

I was just about to step out of the woods and back onto the trails when I realized I now had a problem. While I knew the area around the trail center was empty, thanks to Alya, I was now carrying a just under six-foot-long wooden staff. It was *incredibly* eye-catching, meaning that people would be able to identify it almost immediately on sight, which made walking around with it in my civilian identity impossible. Not only that, but it would lead people directly back to my temporary home if that was where I carried it, too.

Thankfully, the stick was still only twenty minutes old, and I already had plans to keep it alive as long as I could. With a whispered spell, I slowly curled the staff up and around itself like a snail shell, compacting a six-foot staff into a foot-and-a-half wide disk with a bulge at the end for the crystal. It just barely fit into the side satchel I used to carry my costume and civilian clothes.

"Well... keeping the staff alive just became even more important," I commented, pulling off my black overcoat next.

"How long can you do that for?"

"Uh...twenty, maybe thirty years?" I said, filing through my druidcraft knowledge. "There's a ritual to preserve splicing branches that I could probably modify, and with a couple of the fertilizing and maintenance spells... I'll have to keep one end in a bucket so it can get some water...."

"And the ritual to enhance its connection to electricity won't be affected?"

"That's the good thing about rituals. Their effects are anchored to an object, not to magic symbols or jewels," I explained. "As long as the staff is whole, the ritual will stay intact. It's almost like a conceptual thing. Even carving off pieces wouldn't do it. The ritual effect won't stop until it was truly, at its base essence, broken."

Once I was back in civilian clothes, I headed back into the city, making a beeline for the library. I had a whole list of things I needed to buy, which meant I needed to do some research. Until I had my own internet hook-up, the library would have to do.

After an hour or so of searching the internet, I found a few locations around the city that I wanted to check out. It was mainly stores that sold knick-knacks, home decoration places, and a few other stores I was hoping would carry crystals and other things I needed. I remember one of my aunts having two amethyst chunks as bookends when I was younger, but I had no idea how common that kind of thing was. I was sort of hoping that the city would have some sort of wiccan or witch store, but there was nothing that I could find with the research I had done.

It seemed that with capes and Endbringers running around, Wicca and other things like it never really gained an avid following. Or maybe I was just looking in the wrong places. I was far from an expert.

Still, this was a city, and despite its harsh conditions, people were still living their lives, trying to make the best of it. Not to mention that the city did have a portion that was more well-off, which meant stores to cater to them.

It took two stores before I finally found a place that had a chunk of rose quartz big enough for my staff. Once I got that, I brought it directly back to the shop since it was a bit big to be lugging around. Once that was set and I had a quick snack break, I immediately headed out again.

When it came to ritual material sacrifices, the level of specificity varied depending on the ritual's design. I was confident I could get my hands on a few specific things, so I designed my rituals around them being definitely included, while leaving more vague slots open for ideas and concepts rather than specific objects.

For example, I needed a vessel of some kind, preferably one made from something natural. While that requirement could very easily be filled by a carved wooden bowl, a chiseled stone bowl would work just as well. In a similar vein, I needed something that was considered empty or unfilled, but was still a solid object and didn't actually have room inside it to store anything. A drained battery would work, as would an empty hard drive, though both of those would throw off the ritual a lot because of how complicated and artificial they were. I planned on getting an empty book of some kind to fill that particle need.

By the time I finished shopping, I was really starting to feel it in my wallet. Alya had done such an amazing job finding things to sell and just randomly "Lost" money that cash really hadn't been a problem yet. Now, however, after spending so much money, I was really looking forward to starting to heal at the hospitals.

Thankfully, I had enough to buy what I needed, so I quickly headed back to the shop, eager to get started.

The first thing I did was tear up more of the linoleum tiles off of the floor. While the chalk ritual had been small enough to fit on a single foot-wide tile, rituals ranged from that size all the way to a dozen meters and beyond. Very few people would actually try and do a ritual that large as it would be ludicrously complicated and very likely to fail, but it was still technically possible.

