

Shamera

Shamera walked slowly through Buttercup Meadow. His deep red and royal blue summer cloak trailed ankle length, soaking up the early morning dew as it brushed past the grasses and small plants which flourished here. He stood looking towards the eastern sky as the first rays of the summer sun broke the gleaming horizon.

With both hands, he slowly dragged back his hood; his long black hair flowed down past his shoulders. He flicked it backwards from his face as he ran his hands through it. He watched as the sun rose steadily upwards. His kingfisher blue eyes sparkled in the early morning light. His skin had a sun-kissed glow, similar in colour to toasted almonds.

This was Shamera's favourite time of day. He loved watching the rising sun enliven the morning with its golden glow. He took a long deep breath of the fresh morning air, sweetly scented by the fragrance of the newly opening flowers. As he watched the sun rising upwards with majestic splendour, he clasped his hands together, paused for a moment and whispered to himself, "Is today the day?"

Shamera had wanted to become a sorcerer ever since he could remember, and he spent the last five years learning all about the medicinal plants and herbs which grew locally. He also learned how to make the lotions and potions created by Mirabilis the apothecary, by helping her in the shop during his free time.

Shamera was one of only six hopeful candidates from the region of Sloendor who were eligible to be tested to become the sorcerer's next apprentice. It would not be a straightforward task, yet, as he watched the sunrise; he felt a quiet confidence growing inside him. The sun was a large orange disc balancing on the horizon; its golden light illuminating the valley. Shamera looked around him as the new day dawned, drew another long breath of the sweet morning air before making his way home for breakfast. The village was quiet, but it was Saturday, it was also a festival day, and soon the entire village would be alive with the hustle and bustle of people arriving from all over the region.

By the time Shamera arrived home, he could see smoke spiralling upwards out of the chimney and, as he reached the front gate, he could smell the unmistakable aroma of bacon cooking on the open fire. As he entered the house, he closed his eyes and filled his lungs with the tasty aromas; this made his mouth water as he was ready for something to eat.

"Is that you Shamera?" shouted his mother. "I have made you an extra-large breakfast this morning. You will need all the strength you can muster for the Choosing." She said, with a proud smile. She rounded up the rest of the family so they could all sit together around the table.

His father, a portly gentleman, peered at him over the rounded rims of his glasses and, with a deep yet reassuring voice, said. "It's a fine day Shamera, all you can do is your best, as, I am sure you will." He blew across his teacup and took a sip of his favourite hot nettle tea. "I am sure you will make us all proud." He continued, and with a smile and a slight nod of his head, he took another sip.

Gwen, his little sister of eight years, waved a small wooden spoon, pretending it was a magic wand.

“You can magic up a unicorn for me to ride upon.” she said excitedly. Shamera glanced at her and smiled.

“I am not a sorcerer yet, and I am sure there will be a lot of training and learning to do first... and besides, I might not get chosen, they have chosen only one person in the past sixty years, and he didn’t last long. He apparently blew himself up, making a concoction called black powder?” He said, as a look of doubt appeared on his face.

“Be positive dear, no one deserves it more than you.” His mother said reassuringly.

“You’re justifiably biased mother.”

“Even if I am biased, you would still make a great apprentice.” she proudly remarked.

“Ah well, suppose I will have to make do with my rabbit, oh great sorcerer Shamera.” Gwen teased as she gave her stuffed toy a hug.

Shamera looked at her and smiled. “I suppose you will little sister. I suppose you will.” he said softly.

The conversation fell silent as everyone tucked into their breakfast of bacon, eggs, and freshly baked bread. Shamera lifted his head and looked at his mother, raised his eyebrows, blew his cheeks out nervously, stood up from the table and said “Okay, I will see you all at the Choosing. I need to help Mirabilis at the apothecary beforehand, she will be expecting me.”

Shamera set off through the cobbled streets and the rows of single storey stone houses of the village. The apothecary was near to the market square, which was now getting busy with the hurly-burly of market life, and the stallholders making ready for the festival. All kinds of aromas filled the air, with the smells of freshly baked bread, flowers, and hogs being gently roasted over wood smoke. Shamera was nervously aware of people staring and discussing among themselves whether he would be the next apprentice and become the pride of Elms Hollow. “Good luck at the Choosing Shamera.” someone shouted from a crowd. “Thank you, I think I’m going to need it!” he shouted back with a smile and continued on his way. “Make the village proud.” Shouted another. Shamera smiled nervously and waved politely.

As he reached the apothecary’s shop, he could see Mirabilis through the large front window. She appeared to be talking to a hooded figure. As Shamera opened the door, the shop bell rang out, announcing his entrance. He stood inside the doorway and was about to say good morning when a hooded figure hurried away out of the back door without looking back. Mirabilis turned and stood staring at Shamera, her wrinkled and weathered face even more deeply creased with a look of concern.

