

I took my time investing my points, each added level resulting in a rush of new knowledge washing over me. It was an incredible sensation, to feel my skill advancing, to suddenly have access to so many more tools and concepts. The magic behind rituals was fascinating, and I was chomping at the bit to test it out.

Not long after dropping my last three charges into the third level of ritual, I left the shop at a quick walk. It wasn't even one AM, but this Earth had its own version of chain, one-stop-shop stores like CVS and Walgreens. With any luck, they would have what I needed. Rituals were a magic of materials and design, which meant I couldn't just jump in. I needed to buy a few things first, then spend some time preparing.

As I walked with purpose, my brain was still alight, examining all of the knowledge I had gained.

The first thing I realized was that I hadn't been entirely correct in thinking that rituals could be used to create complicated things. The process of designing and creating a ritual was complicated, though I had a significant leg up with all of the knowledge that had just been downloaded into my brain. Despite their complicated nature, they were almost always dedicated to creating singular effects or phenomena. I could create a ritual to enhance a shield's ability to withstand attacks, but it would be nearly impossible to create one to allow that same shield to react to different types of attacks in different ways. That was the work of enchantment.

That isn't to say that it was impossible, just that it was very difficult and would likely result in a hilariously expensive and complicated ritual circle, to the point of being completely unfeasible.

There was a lot of overlap between rituals and enchantment, at least in physical objects, with each side having things it could and couldn't do, as well as pros and cons and strong and weak points.

That said, the width and breadth of what rituals were capable of was staggering. With every idea that popped into my head, I could see some way to achieve the concept. Some of the results wouldn't even be close to feasible since creating boots that would blast me in one singular direction with enough force to fling me through the air was *not* actually flying, but still.

The second thing I realized is that despite having a clearly wide spread of knowledge, I did not gain everything connected to rituals. There were several spots I could "see" that were clearly missing continuations, almost as if the subject stopped dead in its tracks. I would have assumed this was knowledge I just didn't have access to for this level, except that geomancy fit rather neatly at a space quite similar to suddenly cut subjects.

It took me a minute to realize that these spots were sections of ritual magic that were either so specific or had shifted and evolved so much that they weren't considered to fall under the broad title of rituals. Like geomancy, these would likely be ritual adjacent but still clearly be their own things. I had some loose sense of what some of them could do, like Chimerization, which was basically like geomancy but with animal parts.

Yeah, I was glad I got geomancy.

When I finally arrived at the store, I made my way back to the office and school supplies section. I filled a shopping basket with graph paper notebooks, a calculator, pencils, a whiteboard, dry-erase markers, highlighters, a protractor, a compass, and several boxes of simple white chalk. I grabbed some breakfast as well, but it wasn't anything exciting. When I paid for everything, I immediately headed back to the shop, relying on Alya to get me back safely.

When I finally arrived back at my temporary home, I immediately got to work. There were so many things that I wanted to make, but I decided my first creation would be a bit of a test. The urge to start big was strong, especially since my understanding of ritual crafting meant I could have puzzled out some incredibly impressive rituals in essentially the same time it took to design something on the simpler side.

Designing a ritual was an interesting process. There was a disturbing amount of math involved, though the subject wasn't nearly as scary as it used to be. I was pretty sure I now had what was a college level of mathematics in my head, though it obviously didn't really apply to any equivalent fields. Building the ritual itself was like a combination of solving a complicated equation, balancing a geometric proof, and discerning a difficult logic puzzle, all of which were interconnected and, therefore, had a tendency to shift and move as you tried to solve different aspects. Altering one angle would change the value of a separate variable, requiring a new solution to a later logic loop, which in turn affected the original required angle.

There were also rules that affected the ritual's effectiveness. For one, sacrificing materials was a core part of ritual magic. I could do a frankly ridiculous amount of things with nothing but some treated chalk and a flat surface, but most of that would be low-level, and frequently it wouldn't be permanent, either.

Not only that, but as a general rule, the more simple a ritual was, the less powerful, potent, or specific it was. With several lines, some circles, and less than two dozen arcane symbols, I could create a bowl that would heat its contents. It would work, but it would only have one setting, and would require me to constantly feed it energy, which it would burn through ridiculously fast. With a hundred symbols, fifteen layers of circles, and hundreds of lines, I could create a bowl that would heat its contents, use ambient magic, the bowl itself wouldn't heat up, and it could just kind of tell how hot its contents needed to be.

The first ritual I would need to complete was actually one of a handful of complete rituals I had gained from the three levels of ritual design and crafting. The purified, treated chalk that was required for a significant portion of rituals was apparently considered part of the ritual crafting portion, meaning I got its creation ritual circle in full.

I took some of the spare slate from the tiles I had bought for the upgraded geomancy partition and laid it out on one of the still-standing shop counters. I then used a rather gnarly spell to cut a slit into my pointer finger and create a sort of magical, glowing fountain pen, formed around the newly cut hole. I spent about an hour setting up the small, basic ritual,

finishing the process by carefully laying a dozen sticks of chalk into the center focus circle. There were several different chalk creation rituals bouncing around in my head, all of them with various levels of complexity and intent, but this was the most basic.

"Alright... You watching Alya?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the small, blood-red ritual circle.

"I am," She responded, sounding confused. "Why are you so excited? Your geomancy rituals are much more complicated than this."

"Yeah, but this is step one," I explained. "When it's done, I'll be able to do all sorts of rituals."

"After you design them."

"Really?" I asked, standing up straight and looking around. "This is groundbreaking stuff, Alya. Magic of a new type, something fundamental. Don't harsh the vibe, dude."

