

**Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change**

**Available Power : 9**

**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)***

My pylons are gone from my senses by the time dawn arrives. I have been silently waiting with my bees, fretting over the wounded while the night plays out around them. Twice, I give warnings about creatures moving in the Green, but none of them are the agents of an apparatus. Just the wild and free creatures of this endless forest. This does not make them any less dangerous, but it does make them less of a *problem*.

I know that it is possible to steal a pylon, I've done it three times already. What I don't know is *how* my pylons were taken from me. The whole area around them was sublimated into that strange domain before then, so I lost sight of them somewhat.

The farmer's memories speak of camouflage for hunting wild oboks, the soldier's of covering tracks, and the singer's of concealing pit traps. I agree with my old lives. Whatever it is, it's a different form of protection than I have with **Fortify Space**. Instead of a shield, it is instead a hiding spot. Hope that whoever is looking won't look too closely.

And if they do, it has whatever weapon it hid in those first few pools of its domain. Something that set my bees to smoking like they'd leapt through a lorra bonfire.

It doesn't *truly* matter in the moment. But I feel it is important to collect my thoughts so that when I attempt this again, I will be prepared.

Also I must pass the time as my bees make their way to the riverbank. I will be attempting to make contact with the aquatic apparatus, and I feel that it will be easier with actual representatives for myself at the site. Also, it's on the way home anyway, and it allows me a short time to compose myself before trying to find a way to speak to one of the things that has been consistently trying to kill everyone I love.

Not that I am one to talk. I am, also, one of those things. Which is why I am trying in the first place, I suppose.

I trace the formation of injured and tired revalabel-sized honeybees as they fly through the trees, only half watching and letting my magic become something of a reflex as I guide it to trace after them. My thoughts are elsewhere. On a half dozen things; thoughts of my own failure, of how overwhelmingly dangerous the world around feels, of what I could begin to do next.

And, also, on a more selfish but also practical level, on the power I have been accruing from this endeavor.

In three or four days, I have harvested... I cannot even remember the count. Twenty? *Thirty?* So many of those small points of light in the dark. And I remember from half a season ago, the thought I had when I was fumbling, learning this magic and this changed world. Challenge brings power. Creativity brings power. *Change brings power.*

Every action I have taken, even recklessly and furiously throwing myself at my enemies, has made me stronger and stronger. If I can survive an action, it will not cripple me. The six lives I used to be know all too well that injuries are cumulative; cracked knees hurt for lifetimes, missing fingers never grow back, scars mount, and aches build forever until the end. But me? I only grow stronger. If I live through it, I grow from it, and leave the scars behind.

And how much of that same power have I fed to my enemies? The thought scares me, more than that I have lost *this time*, it is the knowledge that *next time*, they will have grown as well.

I need to be stronger, if I am to survive, and protect. More focused. How are they making monsters like they are? How are they making *weapons* like they are? It cannot simply be wild scrambling; the targeted pylon-based assault of the silkspinnners was *clever*, in a way that I would not have thought of. Though I will be stealing the idea.

I should have listened to Yuea. What a world, that it has led me to *this* conclusion. When I finish here, and bring my apian forces home, I will talk to the soldiers, and seek their advice on how best to go to war.

For now, I watch my bees take a much needed rest on the bank of the river. They have found a tree growing clumps of hazel and green berries that they are snacking on, their larger bodies requiring it until they are back in my reach. But the rest of the environment seems mostly unchanged. Reeds and mud around slippery river rocks, a constant rush of water that looks deceptively thin from my broad perspective, and again that strange sensation of knowing that there must be *noise* here, but being removed from it.

We're headed home. They're headed home. I'm still here. It wouldn't even be much of a change at all, to take the time to listen through the beetles and remaining bees, to help with the morning chores, to write greetings to the people there. I'm there and here at the same time. But I don't... feel like I am home. Instead, all I feel is a disconnection.

I don't know why. My old lives, they've all seen death. All lost people they cared for, or commanded, or were responsible for. I don't know why this is different. It's not even the first time I've lost someone, really. The first bees I bound and nurtured died for me the same way that Sivs did.

But that's somewhat silly, isn't it. And I know why this stings more. Why I feel as though I'm stumbling through strategic plans and skirmishes. Because as complex and beautiful as honeybees are, they don't start out as *people*. And losing a person hurts.

I realize suddenly that I am, whether I meant to or not, pushing my bees toward becoming people in their own right. I hope they will forgive me when they learn how much it hurts.

I check in on my bees, trying to focus on the world. Trying to push myself to perform a function, even if my thoughts are scattered and I am beginning to think that my people might need sleep after all.

Something *changes*.

Something coils back along the dimmed connection between myself and the bees. The tether is still *there*, from them to **Bind Insect**, but it is far, far away and I cannot reach through it. But now, something reaches *back*, something that isn't part of either of us. It murmurs and wheedles, magic giving a near-literal shape to the memories of the merchant's lifetime.

I recognize the texture of this magic. This is like **Small Promise**, in so many ways. But the words it whispers are rigid, and unchanging. *Value for value*, it says to me.

A point of power appears in my starfield. An *alien* point of power, one not of my own making. And as it does so, the tether to one of my bees vanishes.

I become frantic, rapidly. But I am still watching with **Distant Vision**, and the bee in question is still there, healthy and whole. Or at least, alive. Many of the others haven't even noticed something is wrong, *if anything is wrong at all*. But the ones that are connected together with **Form Party** begin to react right away, taking wing and buzzing away from the bee in question like they are repulsed.