“Who was that? He seemed to be in a hurry.”

“Erm... no one, it was no one.” Stuttered Mirabilis. “I have to go out for a short while; you can mind the shop, can’t you? I won’t be long.” Mirabilis quickly grabbed her bottle green summer cloak off the peg and hurried out of the door.

Shamera looked out of the window. He felt a little bewildered as he watched Mirabilis scurry down the main street. Her cloak flowing and fluttering behind her; she was also glancing nervously around as she hurried down the street. She was soon out of sight. Shamera turned from the window and thought to himself, this was odd behaviour; he had never seen Mirabilis acting so troubled.

“Whatever could the matter be which has her acting so strangely?” he muttered to himself. He hoped whatever the problem was, it would be sorted out swiftly and Mirabilis would return quickly, as he needed to get himself organised for the Choosing ceremony. He was also hoping to ask if Mirabilis had any last-minute advice which may give him an advantage over the other candidates.

Shamera wanted to keep his mind busy, so he pottered around dusting and rearranging large jars and bottles which were being displayed on shelves around the shop. Blue, green, purple and red, translucent bottles displaying a variety of coloured plants and strange objects steeping in the liquor. Plain bottles, fancy bottles with fancy glass stoppers, all adorned the shelves and cabinets. Clumps of dried herbs and plants hung down from the rafters, wicker baskets filled with a mixture of dried berries, aromatic leaves and dried fruits filled the shop with a heady, sweet aroma. In between dusting and rearranging some displays, he served the odd customer who came in to buy a healing potion of some description and wished him good luck at the Choosing.

He looked around the shop and thought it was looking a lot tidier, and the aroma of the scented oils and plant extracts appeared to be even more inviting. Shamera kept looking at the large ornamental timepiece hanging on the wall; he watched the slender, ornate hands as they leisurely turned about its face. Barely thirty minutes had passed, but it seemed like hours. He thought to himself how quiet the shop seemed for a festival day, with barely a handful of customers entering the shop. Time appeared to be passing by agonisingly slowly.

Bored with merely pottering about, he distracted himself by sitting for a while and read a large comprehensive book which contained all the secret ingredients and special mixes for the potions. As he sat reading the book, he could not help but contemplate what might happen at the Choosing. He was deep in thought when the shop door burst open, virtually taking the bell off its spring. Startled, he jumped up out of the chair. A stranger stood in the doorway; his face obscured by the dark brown hood of his cloak. He was breathing rapidly and sharply, with a sense of urgency in his voice, demanded to know. “Where is the apothecary named Mirabilis?”

Shrugging his shoulders, he replied, “I do not know. She...” before Shamera could say another word; the stranger turned around and took to his heels down the street.

“What is going on? This is not doing my nerves any good.” He muttered to himself. He took a deep, chest expanding breath. The time for the Choosing was getting closer, nerves were setting in and thoughts were running wild inside his head. He looked at the clock again as another hour had gradually passed by; the shop door opened and in walked Mirabilis looking a little flustered. Her face was flushed, and she was panting.

“What’s going on Mirabilis? A stranger came in looking for you. Did he find you? What did he want?” Probed Shamera, standing there with a furrowed brow, looking and feeling very confused.

“So many questions lad, anyway... it’s nothing that needs to concern you, you need to be getting ready for the Choosing,” replied Mirabilis quickly and calmly, trying to divert the conversation. “Not long now lad, you better be looking sharp and get yourself over there. I have already seen Verazslo roaming around the village; wandering around doing his usual conjuring tricks and entertaining everyone, getting them all excited.”

“But what’s with you and all this rushing around? And who were those people looking for you?”

Mirabilis looked calmly at Shamera and quietly said, “It was something I needed to take care of is all. It’s all sorted now. You need to concern yourself with the task at hand; getting chosen. Everything is fine. Remember, during the Choosing, you need to think precisely before answering any of Verazslo’s questions. Concentrate fully on any task you have to perform. Think carefully before rushing in. Now, you prove yourself the worthy candidate I know you to be.”

“But....”

“But nothing. There’s no more to be said on the matter. You need to focus on what YOU need to do; I will be there to watch you at the ceremony. Now go quickly and take your place.” Mirabilis held out Shamera’s summer cloak and helped him put it on.

“This is not the end of the matter; I know you’re holding out on me.” Shamera said as he made his way out of the door. He glanced back and said, “I know there is something you are not telling me.” Shamera stood there looking at Mirabilis who shrugged and gave a slight smile through her tightly squeezed lips.

“If you show the same tenacity at the Choosing, Verazslo will have no option but to appoint you. Good luck lad. Off. You. Go. Trust. Your. Instincts.” Mirabilis said as she punctuated every word, then leaned against the door frame as she watched Shamera for a while as he made his way down the street. She could not help a proud, motherly type smile forcing its way across her face. She had watched Shamera grow up from a small child to a young man.