I could actually feel her internal eye roll through our connection, and I couldn't help but snicker to myself as I turned back to focus on the ritual. I gave it one last check before reaching out with a singular finger, touching a specifically designed line of blood. I pushed my magic out of my finger and into the line, the ritual eagerly drinking my magic. After a moment of feeding the spell, it flashed, a dull red glow flaring up from the arcane symbols. The blood I used to write out the ritual burned away in a blink, leaving behind black soot that I would have to wipe away.

In the center of the ritual, sitting in the focus circle, were twelve purified sticks of chalk. I knew that several aspects of their makeup had changed, but the only visual cue that something had happened was that they were all now a pastel red rather than pure white. I clapped and pumped my fist, celebrating the successful ritual. I took the chalk, slid it back into the box I had taken it from, and took out the next twelve, repeating the ritual after wiping the slate down. Now, I had a full box of twenty-four purified chalk pieces.

With the most basic ritual ingredients complete, I grabbed the bag of stuff I bought from the store and sat down on the couch. Now that I had chalk, it was time to start designing my first ritual.

Again, I could have gone big and made my first custom ritual something crazy, but I thought it would be best to start small, something basic and easy to recover from if something went wrong. That said, I still wanted my first creation to be something useful, so I set out to find a middle ground and make something appropriate.

A wizard's staff.

It was more than a bit cliché, but then again, everyone clearly thought I was already leaning into the "my powers are magic" shtick anyway, so what was a bit more lean?

The first part of the project would be the main staff, which I would ritualize to infuse with lighting elementalism. Depending on how complex and potent I was willing to push the ritual, it

could have a pretty solid increase to my casting power. Not all spells would work with it, but those that did would be much more potent. The second part would be a crystal of some sort, one that I would ritualize to contain a single spell, which I would have to charge it with. Depending on what I stored inside the crystal, it could really up my on-demand power.

I would probably end up shoving the most powerful lightning spell I had inside it, since it took too long to use in most combat scenarios.

The staff part was easy, as I could grow it from just about any tree, though I hoped to use a spell from my druidcraft to locate a particularly old or magical tree if such a thing existed in this world. The crystal didn't necessarily need to be anything specific, but it needed to be the size of my fist at least, so I thought my best bet would be to call around places selling interior decor. All I needed was a big chunk of quartz or something, the most important part being that it contained a crystalline structure of some sort.

Hell, with a little research, I could probably set up a ritual to make a giant salt crystal. A natural source would be better, but beggars can't be choosers.

I spent the rest of the night and the first handful of hours of the morning working on the two separate rituals, managing to finish them both by nine o'clock. After that, I did my normal morning routine, including a steel absorption. All the while, ideas for my eventual new home danced around in my head. Of course, a project like a wizard stronghold was likely to be a work in progress for many years.

When I was ready for the day, I headed off for the nearest forested area. Brockton Bay was a decent-sized city, smaller than Boston, but only by about twenty percent. What it did have going for it, beyond its expanding harvest of parahumans, was a surprisingly large forested area around its outskirts. It was some sort of government-backed preservation or conservation area, a remarkably large swath of land without anything but a few hiking trails running through it. This area continued right up to and around the mountains responsible for the Bay's abnormally temperate winters, at least for its location.

It took me half an hour to walk to the outer limits of the city, which was where I quickly changed into my costume. While I didn't like the idea of showing off my interest in the area at all, I would be using magic in the open, so I needed to wear the costume, just in case.

Once I was changed, I walked into the forest, ignoring the trails completely. Alya could guide me back if I got really lost, and there was very little chance I would be able to find what I was looking for along one of the many trails.

Once I was a good way into the trees, I cast my first spell from the druidcraft subject. It was designed to locate powerful trees and plants, most likely for harvest if the theme of the subject held true. It was a simple spell, not surprising considering it had no control scheme, no discrepancy adjustment, and no way to control its selection. You just cast it, and it points you to magical plants.

Considering my assumption that magic didn't exist in this world save for me, I was suitably surprised when the spell latched on to something immediately. I quickly oriented myself before taking off at a run, the spell guiding me deeper and deeper into the forest.

After a good twenty-minute run, using the marathon spell to keep me going, I arrived at a small clearing, at the center of which was a truly massive yew tree. With how large it was, it had to be ancient, and considering yew trees could live up to three thousand years, that was saying something. I also realized that I had gotten a bit more than just magic from my levels in druidcraft.

I approached the tree slowly, running my hand over its flakey, peeling bark. It was far from what I would call a beautiful tree, with moss growing on its branches and trunk showing its age. Still, you could practically feel its age as you stood next to it.

Rather than force it to grow a whole new branch, putting a lot of strain on the tree in the process, I used my enhanced strength to climb up the trunk. When I reached the first branch of appropriate length, I put my hand at the base, my fingers splayed wide.

*"Parere voluntatem meam, et incrementum ac figuram huius plantae mutare,"* I intoned, magic flowing through me.

Between each of my fingers, arcane symbols appeared, flaring with green energy. A second set of symbols appeared ahead of them before both sets sank into the tree, disappearing into the living wood. The tree seemed to shudder as I could suddenly feel my will cut into the wood. After a moment, I let out a breath, my eyes closed, forming what I wanted on feel alone. When I opened my eyes, I was holding a smooth, almost polished staff, two meters long. I had smoothed the branch out everywhere but its grip, growing a gnarled cup where I could place the gem. Until I was ready, I would need to keep the branch alive with magic so I could seal the crystal cage shut when I was done.

With a final mental command, I cut the branch from the trunk of the tree before I quickly jumped down. There, I spent another minute examining the fruits of my labor.

"What do you think?" I say, asking Ayla. "Not bad, right?"

"It is more than adequate," She commented. "Congratulations."

"Thanks..." I said, looking around now that my forest task was complete. "Let's head back, I still need to find a crystal."