

It took me about nine hours in total to complete the alchemy station in its entirety. Considering that this station, and the branch of knowledge it represented, was its own brand of defying the laws of physics, nine hours to set up a one-stop shop for all the metal and gems I needed was pretty impressive. Though in all likelihood, I would almost certainly need to expand and upgrade a good portion of it once I leveled up the subject.

Considering the significant boon I received from just two levels, I was already crossing my fingers that the next cycle would include level three. If it didn't, while I wouldn't likely be able to purchase it with my charges for a few cycles, it was definitely on the short list of eventual purchases.

Some branches of magic had different feels to them, and alchemy *felt* like it was the first step to creating large-scale magic, as with more refined methods of making whatever I wanted, I would need large quantities of gold, platinum, jewels, and more. With a constant supply of that, plus more esoteric materials, I could significantly expand the scope of my projects. Already, my mind was drafting ideas for larger, more potent rituals. I was already scrapping along the three levels I already had, but if I invested four charges to upgrade it...

A thought for later.

Once I was done with the alchemy station, I called Kali over. By this point, her dogs were reformed enough that she could leave them alone for a good while, as long as no humans went near them. That was good, because with her ability to use magic, she could easily run the infusion station, augmenting our golems. It would be a lengthy process to complete all of them, and that didn't even include upgrading the guardians. However, getting through the golems without me personally needing to spark each infusion was a massive help.

I explained the station and the process while quickly creating and infusing everything I would need to run a new geomantic ritual on myself and Olivia, whom I then called to invite over. When she confirmed she was interested in an upgrade, I teleported over to our usual meeting spot, where she was already waiting.

"Hey," she greeted with a nod. "So what's this about upgrading our enhancements?"

"Yeah, figured out how to infuse... You know what, C'mon, I'll just show you," I took her hand and we teleported home, right beside the ritual platform, where the metals were already waiting.

"What's all this?" She asked, walking up to the platform but staying off of it. "That metal... what's different about it?"

"It's been refined and infused with magic," I explained, climbing up and gesturing to the metals. "All the ingredients to do my max geomantic enhancement, but now the results will be even better, as the metal is more reactive and better to begin with. It's going to be a noticeable boost for us."

"Alright, sure," she nodded. "I gotta focus more on stealth, though. I don't think my power likes it when I lean too heavily on brute force."

"Huh... That's interesting," I said, turning to face her and tilting my head. "We can look into that further when we have the chance. For now, hop in the circle."

"You going to do this for New Wave too?" she asked as we carefully stepped inside the heavily modified geomantic partition, chunks of infused metal in place around us.

"Probably," I responded, scanning the ritual to double-check it. "They are good people, they need all the help they can get. I'll make the offer when I'm upgrading their golems."

"Wait, this works for the golems, too?" She asked, surprised.

"Not this, this only works for living creatures," I explained. "But the infusion process, that refines and infuses the metal with magic? That works on their empty frames, giving them a not insignificant all-around boost. Now hold on, I need to focus."

After a long moment, the ritual was completed, and I could feel the increase in our physical abilities. It was not nearly as major as the original permanent enhancement, but it was a complete upgrade around the board. Olivia and I spent an hour sparring and messing around, getting used to our own strength, throwing each other around, and doing pointlessly complex acrobatics.

We were shockingly powerful at this point, a solid twenty-five percent increase in speed, strength, and durability. We are also now much more resistant to heat and electricity, in addition to our already increased durability. Olivia could shrug off some of my most powerful lightning spells with a shrug and a wince.

When we were done messing around, I showed off the new look of the golems.

"Huh... not quite human still, but less gorilla-like, which is good," Olivia said, walking around the non-sentient metal construct. "What about the guardians?"

"The process burns through some of the metal's mass, hence the change in shape," I said, gesturing to a golem. "I can't do that to one of the guardian's frames, they would lose their shape. I need to design a workaround. Shouldn't be too hard."

"Why haven't you done it yet?"

"... 'Cause I just worked for like nine hours straight," I responded, turning around to give her an unhappy look. "This is what I got through."

