

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 18

Authority : 7

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Collect Plant (3, Shape)

See Commands (5, Perceive)

Bind Crop (4, Command)

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Nobility : 6

Congeal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Stone Pylon (2, Shape)

Drain Health (4, War)

-

Empathy : 5 ><

Shift Water (1, Shape)

Imbue Mending (3, Civic)

Bind Willing Avian (1, Command)

Move Water (4, Shape)

-

Spirituality : 6 ><

Shift Wood (1, Shape)

Small Promise (2, Domain)

Make Low Blade (2, War)

Congeal Mantra (1, Command)

Form Party (3, Civic)

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Ingenuity : 5

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Sever Command (4, War)

Collect Material (1, Shape)

Tenacity : 6 ><

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

Pressure Trigger (2, War)

Blinding Trap (5, War)

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Animosity : - - ><
Amalgamate Human (3, Command)
Congea! Burn (2, Command)
Trepidation : -
Follow Prey (2, Perceive)

Consciousness is a funny thing, when you think about it.

My first waking thought makes me want to laugh. The amusement is a beacon to my focus, as I pull threads of shredded attention back together, and bring myself back to being a single person again. My mind is dark to me, the bookmarked places that I was keeping my magics all askew. I can't feel anything like proprioception inside myself, but I still have a sense that the neatly ordered layered dome of spellcraft that I used to see and touch the world has been thrown into disarray. My accrued power is a constellation in chaos, the shadows I have taken in and the things I have collected or drained are a jumbled *mess*, rather than the sorted and comfortable ledger I was keeping.

I lurk in the dark with my upended inner world, trying to puzzle out what happened. Scattered impressions and feelings slowly letting me build a full picture of what my killing of the other apparatus did to me.

So much power. It had tied up everything into reshaping and securing length after length of territory, and all of that safety dissolved on its death. A lost fight, broken promises, and a shattered domain all in one fell swoop.

It was keeping prisoners. It was *torturing people*. A part of me is darkly fascinated by the clever flexibility of **Small Promise**. Knowing that the magic is a stepping stone, it all makes sense. If you can promise someone that you will hurt them, and then follow through, that is just as much a source of new magic as anything else. Almost certainly easier than promising to keep them safe, find them a home, or build them a community.

The rest of me is less fascinated and more disgusted. Both by the thing's actions, and also by myself. By how *easy* it is to find a detached, logical reason why hurting people would be useful. How easy it could be to rationalize that people I struggled to communicate with, maybe didn't count as people. Maybe would be more useful as fuel.

It doesn't matter. I am not that, and never will be. Dwelling is needless pain, and when I am in quite unavoidable pain already, I don't need to add more.

Everything does hurt, though. Bits of me that I did not realize could feel ache and creak. There is a sensation I pinpoint as I reach for my magics that is akin to sand slipping between scaled fingers. Something leaking out of me, running in rivulets down my skin that is not skin.

I tug the arcane device of a spell into place, and push against it. A fresh jolt of agony courses through me, but I persevere, and in a Grand Devil's second, the resting but intact bond between myself and my bees is restored.

Light creeps into my mind. Small holes in the shell of darkness, holes that aren't holes at all, but whole lives, waiting to be immersed in and shared.

I dip myself into them. Taking in sights and sounds, and try to see what has become of the battlefield.

In theory, I knew what it looked like. A rough field, covered in protrusions from roots or boulders or other terrain, but all of it drained of vitality and calcified into a chalk-white material that crumbled and broke easily, and held no promise of growth. I'd seen it already before the torturer fortified their road. But seeing it in a length-wide strip is different than *this*.

There is *nothing* around us. It stretches all the way to the hills we rushed out of, and farther still out through the open valley. An expanse of dead white, occasionally broken up by dots that poke up like pebbles trapped under skin. At the borders of it, the monstrous pylons still stand, but they are far, far away. All that covers the landscape is trampled and drained calcification, and black burn marks or collapsed bodies that stand out as blemishes on the field.

It's so *dead*. I've seen in past lives flat places before. This could have easily been a farm field, just after planting. Nothing but dirt. But it isn't even close, and feeling it is trivial through the eyes of my bees.

But that's not important. What is important is the people.

Mela and Fisher are both hurt. The human has a blackened burn up her leg, and blood running from her mouth. The gob is clutching at a deep gash running down their chest where their chainmail didn't fully deflect something. Both of them are in bad shape, and I work quickly to find wherever the health I have stolen has *gone* inside of me, so that I might **Drain Health** the vital force back into them. The process is... not painless, judging by Mela's choked screams. But as Fisher's wound seals and Mela's skin flakes away like an overcooked fluffmote, I can at least know that they aren't going to die. Many of the bees are also injured, though none nearly so seriously. I push **Bind Insect** to feed them more of my own magic, letting them recover far faster.