The streets were full of people all enjoying the start of the festival. Shamera gradually made his way through the hordes of bustling people and down towards the market square. The noise levels were growing louder the closer he got. The scents of fresh bread, cooked meats, roasting nuts, and many other delicacies filled his nostrils. There were jugglers in extravagantly colourful costumes, juggling all manner of things, from large knives to flaming clubs. Travelling musicians playing different instruments added to the noise level as he made his way to the Choosing. He tried to relax but could not stop speculations about what was happening with Mirabilis from occupying his mind.

‘Finally!’ he thought as he entered the square. Glancing around, he saw the gathering of villagers, especially the large number of children being entertained by Verazslo. Who was meandering through the crowds, performing party tricks, conjuring up pyrotechnics which went whizzing and fizzing high into the air. He was also creating different flying creatures and colourful butterflies that would appear out of thin air, and small birds which flew out of his long beard and under his hat.

People cheered and patted Shamera on the back as he made his way through the crowd. He eventually made his way up the wooden steps to a loud roar from the delighted spectators. As he walked out on to the stage, the intensity of the cheering grew to a deafening level. He took his place on the stage with the five other apprehensive-looking hopefuls who had arrived a few moments before. Shamera nervously observed the hordes of people all looking towards the stage and pointing in his direction; now the realisation set in. His mouth dried as he tried to swallow, his stomach churned. It felt like it was performing cartwheels as he realised; the Choosing would soon begin.

He nervously paced around the stage, his eyes quickly flitting across the audience, looking for his family and Mirabilis. He would not hear them calling over the loud commotion of the crowd. His eyes were rapidly darting around the sea of faces. Some, he recognised but most he did not. He spotted his little sister sitting on the shoulders of their father. He could see they were trying to get closer to the front, but the vast throng of bodies impeded their progress. Shamera waved his hand high in the air to let them know he had spotted them. A small group of musicians tuning up their instruments for the start of the proceedings momentarily distracted him.

A loud booming voice from behind startled him. "ATTENTION ALL!!" shouted an enormous man in a bright yellow suit, holding a hefty megaphone to his mouth. "Verazslo will come up onto the stage and commence the Choosing. Will his next apprentice be among these six hopefuls? We will soon see." The man moved to the front of the stage and with gesticulating arms, as though trying to part the crowd, he bellowed again, "Make way, make way, let Verazslo through. Come on, give him room."

The deafening clamour became a mere whisper as trumpets sounded the approach of Verazslo the Sorcerer. Everyone watched and applauded eagerly as Verazslo gradually made his way through the crowd. The musicians played a fanfare, announcing his arrival to the stage. Verazslo, with the aid of his staff, trekked up the steps and onto the stage. He was still producing colourful butterflies and small birds, flashes of pyrotechnics exploding in the air. This whipped up the crowd again. His well-worn, multi-coloured robe swept along the wooden boards as he walked to the front of the stage.

The musicians played another fanfare as Verazslo paused for a moment, waving to the crowds. He stood at the front of the stage with a big grin, which was partially hidden behind his bushy grey beard. He listened to the sound of the whooping and clapping for a short while before raising his staff high in the air; paused for a few seconds before banging it down hard against the wooden boards three times. The commotion of the crowd dropped to a hush as Verazslo addressed them.

"Magic comes from nature, the lifeblood of our world, even from our universe; we should never use it for evil or personal gain." he bellowed. He turned to face the six nervous candidates who had formed themselves into a line across the stage. Verazslo stood looking at them for a short while before addressing them.

"You hopeful few will undergo a test of your worthiness; will one of you, this day, become my apprentice?" Verazslo walked along the line of aspiring pupils looking at each one in turn. It must have appeared to those watching as though he were peering into their very souls as he pondered and looked deep into their eyes.

“With this staff and this wand, you can have the power of sorcery; forget all you think you know. Use your instincts and intuition to show me...” Verazslo held a glass globe cupped in both of his hands. He held it in front of the first candidate and continued, “Make this glass globe glow.” the first hopeful deliberated for a moment, held a hand over the globe and concentrated on making it glow. Unfortunately, there was not even a glimmer of a glow. “NO!” exclaimed Verazslo as he passed to the next contender.

“Make this glass globe glow.” he asked again. The candidate, without hesitation, hovered his hand over the globe and, try as he might; he too failed to make it glow. “NO!” Verazslo continued along the row of candidates, each time declaring NO! As they each failed to make even the faintest flicker of light within the globe.

Shamera stood watching and tried to remain confident as Verazslo approached him and asked, “Can you make this globe glow?” Shamera looked at the globe. He poised his hand over the globe and scrunched his eyes shut. Concentrating as hard as he could, he imagined the globe glowing in Verazslo’s hands. Shamera felt his hand getting warmer. He gradually opened his eyes a little to sneak a peek at the globe. His eyes shot wide open as he saw the globe glowing dimly. It might have been dim, but there was a glow within the globe!

