

CHAPTER 62 – MIDNIGHT BLOOM

The crawling sigils and symbols stopped the moment Shrubley's hand touched the surface. With a faint *whooshing* sound, they were pulled toward his palm.

He could feel a tremendous amount of heat from the stone flooding into his arm. Shrubley calmed himself and focused on what the Witch had told him to do.

I offer my strength to you, he told the Stone. A gift for a gift.

Thousands upon thousands of symbols were siphoned into Shrubley's wooden palm as the heat grew unbearable. He knew, within his heart of hearts, that he could stop this at any moment.

He could pull his hand away and the pain would stop in an instant, leaving him no worse for wear, but the Stone would forever be closed to him.

Another test, Shrubley thought with a nod of conviction.

There had to be millions of symbols on the thing's surface, and each one was like a tiny red-hot needle poking into his hand. You would think that it would eventually numb or a person would grow accustomed to the pain.

You would be wrong.

But Shrubley had a stubborn streak a mile long. He wasn't about to let a stone beat him and not with Mistress Ceasewane watching him least of all.

He was Halbert Wulfram's son! He would show her that, through him, the Druid was still alive and well. It was the least he could do for her, and for the memory of his father.

The Witch watched silently, neither offering advice nor comfort. She watched with those vivid green eyes of hers, hardly seeming to blink.

You have attuned to the Guidance Stone of Vitality.

The following Unique Classes are available to you:

[Druid] / [Awakening Essence]

[Sage] / [Life Essence]

[Verdant Knight] / [Gaia Essence]

Shrubley had expected something... more. At least a description!

“Mistress Ceasewane?” Shrubley called out, afraid to turn around because he feared she would not be there.

For a long while there was silence until he heard her voice right behind him.
“Tough choice, is it?”

“Very.”

“Can’t be helped.”

“But they aren’t described!”

“Very few things in life come with an instruction manual, Shrubley. This is one of those times you must choose with your heart. Which of the three options do you feel best suits you?”

Shrubley was about to tell her he didn’t know but instead he said, “How do you know there are three?”

“Because I have a Prime essence of my own,” she told him. “There are always three. Each person gets three different options. If I had the ability to touch it myself, what I would see would be different, but I’ll wager my teeth that you’ve got Druid in there.”

“You cannot see it?”

“It is for your eyes only.” She patted his leaves again. “I am very old and very good at guessing. You wish to follow in your father’s footsteps. It’s an admirable calling, I’ll give you that. But each child should be allowed to be their own man, or shrub as it were.”

A part of Shrubley felt that if he took the Druid Class, he would be able to keep a part of his father alive within himself. Was the Awakening essence the reason Shrubley existed? Or was it just a strange coincidence that the essence was called the same thing as a monster who became sapient?

He couldn't help but wonder, even in the middle of this crucial decision. Did his father use Awakening essence to create him?

Or did his father have a different Prime essence? Mistress Ceasewane had made it seem that they would have different essences even if the Classes were the same.

Not to mention, the Guidance Stone of Vitality was here. Nobody had attuned to it in many years. Then again, that did not mean his father lacked the Awakening essence. There were countless paths to the same essence.

It was possible he was jumping to conclusions with insufficient information, just because Awakening essence was paired with the Druid Class. But without any more details, that was all he had to go by.

There wasn't enough information!

Would he be able to Awaken other monsters if he took the Druid Class and the Awakening essence? Could he free the minds of the slaving beasts that wandered the hills? What would that do, to Awaken something by force?

There were too many questions, far too many moral and ethical complications to consider. There had to be a reason why his father hadn't made any more than Shrubley.

As far as he knew, he was the first and only one of his kind. His father had doted on him, raised him from a seedling as his own child. There had been no one else, not that Shrubley had ever discovered. No trace of a sibling.

That begged the question, "why?" and it was one Shrubley doubted that he could ever answer. Even if he had the Awakening essence and it did everything that he thought it might, he didn't think he would ever be able to answer that question.

Shrubley possessed insatiable curiosity, and never knowing why would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Three paths before him, three ways of life that seemed similar on the surface but were anything but once you looked at them long enough.

What would a Sage do?

Sage, a profoundly wise person, Shrubley thought, remembering the textbook definition. He wanted to be wise. His Curiosity essence was deeply in-tune with his soul, and a Sage seemed to be the path upon which he could gain even more knowledge.