Yuea is in adequate shape, from what I can see. I know she broke her arm slamming a silkspinner four times her size into the ground repeatedly. But she's standing, and through multiple views of bees that are still up, I see her helping to carry the people out from the abattoir structure.

I reach for her through our bond, and all the bees topple sideways as I scream in their minds. Fuzzy forelegs frantically scrambling at their heads as their compound eyes flinch wildly, reacting to my pain as I unintentionally offload it onto them.

Because there is *so much* pain. Just touching **Amalgamate Human** brings a shock of vicious agony to me. So much so that it overwhelms any decision making ability I have.

When it fades again, I look through several blurry visions to see Yuea giving me a concerned look. She's still wearing the shoulder pack with my body in it, but I follow the honeybee's eyesight and see the part of me poking out that looks like someone tried to smash a window in. Spiderwebs of cracks across multiple facets of my body, and one part of the damage glittering as the pain recedes.

I reevaluate the information that my souls give me when I ask. See the marks next to some of them; **Animosity**, yes, but others too. All the souls that I pushed power into when I was struggling to manage the influx. All of them are marked.

Out of curiosity, I start to reach for **Shift Wood**. Not even to activate it, just to pull the patterning of the spell closer to me. And I don't even get close before pain shoots through me again and I jerk back from it.

Okay. None of that then.

I have... no thoughts on how to communicate, now. All my shifts and nudges are locked away in souls that are so damaged that trying to use their magics is viscerally painful. And even worse, it seems like none of my other magics are fully stocked. The nothingness liquid that fills their attached vials and reservoirs is... missing, somehow. Elsewhere. The vials aren't cracked, but none of them are filling over perhaps a quarter of their maximum.

I am *wounded*. And while I've felt this twice before in small measure, this is different. This feels like I've lost a limb, and I do not know if I will heal from it.

But that's not relevant right now. My companions are speaking, and I need to focus.

"...no fucking way to get these people back." Yuea is saying to one of the bees. Or to me? It's hard to tell. "Half of them aren't going to last the night, and they know it."

The woman she is dragging out into the summer sun, legs scraping the ground as Yuea hauls her with hands under her arms, mutters something.

"Yeah, sure." Yuea sounds winded. "You'll be fine. You've got all your blood." The woman nods as Yuea settles her against a wall of the building, sitting upright, and then takes obviously forced steps back inside for someone else.

One of the bees moves to the woman, who doesn't even have the energy to flinch back, though the bee does recognize the look of terror and pauses at arm's length. Slowly, it lowers itself down, and starts crawling forward, and I sincerely believe that it simply looks too cute doing so for the woman to be afraid of if it is about to kill her.

The bee isn't, though. Instead it prods with its forelimbs at her scraped legs. There is a flicker, from within the bee that only I can see, of a glimmer activating. And then, the woman's legs simply never got some of those scrapes.

Only some of them. And only the ones Yuea just caused. But still.

My honeybees are learning to be medicos. And isn't that a wonderful thing.

Yuea pulls two more people out. Two people, and one corpse. The emaciated demon was dead either before we got here, or shortly after the assault began, but either way, we weren't in time to save him. Had we known... I don't think we could have gone faster. This was rushed and risky to begin with, relying on the enemy's overconfidence and taking advantage of a few mistakes to secure a fast kill. We couldn't have saved him.

At least, that is what I tell myself.

As Yuea is unceremoniously dumping the body away from the others, Mela joins her, limping on a not fully healed leg. "She's awake." She says simply, and Yuea shoots a look down at me.

"You up, shiny?" Yuea addresses me, speaking clearly for a nearby bee.

I am. But I have no way to say that, aside from having the bee nod. The honeybee offers to make the effort to share something more complex, but... how? I can't push something as intricate as a pattern of writing to them yet, and may never be able to, and even if I could the ground here is still more solid than the dirt ever was.

So instead, I have the bee make a dance of pointing at my body, and then toppling sideways and curling up to nap.

"That... is so fucking cute I'm angry about it." Yuea states. "But what does it mean."

"She's tired, probably." Mela fills in.

"We're all tired."

Mela looks back to the blocky structure. "Yeah, sure, but remember how she was down for a day or two after the other ones? And those cracks..." The women study me for a moment, and then share an unhappy look. "We need to get back. We can't take the second one now, can we?"

“We could if Kalip were here. But... party’s gone for me.” Yuea *tsks*. “Besides, we’ve got some people.”

People who can’t walk. People who can barely stand. Malnourished, injured, dazed people, who probably also have bad cases of food poisoning.

I can at least try to help. It is a cruel calculus, but there are piled forms of almost a hundred animals in that building, and without whatever the torturer was doing to them, they are going to wake up and cause quite a lot of damage soon if they are still capable of it. At least one of them is a *bear*, and that’s not something we are prepared to manage.

