

Unnamed - Apparatus Of Change
Available Power : 6

Authority : 3

Bind Insect (1, Command)

Fortify Space (2, Domain)

Distant Vision (2, Perceive)

Nobility : 3

Congéal Glimmer (1, Command)

See Domain (1, Perceive)

Claim Construction (2, Domain)

Empathy : 3

Shift Water (1, Shape)

Imbue Mending (3, Civic)

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Spirituality : 3

Shift Wood (1, Shape)

Small Promise (2, Domain)

Make Low Blade (2, War)

Ingenuity : 3

Know Material (1, Perceive)

Form Wall (2, Shape)

Link Spellwork (3, Arcane)

Tenacity : 2

Nudge Material (1, Shape)

Bolster Nourishment (2, Civic)

There are monsters amid the trees.

Farther into the woods, my **Distant Vision** shows me their passing. They are tall, so tall they scratch the upper bound of my spell's sight. Four legs that move with choppy motions, prodding forward their stilt-feet like every step is cautious, but so quickly, like I am watching them sped up from reality. The legs lead to a body of an oval ball of flesh, covered in black fur, sprouting small arms with several joints and tiny protrusions like hands on the end from which something like webs drift slowly.

They drag behind them, plodding and stumbling, the forms of people.

It doesn't take long for them to move out of the range of **Distant Vision**. I cast again, following them, keeping track of their movements. I have used up perhaps half my spell's stamina, quite a lot of it with repeated casts, trying to draw a map of my range, and give a rough guess as to where they are.

I managed to acquire through Yuea's voice the services of the camp's children, in fetching me long pieces of bark. From there, **Shift Wood** has been getting proper exercise today, smoothing them into a reasonably flat surface, and then serving as a makeshift map as I etch lines and circles of my vision into it. I had wanted to see if I could complete the circle of vision, so I could begin to give a more useful scouting report to my people. But instead, I have encountered a problem.

It was only a matter of time, really. I may technically be a child, but I am not a fool. Monsters once could be an isolated nightmare. Monsters twice is not a coincidence. That is a pattern, and one I have no interest in falling prey to.

So I track them. They are moving sideways in my vision, relative to my own position, following a trampled trail of brush. Technically, they are getting farther away from our camp. But there are two problems with that. One is that they are following a trail that changes directions as it weaves around trees or follows the lip of small valleys. And that path could, at any time, bend back this way. And should it cut too far toward us, it will be inside my watch, past the minimum line from which I can cast **Distant Vision**. Which will require us to prepare for the worst.

The other problem is that they are hauling captives. And they are getting farther away.

I evaluate options, and they are all bad. The best I could do myself is **Make Low Blade** through my sight using **Link Spellwork**, and that will simply not be good enough. Too slow, too obvious, and their captives don't even look *awake*, much less capable of fighting back with a single dagger. Everything else is even worse. **Form Wall**? To stop them for the smallest moment before they simply walk around? **Bind Insect**? To harass them with a clawful of stinging ants, perhaps?

And so I turn to my other resource. The one that I hesitate to actually call a resource. Part of my self rebels at the idea, to reduce people down to just another ledger line. But while thinking of them as tools is reductive and disgusting, I cannot deny that it is through the people near me that I have the most reach into the world.

But these monsters are no small scouting group destined to never report back. They are not the remnants of a hard fought battle waiting to be picked off. No, these creatures, with their too-sharp steps and their tethering webs, are a force that I can tell just from watching are dangerous. Eight of them, with no injuries or weaknesses I can see to exploit.

I have exactly one person in even remotely good health who can fight. And I *suspect* that Yuea has been keeping herself on half rations to stretch out their food supply. It doesn't matter how many knives I can give her that are better than they should be; if I ask her to fight, at best, she would be added to the cluster of prisoners.

That is not an outcome I am willing to suffer. Even if it means that the only real choice is to sit, and do *nothing*, while people I wish dearly I could help are taken away for a purpose I do not fully know yet. I assume food, though, which is bad enough.

The only thing I can really do is watch. Which is itself a problem, as **Distant Vision** comes closer and closer to being emptied of any of the nothingness that I use to fuel it.

I'm not happy about this, but I will still have power in reserve, and I am still waiting patiently for the presence of a bird that might possibly be considered 'willing'. So while what I truly *want* is to advance my **Tenacity** to see the options it brings, or my **Spirituality** or **Ingenuity** so I might make even more of an impact with **Shape Wood** or **Form Wall** respectively, *instead* I turn my mental focus onto the progress that is driven by the needs of the moment.

I cannot let these creatures leave my line of sight, limited though it is. And so my **Authority** rises, to keep **Distant Vision**'s fire stoked. Three points of power in my constellation used up.

Almost immediately I realize I have come close to making an error. The current spell working of **Distant Vision** that I have afield is not abutted to my inner limit; I have been following these creatures for some distance, and while I do not actually know the absolute outer limit of my range, I know that I have made progress toward it. And so when my spell is forcefully shunted, my perspective abruptly different from one beat to the next, it only takes me a quick attempt to recast to confirm what I did not think of.

With the rising of my **Authority**, my outer range has increased. So has the spell's pool of potential magic. These are things I expected. What I did *not* expect and account for was that its inner range would be pushed farther away as well. So far, my progression has only amplified strengths, not flaws; at least as far as I could determine. Perhaps a closer examination of my other spells is in order.

