along with the memory. The bees are partly foraging partly scouting somewhere in the Green, though they can smell water nearby, so I think they might be near the lake outside the valley.

There is something *wrong*. The bees don't quite know what, but I do, almost as soon as I connect to their senses, and more and more bees add their voices to the chorus. They are near the water, I can see now. And everything looks perfectly normal for a warm summer day. But.

The woods have gone quiet. Not just quiet, but dead still. Small animals and distant birds have stopped making noise, yes, but beyond that, even the bugs aren't buzzing. The trees aren't making swishing sounds in the summer breeze. The bees can't even hear themselves buzzing, though they tend to filter that out; *I don't*, and the sound is absent.

Through twenty sets of faceted eyes, pulled back off the ground to sit high up in the branches of hopefully safe trees, I watch the area, trying to see what is happening.

Then something smashes through the treeline on the other side of the lake. Not just that, it smashes through a tree; the trunk half the width of a person splintering and being slammed to the ground as the creature charges through it.

A dusty black coat of fur, fierce gold canine eyes set into a skull large enough to swallow a child whole, a full set of digitigrade legs that propel it forward like an overgun shot, and a sleek muscular body that feels more like a weapon than a part of nature. This is an apex predator; a creature that no amount of kingdom building or civilization spreading has ever been able to eliminate. The largest known land predator, unless they invented something bigger than this in my times away from the world.

And there is something wrong with it.

It twists like it is moving on stage strings, head twisting as it sniffs the air. It does not howl, because what would be the point? The air itself is forced into silence around it. And something is twisted about its body; clothing of some kind, or perhaps *growths*, coming off its back. It makes it look like it is wearing a shredded masquerade gown made of dark ink. Then it takes a forced step forward, and I lose sight from several bees on the edge of their group.

The others flee. The bees I just lost connection with follow, and as they leave the radius of the creature, they snap back to me, panic and terrified loss echoing across their bonds before I reassure them that we are okay.

The monster sniffs the air. Sets itself in the vague direction of the fort. Begins to lope, like it is casually moving faster than anyone I ever was could have run. My bound insects bounce information between themselves using me as a relay, draining the spell by a finger's depth as they establish a plan for fleeing. Then the other bees around the fort check in.

Including the ones that are out with Dipan and three of the children.

Seraha is saying something. I wasn't listening. I won't be listening. *Wolv*. I write on the wall.

"I'm sorry, what?" She sounds confused.

*Wolv. **Wolv!*** I drag the word into the wall in blocky slashes of letters, leaving no chance of misinterpreting my alarm. *Arm yourselves! Alert the others! There is a *wolv* approaching!*

I push back the encroaching memory as hard as I can. I need time. I *desperately* need time. I also absolutely will need another weapon, *now*. With a thought, I add **Drain Health** to my list of arcana, and add the memory from that selection to the grip of my will as I hold it down and turn my eyes to the worst timed monster that has ever been.

Yuea! I scream across our bond. I know she cannot properly hear the word, not really. Not if it isn't a command. *Get up! Something is coming and you need to kill it, **now!*** I make the words a command. I give her an order; a breach of trust I will never be able to take back. I immediately strike her with **Sever Command** to ensure that she has no compulsion to obey me; an ineffective method of communicating, and something that leaves me feeling disgusted with myself.

But I don't care.

A beast the size of a small home is moving toward us. And from the way it twists the world around it, I believe this is yet another apparatus.

From behind us.

Our tenuous safety feels like it slips further away with each passing day.