So I send a bee in quietly, and **Drain Health** the whole pile. Keeping the spell tightly aimed, and holding it on the woodland critters long after what I am gaining has dropped to a trickle. One by one, their bodies go still, and small smatterings of motes are released, until there is nothing left of them but corpses.

I give some of the stolen health to Yuea, but before she is fully recovered, she snaps her fingers hard enough that I think she strips away some of her toughened skin and gets my attention through the bees. “Cut that shit out, shiny. We’ve got a hundred people to triage. Save that.”

I comply. The magic is almost gone, already, and I need to recover. Yuea actually takes time to check on Fisher, and get the gob’s cut chainmail off, before the three of them and the healthy bees resume the work of pulling people out of the dark interior.

A process I can at least start to help with. **Form Wall** might not let me demolish the whole place, but at the very least, I can let some light in. I have a few bees scale the outside, clinging to the exterior as I apply my spell to the upper chunk of the square structure. The whole thing is studded in strange circular holes that lead into the dark, and I don’t really know what I’m looking at. But I don’t care anymore.

Form Wall doesn’t let me destroy walls. But it does let me reshape them, into somewhat different walls. As I peel away the fortification, no longer protected by anyone else’s magic, I use it as material to recreate a new wall. Tall and precarious, because my magic has no qualification or safeguard to make things *work* after it is done, I narrow the base to a thin and fragile edge as I move the whole wall to one side on the rear of the upper floor.

Then my bees slam into it and topple the whole thing with a crash like shattering shale to the ground.

The upstairs, peeled open and revealed, is shown to have several holes in it that let light into the main warehouse of lives down below. But also, there is another floor up here, and what I find is... maliciously ingenious.

Mechanisms that look like spring-driven baskets are the source of the holes. Each of them with a carrier, meant to hold one of the flaming spiked balls, and fling it down a long tube to fire outward. It's no wonder the thing had such an easy time ranging us and laying down a siege on our approach; it has fifty different weapons up here, and must have had some magical control of them.

All of the baskets are fed by a smooth spiral of a ramp that coils down through the whole room. Gravity fed, the top half of it is empty, but the bottom contains dozens of unfired projectiles, waiting for their siege weapons to need a rapid reload. The method is clear; all the torturer would have to do is create a projectile at the top, and let the whole system reload itself. If it can fire the weapons magically, then all the better. A whole bastion's worth of weaponry, compacted to an automated room.

A fascinating application of magic. I hate it.

Form Wall is unfortunately exhausted by my work, but at least the others have some light to move by. One by one, they pull the victims out. A mix of mostly human and demon, but also a few gobs, and even a pair of verdlings. There are more corpses than I'd like, and every now and then Yuea will yell a command to me and point at one of them, and I will do my best to **Drain Health** into someone who is on the edge of life and death.

The only time I falter is when she finds someone who she shakes her head at, and slowly lowers to the ground, moving the fully grown adult like she's carrying a kitten. Yuea says something I don't catch, and Mela starts yelling at her loudly enough that I know what she plans to ask me.

I don't hesitate, much to their surprise. **Drain Health** needs every scrap I can get. And... and I can't save them all. I can't. But if I don't hesitate, maybe I can save more of them.

The motes from the man's death I pull in, and beg that in his next life, he will forgive me.

After that it is much more subdued. Fisher moves with a grim precision, dragging out one of the animal bodies and beginning to butcher it even as the gob takes charge of a few bees and sends them dashing away for firewood. Preparing to feed who they can with something *real* before they try to motivate them to make the long trek back to relative safety.

It takes me too long of searching to figure out that not one of my resin watchers survived the skirmish, and that what I had thought were blemishes in the converted land were actually smashed bodies. But perhaps my little glimmerlings could be of use in carrying those who truly cannot walk. I go to work myself, **Congéal Glimmer** making the largest stone I can before exhausting itself and its very limited store of stamina. When I am more healed, I will turn that into a mobile thing.

The day turns onward. Lives fade out, but every one that does allows me to secure another against the terminus. Mela breaks down at one point, simply staring out at the blasted landscape with catatonic eyes; I send a bee to keep an eye on her until she is... not okay. Never okay, after this. But moving.

Fisher prepares a rough dinner, that I wish I could **Bolster Nourishment** on, but that is another spell I will need to learn to live without for now. *For now.*

I don't know where Kalip is. I hope he's okay. Him, and everyone back home.

By the time the sun is setting, I've used **Form Wall** to make something pretending to be a secure campsite. There are thirty three survivors, though if nothing else changes, I doubt more than half of them will make it back with us. And we *cannot* wait here for them to recover; there is at least one other apparatus abutting this territory that we are in no shape to fight now.

Once again, victory tastes quite bitter.

But I imagine, for those thirty three people, nothing has ever tasted better than some inexpertly cooked meat and sleeping under the shattered moon.

And so I will say this was worth it.