Once I had a nice big patch cleared, I used another spell from the ritual crafting part of my most recent purchases to smooth and level the surface. It was already pretty much level, but the concrete was rough enough that I spent an hour sanding it down to a much smoother space. Once that was done, I got to work copying the first ritual from my notes. After I was finally finished, using up a full stick of purified chalk in the process, only two more steps remained. The first was laying out the sacrificial materials in their appropriate locations, and the last was to activate the ritual.

There were four sacrificial circles in the staff ritual, as well as the focusing circle. I uncurled the unfinished staff and carefully laid it in the focusing circle, which was the center of the ritual. After that, I placed a bundle of coiled copper wire, a natural chunk of hematite, a stack of batteries, and a small electric motor into the four sacrifice circles. Technically, modern,

factory-made things weren't the best to use in rituals, especially when mixing with something organic like the Yew staff. That said, electricity is hard to attune anything for, especially on a budget, so I needed to accept a few cut corners.

Besides, I had seen this coming when I designed the ritual, so I had done everything I could to at least partially compensate for the modern things.

Once everything was set, I knelt beside the ritual, putting both my hands inside separate energy gatherers. After taking a deep breath, I finally began.

I slowly poured magic into the ritual, the chalk lines gradually beginning to glow a pale blue. That was the influence of the lightning or electric element I was attempting to fuse to the staff, as a neutral ritual would just glow white. Unlike the ritual to create the refined chalk or the process of geomancy, this ritual was going to take some time. Altering materials like wood required a gentle hand. Otherwise, you risked damaging the focus or a lesser result.

So, I knelt there, slowly but surely feeding magic to the ritual, keeping it under control. The ritual circle I had designed did have some basic buffers to absorb spikes in energy, but nothing that could handle a complete wash. Thankfully, I had Alya to talk to, or I would have had a lot harder time controlling my patience.

After about an hour of constantly feeding the ritual magic, each of the sacrificial circles pulsed brightly. I watched as the object inside started to disintegrate, glowing cracks beginning to form as each of the material's essences were fed to the ritual. The process took another five minutes before the ritual was finally concluded. I cut the flow of magic, and the glowing chalk lines faded, revealing that chalk itself had long since burned away, the lines of magic self-sustaining as long as I fed them.

I stood up slowly, using a bit of healing magic to fix my bruised knees, before picking up the staff and turning it over in my hands. I traced my fingers along the smooth wood, following shiny copper veins that were now visible, gleaming under the shop lights. It looked almost natural, like the copper had grown with the tree. The handle was now black and shiny like the polished hematite. Thankfully, it still felt like rough wood, making it easier to grip than the rest of the staff.

Even with the inorganic elements that showed through the ritualized wood, it still registered as a fully alive plant, responding to my magic as I curled it up and straightened it back out. I tested this a dozen times before I was satisfied that the ritual hadn't screwed anything up. Once I had confirmed that, it was time to check if the ritual had actually worked. I held up the staff, aiming it across the room.

*"Fulgur parvum fragmentum,"* I said, casting one of my most basic lightning spells, focusing it through my staff.

Rather than a disk of energy forming around my fingers as I jabbed out with it, it instead formed around the tip of the staff. Three arcane symbols spun around it, before a single blast of

electricity slapped out against the far wall. It slammed into a metal panel, noticeably denting it and leaving a fist-sized spot of glowing red, near molten metal.

"Holy fuck..." I said, my eyes wide.

Right off the bat, I could feel that it hadn't been a gigantic power boost. But, then again, I hadn't expected it to be. It was, however, much more of a boost than I had anticipated. The verbalized version of that spell was potent before, enough to knock off Heap's trash limbs when I was fighting him, but it was still around the edge of nonlethal. Unless, of course, I fired it directly into someone's heart. With my staff, though? That had absolutely just been lethal.