"Oh... right," she said with a wince. "Sorry?"

I rolled my eyes and shook my head, sitting heavily down in one of the chairs by the common area. Kali had made good progress upgrading the golems, and I had planned to make the guardians the next priority. I just needed a break.

After a few minutes of chilling, Olivia and I teleported into the city to grab something to eat. She was forced to change into her uniform, as by now my identity had entirely broken down and I was officially an unmasked cape. It was unfortunate, and probably the only real issue with people knowing who I was. If I had gone to the docks community, nobody would have suspected anything, since I go there all the time and talk to her as well as Charles and the others. But having her unmasked and alone with me would have thrown up some questions.

Thankfully, it wasn't a big deal for her to put on her costume, since it was always with her, tucked into her shadow.

Once we were done eating, I brought her back to the community before heading back to the forest, so I could start making the necessary adjustments to the infusion array to work on guardians. Or rather, I started designing the adjustments, since they would be a non-permanent addition drawn on with electrum or iron chalk. There was no need to ruin the permanent array to work on the much smaller group. Thankfully, as I mentioned earlier, the process was relatively straightforward. When Kali took a break to visit her dogs and relax, I had Smokey and Piper return to the compound. Their golems had already been converted, and they were eager to go through the same process.

The process was, in fact, merely an extension of the golem conversion, with some slight modifications to the original ritual. Smokey, as he was the first to volunteer, quickly stripped down before stepping into the array. Just as the golems did, he took a sturdy stance to prevent his frame from falling over. I then carefully removed the golem core, followed by his spirit anchor. Once both were clear, I carefully cast my metal control spell, swathing the now inert frame in a two-inch plating of metal. I specifically did not fuse to their body, as I used the separation as a border between what I wanted destroyed and what I didn't. I then drew out the adjustments in electrum chalk and sparked the ritual started.

The process was visually very similar, but rather than burning metal from the golem frame, it instead burned the extra provided material. Some of the additional material also sank into the golem itself, filling in for all of the removed contaminants. When the infusion finished, all that was left of the metal I had wrapped around the frame were flakes, dust, and some small chunks, which crumbled and fell to the ground.

After spending a few minutes examining the frame, I carefully returned the core and Smokey's spirit anchor, the guardian coming to life in just a moment.

"How do you feel?" I asked as I scanned him with several spells.

"I feel fine," he said, looking down at his hands. "I can't feel any difference. "

"Hmm, let's hope that doesn't lead to any issues with applying your strength," I responded, tapping my chin. "Go take a walk and get a feel for yourself. Then maybe wrestle with one of the unchanged golems, get a feel for how much stronger you are."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," He agreed, grabbing his clothes and stepping off the platform.

As the guardian walked away, I started the process all over again for Piper, who thanked me before following after Smokey. I performed the infusion four more times before taking a break and letting Kali continue working on the normal golems.

Meanwhile, I finally started working on what I had spent so many points on. I had a considerably more profound understanding of annihilation magic than before, and it was time to put that to use.

First, right off the bat, I decided that a simple wand was not going to work for the final design. A wand was nearly impossible to aim well, not to mention that even a reinforced piece of wood was prone to breaking. No, the best way to make these weapons useful was to play to the strengths of the people wielding them, and that meant firearms.

I spent a few minutes hunting for natural, normal acorns. I then whipped up a ritual to merge them with electrum and platinum, the first for magic attunement and the second as a reinforcement, since it was tougher than most precious metals without negating the sensitivity to magic. Of course, I infused both of the metals before feeding them into the acorns in a ritual. I stored most of the acorns away, before bringing one off to the side of the compound and planting it in the ground.

I mentally reached out to Kali, who paused her work to help me slowly grow the tree in a way that wouldn't harm it. With both of us working our magic into it, the tree grew into a tall and sturdy oak, its bark marbled with shiny veins, the metal's presence growing with the tree.