But then the bee moves away from the group, dropping to the riverbank and the roots and reeds there like it has forgotten how to fly. In a wobbling dance, it moves between plants and rocks and mud, wings twitching but not enough to take to the sky. It is heading for the river.

Rapidly checking everything I can, I discover that a sliver of **Bind Insect** is *also* missing. The reservoir of the spell's empty liquid fuel source is simply *gone*, and though the rest of it does not seem to mind the hole in the arcane machinery, I certainly find it unsettling.

I don't know what has happened, but my bee has been taken from me. And as they move toward the water that I know the other apparatus has infested with its own creatures, the frantic thoughts I have intensify. I have no heart, but I would make an oath that I can feel it beating anyway. So hard it threatens to crack my gemstone body.

Tapping **Small Promise** through **Distant Vision**, I make an attempt one last time, before I start trying to find a way to shatter the thief and rescue my bond, at diplomacy. *If you let them go, I won't be mad*. It's not a threat, it's just a simple and level plea. This can end here, I want to tell them. Without any violence.

The taken bee stops. Almost completely, a living carving standing inches from where the mud drops away and the water flows by.

And to my utter shock, I feel the invasive magic touch me again. A serpent of arcana, moving through everything I am and everything I have like it's *searching* for something. And it finds it, metaphorical fangs latching onto a point of power within me, and *tugging*, the magic threatening to shatter as it does so. But from the other end of the connection, an equal counterweight stabilizes it, and just as before, something is placed inside of me.

A point of power is taken. And a small part of **Bind Insect**, and a bond with a singular bee, is replaced.

I don't hesitate. I burn the strength of my spells, depleting what I need to of **Link Spellwork** to extend my reach and make contact with **Bind Insect**. Reaching out across the distance to make contact with their developing mind, and to ensure they are okay, or at least, alive and whole.

But when I touch the outer shell of their thoughts, and then deeper into the roil of how they are feeling, I do not find the straightforward and earnest thoughts of a mystic honeybee. Instead, something has overwhelmed them, left their budding emotions and feelings in a chaotic maelstrom of terror and confusion, and with one singular line of thought that latches onto and dominates any attempt at coherent direction.

*Help me* it whispers in their mind. *Help me* it screams as they try to move. *Help me* it begs as they struggle to reach out to me, or reach the others, or think anything at all. The poor bee has collapsed, not from pain but from simply being unable to do anything when every one of its thoughts turns back to the same directive, wailed over and over and over without cessation.

I decide to manage the bee's distress first. They can't handle their own thoughts, and what has been shoved onto them. I don't know... I don't know how to remove a *thought*. I am not a mind sculptor, I have never once held a qualification like that. So that path is closed to me. But I do think, at least, that I can help give them the capacity to cope with it themselves. And I worry I must act fast, because they are surely dying as they are now, even if this was not an intentional attack.

It takes a surprisingly deep pull from the pool of **Link Spellwork** to cross the distance and add **Congea! Glimmer** to the bee. They already have both a glimmer and a mantra, and I feel the promise to never force a shape onto my bees stretch and fray to near snapping as I impose this cure; the promise does not have room for excuses. But despite the increased cost of the action, either from distance or from continuing to add more compounding magics, it takes hold.

Their wings double in length, one set splitting to form an almost hexagonal pattern on their back, glittering like mist refracted sunlight behind them. Their body lengthens, their face developing from a simple insect's visage into something with more fine control; more capacity for emotion. Lines and the bug version of muscles forming around freshly grown eyes, their mandibles growing and dividing into a more flexible mouth. Lines of glowing black and yellow highlight the thick fur and lengthened antenna. And, inside, their mind expands.

I cannot take the thought away, but I can give them the space to hold it, without pain. While the foreign directive still echos in them, this singular bee suddenly sees the world with a sense of perspective that it has never known before. It beholds the horizon, and instead of seeing a point where the world stops, it sees a future where the world opens up. The bee looks up, and for the first time, truly *sees* the sky.

I should ask them later, to look at the night sky for me.

But for now, at least, they are safe. Even if it has nearly exhausted some of my magics. And, without permanent damage done, it is easy for me to fill my other **Small Promise**. I am not angry at this apparatus. How *could* I be? It is trapped at the bottom of a river and begging for help.

I don't know what I could possibly do here, now. But I know where I can start. And I know who I can ask for help.

I use the last of my **Link Spellwork**, at least until some bits of it regenerate in the next candle, to make one more **Small Promise**. *If you get yourself to this spot, I will come back within two days and take you somewhere safe.*

There's no way to know if it hears me, or understands. But... I think it heard the first time. I think this is it trying to communicate. And I *promised I would listen*. It doesn't seem likely that it could fake the desperation and fear that it seems to have placed in my bee almost by accident.

I know it's body is somewhere downstream, but I can't risk my bees or my larger friends on a rescue mission near where the silkspinnners are calcifying their way toward the river, if they aren't there already. But it's an apparatus. I believe it can find a way. It found a way to cry for help, with only the ability to steal bonds. I know it can make it upstream just a bit, to the place where we can scoop it out.

Perhaps this is a foolish plan. I don't care anymore. It has taken me very little time to become angry at this world. At how I was born not just into a fight for survival, but to *be* the fight for survival for the people of the land.

I reject this. Utterly and completely. I am going to save one of my siblings. I am going to make a friend. And maybe the two of us together, along with the people I have managed to protect and befriend so far, will be enough to fight back.

I watch my bees take wing one last time, one more push for the fort, and home. I will meet them there. There are people I have left, people that I miss, people that I owe apologies and explanations to.

It is time to go home.