I fired off the spell a few more times, this time not doing the chant or even summoning the sigils, wordlessly casting the basic spell. Usually, this was enough to blast the paint off of a surface or incapacitate for a few seconds, depending on where I hit them. With the staff, it was leaving little cherry red spots in the metal plating every time I cast it.

"Well... There's my boost in combat magic," I said, lowering the staff, the butt hitting the concrete floor. "Damn, that was more than I was expecting... Maybe the Yew really was magically charged..."

"Your target is still smoking," Alya warned.

I looked up at the target, and sure enough, smoke was beginning to pour from behind it. I quickly ran over, snagging my water container as I did. Luckily, it was still only smoldering, meaning once I pulled the panel away and splashed some water on it, the smoke died down.

"Yeah... note to self, no more lightning inside..." I said, a hot, humid breeze rolling over my shoulders as Alya made her displeasure known. "Alright, alright, sorry. I'll be more careful."

"Good," She said, the warm breeze dying out. "Now, are you prepared to finish your creation?"

After giving one last check to make sure we weren't about to burn the shop down, I started copying down the next ritual. This one was slightly more complicated than the last, primarily because of how many more sacrificial circles I had included, though there were more arcane symbols and lines in it as well.

In the end, the quartz crystal sat in the focusing circle, while an empty hand-crafted wooden box, a dried, empty gourd, an empty leather-bound book, several small uncracked geodes and a large bowl carved from a burl were oriented around it in their sacrificial circles. It had been a pain in the ass to get all of these things back to the shop, but with Alya's help I had just barely managed.

When the ritual was finally set up, drawn out, and filled with the appropriate materials, I knelt back down beside it. This ritual did not have the same need to go slow as the staff ritual did, but I still couldn't go full blast without risking the materials. That meant that it was done in just under a fourth of the time, saving my knees some suffering as I poured my magic into the appropriate spots.

Around fifteen minutes later, the ritual was complete. All of the sacrificial materials cracked and turned to dust, which faded away into nothingness as the ritual infused the crystal with what I wanted. When the dust settled and the glowing stopped, I stepped into the faded and used-up ritual circle, picking up what had once been a hunk of rose quartz. The chunk of crystal had lost its pinkness, replaced by a blue core with light blue crystals. The actual shape was the same.

As I was studying the crystal chunk, Alya picked up my staff and carried it to me, passing the ritualized branch of Yew. Carefully, I slid the blue quartz into the staff bulb before using druidcraft to seal the crystal inside. I played around with it for a few minutes, trying to get it to both look good and be stable enough to fight with. Eventually, I settled on a grasping vine look that gripped around the base tightly, stopping about halfway up the crystal and leaving the rest of it fully exposed.

Once it was set and secure, I quickly tested the crystal out, infusing a healing spell into it. It was an interesting sensation, to feel a spell click as it completed, only for it to immediately vanish, but I couldn't argue with the results. With a quick jab of the staff and a shout of "Cast!" the healing spell inside the crystal would fly back out. I tried it with a few more spells, including another lighting spell, and found that the spell release happened with pretty consistent accuracy. Of course, this was useless for any spell that had to be cast at a touch, unless I was going to start poking people to heal them.

But it was perfect for a high-end, powerful lighting spell, one typically too long to cast in combat. Even better, I could cast it *through* the staff and then into the crystal, meaning not only was it powerful on demand, but it was supercharged.

I offered it to Alya with a proud smile.

"Well? What do you think?" I asked. "My first real ritual creation, and not too shabby either!"

"It is well done, William. Congratulations," She said, taking the staff from me in her corporeal form so she could inspect it. "What are you going to do now?"

"Now, I'm going to do a bit more shopping," I confessed, getting a raised eyebrow from my elemental partner. "I know, but this won't be more than twenty or thirty bucks. Then we will go visit some of our less fortunate friends. I want to try out more druidcraft."