When it was stable, and Kali returned to her work, I carefully grew a branch out from the tree, transforming it into something akin to a wooden rifle, though it flowed more organically. It was just under a meter long and covered in the same spiderwebbed electrum and platinum that the tree was, even though the branch lacked any bark. The branch wasn't particularly heavy, but it was far from light as well, feeling like a hefty, sturdy chunk of wood, despite the fancy veins of precious metals.

"I can feel the power already," Alya said, fluttering into her corporeal form as she walked around me. "I think growing more of your materials might be a good idea."

"I get the feeling you're right. The infused metal really made a significant difference..." I said, turning the soon-to-be weapon over in my hands. "I think I might need to remake my staff."

"A project for another day," the elemental suggested. "You have enough on your plate."

I nodded in agreement before taking another look at the magical wood. Now that I had proven the material was worthy of what I had in mind, it was back to the drawing board for the actual enchantment and ritual. In all likelihood, when I started to produce these on a larger scale, the enchantment would likely be where I could improve design, assuming I invested more charges into enchanting.

It took me three hours to design the ritual and enchantment. It would have likely taken longer, but I was pulling heavily from the knowledge gained from annihilation magic, which

provides the bare bones template for weapons similar to what I was making, at least in their final effect.

The rifle design was pretty unique, as far as I could tell.

The first step was to prepare the rifle for the ritual, as once the enchantment was set, any significant modifications to the weapon's shape might disrupt it. So, I took a quarter-sized diamond and fed it to the shaped branch, using my magic to pull the stone into the center, right where the chamber would be on a standard firearm. I then fed a dozen smaller diamonds along the "barrel", using my magic to center them as well. Finally, at the end of the "barrel," I pushed in an emerald the size of my thumbnail, sinking it into the "barrel," but leaving it visible from the end.

The diamonds would serve as a directional guide for the enhancement magic, while the emerald would serve as a final focus. When I was first designing the weapon, I considered using ruby to amplify the power or a sapphire to increase the final speed of the annihilation magic. In the end, however, all that power was useless if it couldn't be focused and controlled, so I went with the emerald to focus and direct it.

After checking that everything was secure and sturdy, it was time for the enchantment, which served as the activator, bound into a trigger that I literally grew into the branch, as well as the anchor and stabilizer for the annihilation ritual. The ritual held and directed the power, while the enchantment directed and stabilized the ritual. Without both working together to direct the dangerous energies, pulling the trigger would be like setting off a bomb, rather than a "projectile" weapon.

The enchantments went on pretty easily, unsurprisingly, since not only were enhancements generally more stable, but at the moment, there was very little power inside the device for the enchantment to contend with.

The power came in with the next step.

The ritual to conjure up the essence of annihilation was complicated, with dozens of components filling into the focal point, the wooden rifle. Drawing out the ritual lines in electrum chalk took quite a while, with the complexity of the lines and arcane symbols, making it difficult to speed through. When it came time to mass-produce the annihilation rifle, I would definitely have to make a permanent ritual site, filled with gold and silver, in order to keep up with the other items. Redrawing this, even if it were a version that allowed for multiple rifles to be created at once, and could be repeated a few times with the iron chalk, would still be a slow process.

Finally, the ritual circle was complete, the sacrificial materials were in place, and the rifle was sitting in the center of it all. I took a long, deep breath before kneeling down beside the circle and placing my hands along the outer ring. I had already double-checked everything, now it was time to make it happen.

I pushed my magic into the ritual, slowly filling it up over the span of ten minutes. As the sacrificial materials were fed into the rifle, purple sparks of energy began to run along its length,

the powerful magic slowly being locked inside. The sparks got more and more dense as the ritual continued, until, just at the end, I was concerned that they would leap off and slam into something important. Like me, for example.

Finally, the ritual finished, and the magic was sealed inside the rifle with a final loud zap. I slowly stood and made my way to the center of the burned-out ritual, carefully picking up the now completed annihilation rifle. I tested its weight, inspected the enchantments, and when it was clear that everything was intact, I let out a long breath.

"Alright. Let's find somewhere to test this thing."