

CHAPTER 63: THYME FOR SAGE

Shrubley stirred from the depths of a great, deep sleep. His thoughts slithered in and out of his grasp like the serpentii hunting them.

He struggled to recall what he had done. Bit by bit, Shrubley gained a greater hold of himself.

The Guidance Stone.

The Witch, Ceasewane, took him to it in the night while the others slept. Both the Guidance Stone and the Witch had tested him.

It wasn't just three questions. And it wasn't just three choices.

There were many more Classes that he could have picked than simply Druid, Sage, and Knight.

Just before it was too late, Shrubley had figured it out.

He had picked his Class, by choosing two simultaneously and blending the two to meet his ideals. One to strengthen against corruption and evil, the other to fight against it wherever it reared its ugly head.

In this lightless place, the golden glow of Shardscript revealed his rewards and his path to Advancement.

You have unlocked Sage Knight.

A rare Fused Class, the Sage Knight combines the erudite knowledge and spellcraft of a Sage with the combat prowess and stalwartness of a Knight.

Few Sages venture out of their protected Sanctums, rarely putting their hoarded knowledge to use for the people of Almora. Likewise, most Knights rarely crack open a book unless it is their Order's holy doctrine.

Your road is different. With the ability to acquire untold amounts of knowledge and the strength to protect it, you could become the next Shardlord of Almora.

For selecting a secret Fused Class, you gain moderately increased maximum health and mana growth per level up and rank up. Additionally, you gain slightly increased maximum stamina growth per level up and rank up.

You now gain the following per level up:

+2 Strength | +1 Skill | +3 Hardiness

+4 Willpower | +3 Arcane | +4 Restoration

You gain the Class ability, [Perfect Recall]

[Perfect Recall (Sage Knight)]

Cost: None

Cooldown: 1 hour

Become a walking library, one book at a time.

Imprint: When you focus on a given object, you can use [Perfect Recall] to capture the information. Once captured, any unprotected information is permanently inscribed within your [Grimoire].

[Grimoire]: A Sage-specific Class item that can be summoned at will. It is indestructible, but will vanish if it is damaged requiring it to be summoned again. All knowledge you gain from [Perfect Recall] is inscribed within its countless pages.

You gain the Class ability, [Valor]

[Valor (Sage Knight)]

Cost: Moderate mana

Cooldown: 60 seconds

Become a shield for the weak.

Imprint: Form a bond between yourself and any creature you can see within 100 feet, granting them a shield that absorbs damage they receive based on your Hardiness, Willpower, and rank.

You gain the Class ability, [Enlightenment]

[Enlightenment (Sage Knight)]

Cost: Low mana

Cooldown: 30 seconds

Elevate your mind.

Imprint: Optimize the efficacy of any spell or ability to its maximum.

You have successfully bound an essence, [Life (Prime)]

You gain the essence ability, [Transference]

[Transference (Life)]

Cost: Variable health, mana, or stamina

Cooldown: 90 seconds

Not all sacrifices need to be evil.

Imprint: Transfer a portion of your own health, mana, or stamina to any creature you can touch.

He immediately summoned his [Grimoire], and then pulled out his [Vinebound Questbook]. *I have two books!* he thought with unparalleled glee. *That's double the amount I had yesterday!*

For the moment, nothing else in the world mattered than these two most precious items in the entire universe. Shrubley held them tightly to his leafy chest, noticing that they looked quite a lot alike. Both were leather covers with

worked vines and trefoil leaves, but the [Grimoire] had a weight to it that surprised him.

I'll peruse you later, he told the [Grimoire]. With a thought, it vanished. He tried to dismiss the questbook as well, but while it was magical, it was not the same caliber of magic.

That is okay. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Shrublely told it as he tucked it safely away.

Shrublely marveled at the improvement to his attribute gains. Upon previously becoming a Copper Ranker, he gained two attributes per level up.

