

**Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change**

**Available Power : 14**

**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)***

***Blinding Trap (5, War)***

**Animosity : -**

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

**Trepidation : -**

***Follow Prey (2, Perceive)***

There is something comforting in the routine that resonates across lives and centuries and possibly whole cycles of the world. In the way that waking up while an unknown distance from a safe home has always been a mix of boredom and fear, that is.

The soldier had her campaign trail, and the scholar his expeditions. The cleric his wandering for a home, and the singer their constant fleeing from the same. For the farmer, it was roadside camping on the way to distant markets when the crops were good, and for the merchant, it was as simple as the bed of an inn where she had never been before.

It is only now that I find this overlap in who I was. All those old lives were, in their own way, travelers. They had all lied constantly, to themselves or others, about how much they simply wanted to stop moving and settle down. But I think all of them knew it wasn't really true.

Because after that moment of fear, when you wake and your mind demands you check to see if you are about to be robbed, stabbed, or mauled by a bandit, enemy infantry, or turodor respectively, there is another moment. The moment where you take your first waking breath of the day, and you know that you are somewhere new, and that you are about to do something or see something you've never experienced before. When you know you're on a small adventure, within the story of your life.

I haven't slept, unless you count taking in the singer's memory of a moment of violence and comfort. But everyone else has, however roughly. And I watch their quiet moments with an amount of longing for those same sensations. Not jealousy, really; I love that they can feel these things themselves, I don't want to take it away. But I miss silently sharing cold breakfasts, or brushing splinters out of a jerkin, or slipping off to relieve oneself and hoping that none of your traveling companions can hear you.

Perhaps I would miss these things less if I had to do them.

The three non-bees in the group also end their breakfast by crushing one of the small rectangles of vim in their hands. Yuea is grimacing before she does so, like she knows what's coming, but the other two simply follow her lead without noticing. The effects are immediate, and look rather uncomfortable. They shake like a bucket of cold water has just been dumped onto their heads, and Fisher claws at their tongue as if trying to excise some foul taste.

"*Why.*" Mela coughs out.

"It'll keep you upright and moving. And since we slept at least a few hours, it won't even stop you from breathing later." Yuea says, spitting to the side. "Let's get down to it. Sparkles, how far out?"

Fisher raises a claw. “The breathing...” they start to say cautiously, the gob looking like they regret everything about what they just took as they scratch the palm of their clawed hand on the forest floor, scuffing it into the dirt and mast.

*Not far at all. A candle, if we move at the speed we have been. We make exceptionally better time when it's just us. At that point, we'll be approaching the border I cannot see beyond.*

“Kalip?” Yuea pauses and shifts to look in the direction that my own bond shows me Kalip is still moving as she focuses on her **Form Party** bond. “Okay, he's still fighting.”

*Mostly he is running. He has dispatched two more silkspinnners, but is mostly making himself an unavoidable nusciance. I have been watching the upcoming **Fortify Space** boundary, and the other apparatus has been sending a single silkspinner every candle. I cannot measure perfectly, but I believe it is making them as fast as it can.*

“Then it won't have a reserve other than a homeguard.” Yuea nods as she adjusts the cloth wrap she's wearing, and starts to buckle on pieces of chainmail. “What about the birds?”

*No birds.* I answer. I don't know why, but I haven't seen them anywhere. Unless the apparatus used up every bird within its reach and actually has no more to change into weapons, then it should have birds somewhere. That I have not seen them means they are likely in its domain, hidden and waiting.

Yuea knows this, and the grimace on her face tells me she doesn't like it. “Okay. Scouts first into the space, then us. Priorities, Shiny?”

*Aim the glimmer clusters for any pylons you see.* Dipan has provided us with a number of small bags and pouches salvaged from around the fort or hand sewn by him when he had a spare moment. The man's ability to provide quick solutions to scattered problems continues to impress me. The pouches are stuffed with glimmer, and my spell's reserve sits ready to turn them into bombs at a moment's notice. *Shout to me if a drain spell begins to touch you, and I will **Fortify Space** to block it. Similarly for rearming you.*

I have a waiting stockpile of stone and wood and a little metal, waiting to be thrown into **Make Low Blade** at a moment's notice.

There wasn't much else to say. Yuea would have a clearer tactical plan for them when they could see directly into the fortified space. I reminded my bees that they wouldn't be able to make their glimmer trick of being somewhere else work inside the enemy territory, and the same for their arrows. And then there wasn't anything else to do but head out. No sense letting Kalip risk his life longer than was needed.