Verazslo stared back straight into Shamera’s blue eyes. It was barely a few seconds, but to Shamera it felt like minutes. Verazslo turned and looked towards the crowd, raised his staff into the air and banged it hard on the wooden boards, before exclaiming, “YES! At last, a candidate of potential worth.” It took Shamera all of his willpower to contain his excitement; yet a broad grin forced itself across his face as the crowd erupted in whoops and whistles at the result.

“W-A-I-T!” shouted Verazslo as he repeatedly banged his staff on the wooden boards. “There are still two more tests to be completed.”

The crowd plunged into silence as Verazslo handed Shamera his wand. He stared at the wand and considered all of its potential magic energy. His deep blue eyes opened wide as he carefully examined the object.

“Wow, this feels very smooth, even though it looks gnarly and crooked. You must have had it a long time.”

He felt how comfortable it was, nestling in his hands. It measured about twelve inches long. It was heavier than he expected and made from twisted Ash; it appeared to have a golden grain which ran its full length. *‘I cannot believe I am holding Verazslo’s wand.’* He thought to himself. His heart was thumping with excitement.

Verazslo watched for a few moments as Shamera examined the wand. With a stern expression, he held Shamera’s gaze. Then startled everyone, especially Shamera, when Verazslo shouted, “You have bested your opponents. You must now make them vanish. Use the wand and make them disappear; concentrate, think them gone and the wand will do the rest.” Verazslo gestured with his hands as if to hurry him.

Shamera again peered down at the wand he was holding. Surprised and dumbfounded at this request, he looked towards the Sorcerer and asked. “Where will they go? Can I bring them back?”

The five unfortunates stood there, rooted to the spot. Verazslo had placed a spell on them and no one could move their feet. With fear etched upon their faces, they anxiously looked at each other and, in sheer panic, turned and stared straight at Shamera. Who looked anxiously at Verazslo; *'surely he did not mean it?'* He thought. Shamera looked back towards the extremely fearful competitors, who were desperately trying to move.

"Sorry, I err... I can't." he mumbled as he turned to face Verazslo.

"Do it or fail! Do you want to be the new apprentice or not?" reiterated Verazslo, again gesturing and pointing towards the unsuccessful candidates.

Shamera paused for a few seconds. He turned to face the fearful participants. Again, he looked down at the wand in his hand before raising it high into the air and shouted aloud.

"Magic comes from nature, the lifeblood of our world, even from our universe; we should use it only for the purposes of good; we should never use it for evil or personal gain!" he turned to Verazslo and offered him back the wand, saying aloud. "So be it... I have failed."

A large gasp boomed from the crowd as they watched Verazslo take back the wand. Verazslo took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly; his face was expressionless as he stood there gazing at the wand and looking back at Shamera. He said nothing as he turned his back on Shamera and faced the crowd. Verazslo stood and looked upon the faces of the expectant audience; his own face remained inscrutable as he thrust his staff high before bringing it down and hitting it hard against the stage three times. The chattering crowd were cut to silence. You could hear a pin drop as they all watched in anticipation as Verazslo raised the staff and the wand high over his head and shouted, "Test two..... Passed!"

An enormous roar erupted from the crowd. The other aspirants were no longer rooted to the spot and appeared to dance a little jig, their faces beaming as they realised nothing bad was going to befall them. Shamera's face could no longer hide the relief or the excitement, and after hearing the proclamation, he was ecstatic as he jumped up and punched the air with his fist. He was grinning from ear to ear as the other competitors came over to congratulate him, more out of relief than anything else.

Verazslo once again turned to the crowd and gradually raised his staff and his wand into the air and with a resounding voice bellowed, "S-i-l-e-n-c-e...." once again, a hush befell the crowd.

"We will hold here the third and final test tomorrow at noon." he exclaimed.

Verazslo looking out over the crowd; observed three men wearing dark-coloured cloaks with their hoods pulled up, they were forcing their way quickly through the crowd. He watched with concern as they hurtled up the steps and onto the stage. They approached Verazslo and at once exclaimed "You must come with us... NOW!"

One man whispered something to Verazslo, which caused him to spin around and look straight at Shamera. Verazslo's face appeared concerned as his eyes narrowed.

"What about the boy?" questioned Verazslo, nodding his head in Shamera's direction.

“There is no time... you must come with us now. Come there is no time to lose.”

Verazslo turned to Shamera. “I’ll see you tomorrow, here at noon. For your last challenge.” He said in a half whisper. He turned away and quickly left with the mysterious hooded trio. Shamera watched as they scurried away through the crowd. A mystified look engrained itself upon his face as Verazslo and the three men quickly vanished into the thinning crowd.