The two levels he gained while traveling with his reunited group had gotten him the equivalent of four pre-Copper levels. Now, the attributes he used most, Willpower, Arcane, and Restoration, were getting nearly double what he gained from when he had first hit Copper!

Such a leap in power, Shrublely mused.

His attribute spread was modified to suit his specialization considerably more. Additionally, the total sum was greater than ever before.

For just being a G-Grade Adventurer, he already had made it far. And yet, there was still so much more between him and freedom from this mirror realm.

[Shrublely]

Race: Soul Shrub

Class: Sage Knight

Rank: Copper

Level: 17

[Attributes]

Strength: 29

Skill: 33

Hardiness: 42

Willpower: 54

Arcane: 42

Restoration: 42

[Essences]

[Life (Prime)] (Copper Rank)

- [Transference]

[Curiosity (Black)] (Copper V Rank)

- [Lifelong Student]
- [Recycle]

[Nature (Green)] (Copper III Rank)

- [Bark Armor]
- [Budding Barrage]
- [Graft]

[Light (White)] (Copper III Rank)

- [Recovery]
- [Counteract]

He was in awe of seeing his Class filled in for once.

It was always one excuse or another. Either he didn't have sufficient essences, did not have a Class Affinity, or he lacked a Guidance Stone Attunement, which wasn't precisely necessary though it did grant an extra essence.

"Finally awake, are ya?" Mistress Ceaswane said, prodding the little fire she had going nearby. "Might as well come and join me. I didn't want to move you. Hiddlin' things can happen when you move somebody who has touched a Guidance Stone."

"Mistress Ceaswane, you are all right?" Shrubley exclaimed, full of fragile relief.

"For the time being," she said cryptically.

“Ah,” he whispered, tempering his hope that the Witch would end up healthy and well after this was all over. “You knew that there were more than three choices, didn’t you?” He sat down stiffly beside her and was rewarded with a mug of hot tea.

Even his glowbug familiar was perched on the rim of one of its own, though Shrubley wasn’t sure how much good it would do for the little thing. Apparently the Witch thought so, so maybe Shrubley’s guess was off the mark.

“I did at that. It’s a trial everybody has to go through,” she explained. “Those that can see, well, they need to see with their own eyes. You can’t tell somebody to look, it don’t work. Trust me.” There was a bitter twist to her thin lips, gone in a flash. “I’ll tell you something for free though, Shrubley. It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen anybody do what you just did.”

“I would expect many people to try taking all the Classes,” Shrubley pointed out.

“You would think, wouldn’t you? T’ain’t so. People is fickle. Once they see something within reach, they can only see what they might be able to get, never once thinking that the answer might not be so black and white but something in between. I wager if you try to pick everything, you’ll get nothing. Maybe even if you only pick two things and your heart ain’t in it.”

“Do you already know what I picked?” Shrubley asked, sipping from the steaming mug. It soothed and invigorated him in equal measure.

“I ain’t known you that long,” she told him.

“That is a very non-answer, answer, Mistress Ceasewane.” He laughed softly, leaves brushing against one another.

“Oh, you’re a prickly one, you are.”

“I am a shrub, aren’t I?”

That earned him a very rare chuckle.

“That you are, boy, that you are.” She sighed. “I suspect you’re a bit like your old man, but you’ve realized that you can’t follow in his footsteps and still be your own person. Had you not passed out, I would have said you would pick Sage. It’s a very rare Class, mostly only librarians and the like in the Sanctums take it because of its useful abilities to memorize text and the like.”

The glowbug made a squeaking noise with its legs as if agreeing with the Witch. Shrubley glanced at it, wondering if the glowbug was trying to get into the Witch's good graces.

"However, I noticed that the first thing you did upon entering the protective field around my home was to pull out a sword and shield despite not being able to see anything." She poked the fire with a stick, stirring up embers into the air that pushed back the suddenly chilly fog.

When Shrubley had touched the Guidance Stone, the swamp was warm and muggy. Now it was quite cold. He turned to look at the Stone, forgetting for a moment that it was gone.