They check their armor, Yuea finding a dozen small things to adjust on Fisher and Mela's chainmail. They check their weapons, a collection of implements of violence pilfered from our

fort's overstocked armory. Yuea goes over the reloading drill for the pair of pistols each of them has one more time. They check that they are ready.

They aren't. Not really. I'm not either. But we're as close as we're getting.

Mela gathers me up, and I feel that ethereal sense of the texture of the leather against my crystal exterior. I steady myself for the feeling of my perception magics beginning to wobble, and we set out.

I suppose I should be done feeling that things in my life are strange. Every experience is new to me, even if I remember it. And yet, there is still a novel tension in making a steady walk toward a fight that may end in death. *Will* end in death, really, though that death may not be my own.

The trees no longer seem to be comforting green and brown life, but ominous standing sentinels. Every creeper vine that threatens to trip someone feels like enemy action. The rustle of the leaves overhead and the crunch of mast underfoot the only sounds the forest has left here, and the silence is oppressive.

"Where are all the birds?" Fisher whispers in their curious young voice.

"Maybe it really did run out." Mela sounds disgusted. I don't blame her. "How far?" She asks.

Yuea points ahead. "Other side of that hill." She says. "We're close. Everyone ready?" I tap her to signal I am, the others nod, or in the bee's case, bob their whole bodies.

There's a small ravine between us and the hill. We cross over what clearly used to be a creek bed; the stones are dry, but smoothed down, and the packed and cracked mud gives it away. Something changed here recently, but that mystery is one I can't really afford to focus on as we clear what used to be a piece of natural terrain with ease, and start up the hill on the other side.

My scouts are out ahead of us, but not too far. Two batches of the little resin creatures have circled around to either side of us as well, and while I cannot see into the **Fortify Space** bubble that they are looking at, they can see anything coming out.

The territory is... large. Worryingly large. It took me over a tenday just to secure a small and isolated fort with that spell, and my **Authority** is not insubstantial. I know this apparatus uses pylons, but the substantial chunk of the world it has simply cut off is at least twenty lengths across. And the more space one of us needs to fill with a spell like that, the longer it takes. Far, far longer. Each length outward from the center takes twice as long as the one before.

What has it been *doing*?

The small walking resin watchers spread out into lines, one line of them in the foliage on the hill, one around on the left flank, and one taking its time to make it to the other side of the domain.

The two groups on the uneven ground below us are screened by the trees and brush that has gone uncleared, but the group that circles around crosses over three different sections where the terrain has been reduced to a calcified band of dead ground. This apparatus has been busy with more than just us, it seems.

Yuea kneels on the top of the slope, crouching behind a tree and ducking her head out to look down, the feathers on her head rising as she spots something she doesn't like. "Shit." The commander says. "Okay. Rocky, you seeing this?"

I am not. "The whole place is... dead..." Mela is horrified. The bees are too, they can see it, even if I can't see it through them. This is deeply strange and I don't like it. "It's all just more of that white ground and... that's it..."

"Walls." Fisher points. "The core is a structure. It blends in." The gob tilts their head. "Why?"

"Defense, maybe?" Mela asks, looking to Yuea.

"That's our target then." Yuea says with a grim nod. "Alright. Sparkles, send them in. Other sides first, then ours. Mela, Fisher, *behind me*. Kill anything that gets close, but stay out of arm's reach of me. Shiny, we're looking at... eight, nine..."

"Thirty five. Even geometric spacing forming pentagons with two points each on the border of the dead zone." Fisher supplies.

Yuea narrows her avian eyes and stares at the back of the gob's pebbled head for a second before shrugging. "Yeah, that many pylons. Bone, looks like. Or whatever it turned the ground into." She takes a deep breath. Leans forward, digs her fingers into the dirt in front of her. Takes a long look up at the sky overhead; a beautiful glittering blue with thin wisps of white and grey clouds crossing it. Closes her eyes. Feels the sun. "Okay. Let's go kill it."

The others nod. The bees flare their elongated wings. My little glimmerborn resin things don't move, because they don't really have a way to become anxious, but that's fine too.

I give a complex series of commands through **Congea! Glimmer**, all at once, so that the spell will siphon in what it needs to refill itself while it isn't actively in use. And then the line of smooth creatures rise up onto their four flat legs, and begin a steady rush off the hilltop and down into the enemy territory. On two other sides, their copies do the same.

Behind them, Yuea rises up watches, waiting for something to go wrong before she leads the others down. She doesn't have to wait long.

Things start to go wrong almost right away.