Regardless, while my hasty choice has come close to causing me to lose track of my quarry, they are still just barely within its bounds. I make a new ring upon my bark map, updating everyone who cares to see, and continue my vigil. I will, now, have no trouble following them for some time. The additional strength allotted to my **Authority** spells enough that **Bind Insect** could fit half a beehive under its banner now, if I so chose.

I continue to follow and watch. Past scenery that would be beautiful and bountiful if I were here for any other reason. Rich leafy trees and flowering plants, rays of light dancing through the canopy now partially visible in my expanded sight overhead. This would be a fine way to relax, if it were not for the nightmare I am tracing.

One of the people being pulled along stumbles. Falls. The procession stops, briefly, as one of the creatures steps backward on jittering legs, and prods at their fallen captive. Then, as casually as if it were a shrug, they lance the spined tip of their leg into the downed woman's back. Once, twice, a half dozen times before they stop.

The monsters keep moving, pulling along dead-eyed prisoners, as if their stop was nothing more than a particularly large rock to walk around.

I mark the site of the fallen on my map. Or at least, where I estimate it to be. With how far my spell stretches now, it would be madness to expect anyone to find that without days of searching. But perhaps someday, they can be properly cared for.

I cannot focus on this. I lack the option to weep, there is no outlet for this emotion. The building rage and sorrow at my ineffectiveness cannot be allowed to overwhelm me. And so, I distract myself. I must.

While I cannot stop the flow of knowledge from the spells, even as I split my attention, I can find other things that are more useful or peaceful to observe or take action on. I watch the inner workings of the beehive for a time. Seeing the careful arrangement of comb and honey, the way the bees flow around and alongside each other in a communal dance of productivity is like a balm for my souls. Through the eyes of some of the bees that are outside, I watch the people who are working together to stitch together the treated leather they have into a tent, hammering down stakes into the dirt with tools I repaired this morning.

There is a symmetry beginning to form here. I can feel it, somehow. I recast **Distant Vision** and continue following the monsters as they get ever farther from us.

I turn my attention to something else that catches at the edge of my thoughts. **Bind Insect**. When I called upon it to peer through borrowed eyes, I could feel the spell itself having expanded.

Bind Insect is, I believe, far and away one of my more flexible spells. It seems almost eager to properly convert thought to magic, and has even been doing so in ways I might not have realized until this moment. For example, days and days ago, I told the bees bound to me that the people around the clearing were friends. Or, more accurately, I gave a simple command to not harm the people in the clearing, and then added everyone to that command, even the demons when they arrived.

And *my* bees appear to have communicated that to their hive somehow. My people know to leave the bees alone, and the bees have been peaceful and companionable. Even the ones that I hold no sway over. Is this a part of the spell? Or are these bees somehow a type of honeybee that acts on their own initiative when given magical orders from an unseen voice?

I somehow *doubt* it is the latter. And so, after I renew my tracking spell, I begin to delve into the workings of the magic that tethers **Bind Insect** to each of my bees.

And it does not take me long, with the spell now expanded and even easier for me to understand, to see what has been occurring. Or at least, to learn something *interesting*, even if it is not the cause of the strangeness.

The spell reserves a small portion of its reservoir for each tether I form. Every bee and beetle under my command has a cost to it. And until now, I assumed that cost was in the form of a blockage, something preventing recovery of my magic; but that isn't it at all.

Instead, each tether is *feeding them*. A portion of my magic moves between us, a tiny trickle of whatever the empty liquid that I use is saturating their bodies. And their souls.

Bees have souls. That is what I am tethered to. Not their eyes or their wings, but the very firmament of their being. And into that soul, I am pouring more power than any simple honeybee has ever felt before.

Under such conditions, of course they are growing. Becoming more and more than they were before. I wonder; are my chosen bees like me? Do they see the advancement of their singular soul? Magics that build from it? Have they chosen, in their own way, to adapt themselves into the shared pillars of two communities?

Maybe not. Maybe they are just bees, after all. But rather clever ones.

There is one more thing I find interesting. That string of power that I am slowly feeding into my bound bugs? I have control of that now. Ever so slight, but it is real. And I wish to know what I can make of this. With that in mind, I open the gate on my beetle, my first test subject. Slowly at first, to make sure I do not harm him. But more and more, until I am giving as much as I can. Enough that the spell is no longer simply bound to not recover all the way, but that the power of **Bind Insect** is draining away as it fills the insect.

The discovery is fascinating enough to sap away at the rage I am still feeling. But that may end shortly.

I renew my **Distant Vision** one more time, tracking after the monsters.

And the spell splinters.

My normally perfect ring of vision is disrupted. Cracking against something. From where I have followed them, I can see normally the abrupt end to the line of vegetation, the trampled mud and piles of bones. The strange pair of pillars of dark stone. But farther in, the monsters and their prey slip out of my view. There are great gaps pushing into my sight, circles in the earth that I cannot approach with my magic.

Circles that feel distressingly familiar.

I shift my casting to **See Domain**. Compare the measurements and lines of my own circular plots of control. But I cannot get an accurate measurement through **Distant Vision**.

But perhaps...

Link Spellwork. Distant Vision. See Domain.

The ledger opens up before me. I cannot see into the spaces that remind me of **Fortify Space** with this any more than I can with **Distant Vision**. But that does not mean the spell's provided knowledge fails to change. It is the pillars. They are tagged and logged in the ledger of **See Domain**. But it takes me a shift of mental perspective to see why.

They do not belong to *me*.

The last of the monsters slips into the space that **Distant Vision** will not reach, their prisoners dragged along behind them.

And I begin to feel afraid.