The fog refused to fill that space, as if it knew something should belong there and didn't dare intrude. He had almost hoped it was still there, and things would remain the same. That the mirror realm would just be somewhere they left behind, rather than destroyed outright.

"That speaks to me of a Knight," Mistress Ceasewane said, following his gaze to the empty spot. "And so I says to myself, Rubella, that sounds an awful lot like a young man who wants to be a bit o' both."

"Rubella, that's a nice name," Shrubley said gently.

"Even young Miranda doesn't know it," she said, tapping the side of her hooked nose. "Only my friends call me Rubella or Ruby, if you like."

Shrubley smiled at the Witch, at Rubella. It showed just briefly in the crinkling of the leaves on his shrubby body.

"So some sort of Sage and a Knight, I'm wagering."

Shrubley looked into his mug. "Are you sure you didn't see what my choices were?"

"Positive. Ain't the sort of thing even a person like me could peek. Believe you me, I tried."

"Well, you're almost right, Rubella. Quite close, really. I am a Sage Knight."

She nodded. "A good Class. Can't imagine there are many of them out there, though goodness knows that there are enough people with strange thoughts that there just might be a few. Can't say myself that I ever met a Knight with more brains than brawn. You'll find yourself in strange company, no doubt."

Mistress Ceasewane paused for a moment and then added, “Stranger company, perhaps.”

Shrublely nodded. “The Shardscript told me it is a secret fused Class. I am unsure what exactly that entails, but I’ve gleaned enough,” he admitted. “Still, I look forward to learning more about what Sage Knight has to offer.”

“Knight ain’t all that rare, though it’s hardly *common* either,” she said, blowing out the flaming end of a twig she pulled from the fire. She stared intently at the glowing ember. It seemed to Shrublely as if it went black and cold much faster than it should have. “Sage, however, ain’t never heard of it gained outside of the Sanctum. And you got ‘em both combined, s’what ‘Fused’ means. So you get a bit o’ both all mixed together into something new, an’ exceedingly rare. Just like you.”

“It will start to become cold as winter, won’t it? Perhaps even colder. The life is draining out of this world,” Shrublely said, looking back to the vacant spot the Guidance Stone had left behind.

A very, very small part of him had desperately hoped that his [Recycle] essence ability might trigger on it, and somebody else could use it, or else the Witch’s life would remain extended.

He wasn’t sure if that was even possible. It certainly seemed out of the realm of a lowly Copper essence.

“It’s a good thing that I’m not going to be around much longer, young man,” she said with a shake of her head. “You’re getting cleverer and cleverer. I’m just a little old lady now, ain’t for all this mental jousting like I used to. But boy oh boy, you’re going to give young Miranda quite a hard time, I suspect. And good luck, says I. Perhaps she can see what it’s like for a change!”

Shrublely looked up suddenly. “I do have [Transference] now. It shares my health, stamina, and mana with another. What if...” he trailed off, knowing it wasn’t that simple.

“Wouldn’t work.” She gave him another rare smile. “Nice try though. Very kind of you. Not many would bother now that you’ve got some real power. Most people would take their spoils and be happy, but you immediately try to use it for good.”

“Life essence must be good for something.”

“Oh, I suspect it’s good for a great many things.” Seeing that Shrublely finished his tea, she stood up. The moment she stopped concentrating on the

fire, the flames guttered and went out. “And unless I’m wrong – and I rarely am – you’ll have a full life in which to delve into all them secrets. Now we best get moving unless you want to freeze to the spot.”

Shrubley got up obediently.

As one, they turned to look at the empty space where the Guidance Stone of Vitality had once been. Shrubley missed it already. He could feel the Life of the world draining away.

Soon enough, nothing will be able to live here, Shrubley thought morosely, as he followed Mistress Ceaswane down into the suddenly cold swamp. Frost was already gathering at the edges of the dark water.