

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change

Available Power : 11

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)

-

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 : 5

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

Drain Endurance (2, War)

Pressure Trigger (2, War)

-

Animosity : -

Amalgamate Human (3, Command)

Trepidation : -

Follow Prey (2, Perceive)

It is fewer than I expected. **Stone Pylon** is actually possible with just random stones scattered around the ground, but nothing in this devastated road apparently is 'stone'. And **Link Spellwork** is still at under a quarter of its strength, leaving me with very few long range tools.

I manage one of the things quickly enough, getting many of my lancer bees to collect a pile of rocks to use, while some of them ferry fresh glimmer to the front line to use as weaponry. But the bees are not inexhaustible, and away from my bond they need real rest and nourishment. So I order them a break while we wait for this new ambush, let the pylon build its thin supply of **Drain Endurance**, and I try to find a way to put together another weapon.

It takes me too long to think that I should simply put some of my new power into improving the soul of **Ingenuity**. And by "too late" I mostly mean that I will simply not have the time to form a new pylon by the time the enemy reaches my forces, even with the improved magic. But **Ingenuity** governs how quickly **Link Spellwork** recovers, and **Link Spellwork** is what is allowing me to operate more than ten lengths from my home without having Kalip carry me to...

Having Seraha...

There is something of a growing lack of people to carry me places. Mela, I suppose. *Someone*, regardless.

I refocus. I will have time to think about home once it is safe. **Ingenuity**. Four power exchanged for more strength to the soul. I decide to see if there's a spell I want now, rather than later, so it may have time to prepare for use.

Ingenuity : 5

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Sever Command (4, War)

-

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)

Place Echo Bond (5, Arcane)

Invite Mammal (5, Command)
Subvert Worship (5, Domain)

I had *forgotten* how much I had wanted **Collect Material**, especially knowing now what I could do with it. **Stone Pylons**, *anywhere*. Just hollow out the ground and use the rock at my leisure. But so much else here draws my want as well. **Create Fire**, then give it to my bees and let them run amok. **Bind Low Mammal**, or even **Invite Mammal**. I could *bind a bosu!* I know there's one around nearby! Something that strong could surely keep us safe.

I know those words are a lie as soon as I think them. No amount of static strength is going to cause safety to emerge like the whim of fortune, solving the puzzle for the characters of a story. Safety will be bought the hard way. But an empowered bosu would still be something I would covet.

Place Echo Bond is... strange. An arcane classified magic, which means it works on other magics. Is *this* how the other apparatus is keeping its creations sustained at a distance? I doubt it. This sounds different, somehow. I want it, just to *toy* with it. But this is not the time for toys, and there is a foundational arcana that I simply must use.

Five more power gone, and **Collect Material** is mine.

There is a trick that I have learned with **Distant Vision**, to cast out a spell multiple times without breaking the previous casts. **Know Material**, perhaps because it is also a perception magic, shares quite a few of its critical moving parts in my mind with **Distant Vision**, and the trick takes me almost no time to recreate. I spin several *small* zones of **Know Material** off away from my body, out away from the fort itself, and then down into the ground. I haven't ever tried this either, always simply letting **Know Material** bloom out from my form without shaping it, but as soon as I try now I find it comes easily to me. Though without any vision in the area, I am mostly targeting it by pointing in a direction and hoping it goes where I want.

Fortunately, when the direction is 'away and slightly down', it works well enough.

The first time I use **Collect Material** targeting the entry of 'stone' from one of the **Know Material** casts, it drains every scrap of its strength and does nothing. The feeling, before the magic snaps, is the same as when I attempt to **Nudge Material** on a target too large to move and find the magic wastes itself trying anyway.

I try again, this time shrinking the space **Know Material** takes up, down to what I *believe* is a fairly small area. Until all it shows me, among the dirt and trace amounts of metal and plant matter, is a single unit of stone; the same amount that **Know Material** has helpfully allowed me to learn is the exact mass of a **Stone Pylon**. *Then* I try **Collect Material** again, and this time, it works.

One unit of what appears to be some kind of rough granite appears in that indeterminate space within my mind. In the bubble that is somewhat imposed behind **Collect Material**, waiting to be used by something else.

And then, I run out of time. I took too long, trying out new magics, and waiting for everything I have to recover. And the enemy has arrived.

They moved *fast*. Or perhaps there are more of them than I thought, pouring into the corridor that I cannot see into with **Distant Vision**, unnoticed before they get their and invisible until they arrive.

Most of my bees are already pulled back away from the one pylon I have, and I give it the command to activate as the silkspinnners charge forward out of the veil I cannot see through, and into the open. The first two crumple as they enter the range of **Drain Endurance**, possibly already weakened by their charge forward.

And then the pylon is empty. And I don't even understand *how* it could burn away its collected pool of strength that fast, until I see the next silkspinner enter my view. Long legs stabbing at the ground in jittery movements as it presses forward, two more following it. And off their oblong bodies, a host of flying things launch into the air as the silkspinnners seek for and approach my pylon.

Distant Vision shows them to me in detail as they drift upward on the warm summer air. They look like sparrows; bright red and black lines on their feathers. But there's something wrong with their faces, wrong with their wings. They are shaped like knives, not birds. And then, several of them orient themselves downward, and there is a pulse of magic, and they *fly*. Like arrows, not like birds at all, they fling themselves downward into the greenery around the dead zone.