That appealed to him greatly, more than he expected. But he knew so little. How could he ever be a bastion of knowledge and expertise?

It seemed an impossible task.

Verdant Knight was an option as well. Gaia essence could be anything, and he didn't think that Mistress Ceaswane would tell him even if he asked. And once again, he felt like he was being tested.

Not just by the Guidance Stone, but by the Witch as well. She wanted to see if he would handle this on his own, he was sure.

And he also felt that the Guidance Stone was called that for a *reason*. Asking somebody else for guidance while communing with the Guidance Stone seemed like a faux pas of the highest order.

Could you tell me more? Shrubley strained, trying to ask the stone.

There was no answer, though it was not the hush of withheld silence, but rather an expectant quietude.

The Stone was waiting for *his* answer.

Gaia often meant the world, or some large part of it. It had to do with nature, that was obvious enough, but all three essences and Classes dealt with nature.

Putting that all together, it seemed that each of the Prime essences took a defining element from one of his essences. As if Nature, Light, or Curiosity were primary, and the rest secondary.

Druid and Awakening were clearly Light. They provided something beyond the natural order of things, a heightening of existence.

Sage and Life essence must have been derived from his Curiosity essence and his firm desire to be knowledgeable and understand all things.

While Verdant Knight and Gaia were clearly Nature. He could see a grassy knight defending Almora from those that would despoil her.

As much as all of them appealed to him, he could only pick one. And none provided further information.

That would not help in any case, he realized.

Any further information, even if each essence and Class pairing came with a book about all of its strengths and weaknesses, would only serve to make his decision even more difficult.

“Go with your heart, and you’ll never go wrong,” the Druid had told him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered quietly. So low that even Mistress Ceasewane could only cock her head to the side in curiosity at what he said.

As much as he wanted so *desperately* to follow in his father’s footsteps, he was not a Druid. A Druid was a person who lived apart from the world. He had seen it firsthand with his father.

He was a kind man, but there was a deep, unfathomable sadness in his eyes that never went away. Even when he was smiling, there was something broken in him, something missing.

Shrublely could never figure out what that was. But after meeting more humans, he realized that they were incredibly social creatures.

His father had been all alone.

And after everything that Mistress Ceasewane told him about Halbert, he was absolutely certain that he became a Druid to hide away from the world. Perhaps to do some good. His father was a good man, and he knew he wanted to help people.

Shrublely understood now that most humans would not go off into the woods, never to be seen again by old friends. He briefly wondered what his life would have been like if he had grown up around the Countess and the Witch, but had to let that fantasy go.

For all his infinite depths of love for his father, Shrublely knew in his soul that he was not like him. He wanted to touch everybody’s life. To make their hurts better, to soothe the pain of loneliness and the sting of defeat from even his enemies.

He couldn’t stand by and let evil take root, no matter how much stronger it was than him.

Shrublely was stuck between two worlds, that of a Sage’s knowledge and that of a Knight’s prowess. Each was crucial in their own way.

Thoughts spun around in his head, threads spooling in, only to be sheared and replaced with another. His many leaves trembled with the effort of searching for what was right for him.

For what Shrublely should become.

In Shrubley's mind, there was only one surefire way to stop evil. You couldn't do it by hiding away in the forests and mountains, tending to magical plants far away from where people lived.

And you couldn't do it with a blade, either. A weapon was for excising evil after it has taken root, but it does not prevent it. It is only a tool, and a last resort at that.

No, the only true way to rid the world of evil and pain was knowledge. Through understanding and learning, people could better deal with the world around them, as well as each other.

Even the smallest misunderstandings could blossom into something gruesome and terrible. If Shrubley could help at least one person understand themselves and the world around them a little better, he would have done his part to make Almora a better place.

It filled him with guilt to deny Druid, but he knew that it was never his path to walk. It was his father's.

Shrubley didn't know if what he was about to do was even possible, but he could still feel the eyes of Mistress Ceasewane on him.

This is just another test, he told himself as he made his selection.

He felt a welling up of power surge within his body and soul. Power, unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life, filled him to the brim and threatened to burn his wood and leaves to ash.

Shrubley tried to hold it all in, but it was like trying to wrap his arms around the world. This was too vast, too great to ever be contained.

Somewhere in the distance there was a scream, and then the whole world went black.