Small ghosts come to me as the sparrows rip into the hundreds of unaltered bees I have been using to erode the enemy domain. The swarm of bees that has been keeping off the dead road, exploring or resting until after the fight, is set into by the birds that are massive compared to them.

I send a pulse of warning through **Bind Insect** using **Link Spellwork**. I know not all my bees are contained in this **Distant Vision**, but I tell the ones I can to scatter, to get to ground. The sparrows follow, though, ripping apart every moving thing they come across. Including a fair few things that aren't my own insects.

The larger bees under my command were holding back, waiting with the stockpile of glimmer for the enemy to exhaust before moving in to help me kill more of them. Now, I find them and give them their own command. Take to the skies, and prepare to fight.

Some of these bees have been with me for a very long time. I call them lancers, sometimes, as a little joke about their purpose. But I think they may have taken it truly to heart. The largest of these bees holds both a glimmer and a mantra, and while they are only the size of a large cat, they are still every bit as agile and fast as they were before their growth.

They take my warning about the sparrows as a challenge, I worry.

Here is a thing many people might not know about cat sized lancer bees. They are not good tacticians. This is an uncommon fact that most will never be in a position to learn, but that I have become familiar with. Fortunately, they have me with them, and my own lessons from old lives and new friends.

I guide them in a flanking maneuver, keeping trees and other vegetation around them as they approach. The sparrows are still snapping at everything that moves in bursts of speed that shoot them from point to point, slicing or biting at whatever crosses their path, but the birds are easily manipulated. I check them over with **See Commands**, making constant use of my newly refreshed **Link Spellwork** to extend my range. All of them have the same order, from the same time; wait until they get to where the others died, then take to the skies and kill anything bound nearby. I don't know how they're supposed to see what is and isn't bound, but with that knowledge, it is easy to move the swarm of surviving honeybees through the pincers of my larger soldiers, and lure the birds in.

Then I cut their order down with **Sever Command**, which doesn't actually do much to throw them into disarray; these things are vicious on their own, it seems, and they were already more than ready to kill and keep killing. But it *does* at least confuse them for a brief window, during which my bees make their own attack.

Wings buzz in a drone I cannot hear, and stingers cut through the air like swords. My lancers and the sparrows cross paths, the bees hitting them from two sides as the birds are in the middle of ripping into my small honeybee swarm. There is a set of uniform pulses of power from the connections I feel to the mantra in my bees, and I watch as many of their stabs reach far beyond what they should have been capable of.

Birds fall from the sky, except for one, caught on the stinger of the bee that impaled it. They don't kill all of them, but they take out a good chunk, and then keep moving, crossing paths and going to ground to hide behind trees and under roots, preparing for the survivors to turn and fight back.

Then the corpse that lancer is trying to shake off begins to burn. And a half beat later, that fire expands to a ball of death that takes the bee and two nearby companions with it. On the floor of the Green, similar orbs of fire erupt from the other dead sparrows, catching almost all of my smaller bees in the conflagration as the forest begins to burn.

The ambush turns to a skirmish, and my bees begin to fight for their lives. Individually, they are faster, larger, and smarter than any one bird. The birds also fight like idiots, shooting themselves forward for the kill with no concern for terrain or ambush. My bees mark off kills like they're exterminating pests, not going to war. And after the first failure, they know to get clear of the bodies following a kill.

Every time one of the sparrows looks like it's about to make a strike that will take one of my bees unawares, I use a drop of **Link Spellwork** to hit it with **Drain Health** or **Drain Endurance**, just enough to stagger the enemy and throw them off. I conserve what I can of my resources, letting them regenerate while my surviving bees cut down the rest of the birds.

I grab their shadows when they die, and drink the power from their victories.

Then the silkspinnners reach my pylon, and begin tearing into it. Their bodies open up into strange sticky mouths, unlike what I saw of them previously, and they extrude some strange liquid that begins dissolving the stone. Three of the things surround the pylon, and before the last bird is dead, they've melted it down like a candle half gone. My connection to the pylon fizzles away, going soft, and then fading entirely as they silkspinnners destroy it.

Overhead, as they tear it down, a few of my bees release the glimmer they've grabbed and flown into position. I feed the stones power just as they bounce off the silkspinner's bodies, and cause my own tiny detonations. Holes punch through disgusting black fur and into delicate internals. I kill two of them, eat the power that bleeds from them, and watch as my bees descend on the last one, stingers flickering as the creature with no defense against anything flying takes stab after stab before collapsing.

But a quarter of my bees are gone. And almost all of the smaller ones, the new and mostly mundane helpers who weren't even truly combatants. Just honeybees.

Another silkspinner strides into view, and in a flare of anger, I expend every bit of **Drain Health** on it and its cargo. Several of the birds die instantly, and explode, taking the rest of them with it. The spot where the enemy's control of this profane road ends becomes a bonfire of twisted flesh and fur and feathers.

Then a flock of sparrows erupts out of the space up high, already shooting into the underbrush. They don't even try to preserve their own lives, instead slamming into tree trunks or the ground, snapping their own bodies and lighting off in fiery blasts that set the Green to smoldering. None of my own bees are hurt, but I can't hold this position if *this* is what's coming our direction.

This isn't going to work.

We can fight this battle back and forth endlessly, but it won't kill the enemy. Not if I can't easily press into its territory.

I recall my bees, giving them nervous permission to retrieve their fallen companion's glimmer and mantra before they pull back. I shouldn't have made this costly mistake.

I won't make this mistake again. It's time for another angle.