

Into the Night

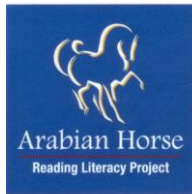
Shayda leaned against the long straight pole that held her home above the shifting desert sands. She yawned and stretched, her curtain of thick, silky black hair spilling to her waist. She scratched irritably, the smooth wood of the tent pole masking some bothersome splinters.

Shayda was only thirteen, a fact that niggled and itched in the corners of her mind solely for the reason that, try as she might to pretend it was, thirteen was simply not fourteen. Her birthday came soon, very soon, in precisely five days. Fourteen was a very special time in the Bedolin nation. For it was on this day, this grandest of days where the new fourteen year old would receive the traditional present of a fine Aladian horse.

In the Bedolin tribes, each tribe was known for a particular talent. The Manolete tribes, for example, were known for their exquisite glasswork while the Terpsiad were noted for their particularly graceful and intricate style of dancing. Shayda's tribe, the Alayets, however, was very special in that they had two remarkable talents: horse riding and training as well as singing. In fact, as any Alayet elder will tell you, many an Alayet has lived by the saying, "To be a great singer is a gift, to be a great rider is a talent, and to be exemplary at both is to be an Alayet." This is why, when Shayda was born, her parents chose her name which means 'singer' in the ancient tongue.

Traditionally, the story of the Aladian horse was told in conjunction with the story of Shayda's own people. She remembered the first time she had heard it, sitting around a blazing bonfire that crackled and hissed glowing brightly, its embers burning fiercely against the dusky evening sky. Old, gnarled Pemsabe had been singing the story to pass the time.

"Long ago, in the days of the Old Ones," he started, his voice slightly shaky and gravelly, "there was an even older race, the Aladians, who ruled the world. Proud and fierce they were, but also wise and just. The two races lived peacefully, side by side, until one day, Kiporyn, the Sly One of the Old Ones, treacherously lured the Empress of the Aladians' treasured son away from his people and murdered him with a single blow. After the Empress heard of this, she wept with rage and anguish until the seas became salty as they are today. Then she performed four great acts of magic: First, she slew the traitor god Kiporyn, and his body became the three great mountains bordering the Imperial Palace of the Kingdom of Windamere, many leagues east of where we stand today. Then, she changed her own people, the Aladians, into the magnificent creatures that we hold so dear to this day, the Aladian horses. This was meant to protect them from the evils of the world, making them less of a threat to the Old Ones, and not powerful enemies that would need to be exterminated. In turn, she created our people, the Bedolins, to protect and nurture her subjects and to keep their breed pure and untainted. Then, she raised the image of her beloved son in the sky as a constellation, and she herself became the moon.



She was never seen again on earth, but we know she is there still because the moon's face still watches us and lights up the night so we might enjoy the night without fear of unknown attack. This is why all Bedolins graze their horses at night, so the Aladians may bask in the attentions of their Empress."

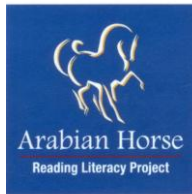
"But," Pemsabe continued, his voice now strong and steady, his old wrinkled face looking strange in the firelight under the now pitch black sky, the desert sand swirling in the distance, "the story does not end there, no not at all. For we, my brothers and sister, continue the story." His features now looked proud and, somehow, by a trick of the light perhaps, the then-young Shayda thought, her eyes wide with awe, he looked younger and stronger, his voice now regal and as mellifluous as I had when he was many years younger. It was then old Pemsabe got up, slowly and unsteadily, one of his sons rushing to steady him. Pemsabe waved his son away, for an instant standing straight and tall, then resumed his stooped posture and, before Shayda's eyes, became an old, weary man once more, shuffling off to his tent.

"Shay-da!" called her mother, drawing out the syllables of her name, "Shayda where are you?!"

Shayda, at that very moment, was, as usual, out by the horses. She moved among them, muttering and singing into the horse's ears. Every since that day Pemsabe had told the story of the Aladians, Shayda had spent as much as much time as possible around the horses. She was often scolded, returning with her dress muddied and askew, hair escaping from the long inky-black braid down her back, but with a rosy sheen to her copper cheeks and a bright gleam in her eye.

Today, however, she managed to keep herself presentable due to the special occasion. Today of all days, she could manage to keep her frequent and, more often than not, unheeded promises to her mother to keep herself clean. Yes, this day was special because it was her long awaited, much anticipated fourteenth birthday.

"Shayda ran pell-mell toward the small tent that was her home. Her mother, her two younger sisters, Aria and Sofia, her older brother, Raj and her father all lived together in the moveable tent, suitable for the Bedolin's nomadic lifestyle. The camel hair on the outside of the tent walls was worn down from the frequent desert storms however, Shayda's mother's lovingly stitched in designs remained almost as bright as the day she had first sewed them.



She ducked under the tent flap, smoothing out her dress and tucking her hair behind her ears, both nervous and excited for her traditional birthday present. At the entrance she paused, smiling quietly to herself. Her family seemed extra special today, she thought, her generous internal musings no doubt the product of the joy she felt rushing through her veins. Her mother was gently helping Sofia undo some stitched or botched needlework while simultaneously admiring Aria's tune she had made up "all by her own self", as the proud six year old would tell anyone within hearing distance.

Her mother turned, noticing Shayda at the entrance to the tent.

"Come in come in child!" she clucked, "Let me see my new young lady!"

Her mother held her at arm's length, examining Shayda from the top of her head to her bare feet.

"Girls!" her mother called to Shayda's younger sister, still not taking her eyes off her eldest daughter, "it's time to help her get ready!"

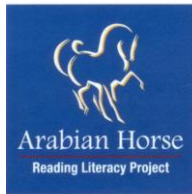
The younger two girls squealed with delight and rushed in a whirlwind dash to the back section of the tent, curtained off for the exclusive use of the family's females. Once ensconced in the cozy back room, Shayda's mother squatted down, her dress settling against the elaborate rugs on the ground. Reverently, she opened a large, ornate cedar chest near the back of the room. It looked oddly out of place amid the rougher bed pallets and the homespun linen of the walls. The inside of chest was lined with finely woven cotton, thick with embroidery. Carefully, oh so carefully, Shayda's mother lifted an exquisite garment out of the heavy chest.

It was a frothy aquamarine dress, heavily embroidered with shimmering silver, yet simply cut. It had a scoop neckline which dipped down in a vee. The neckline was edged in tiny shimmering tanzanites. The sleeves were short initially, but it had layers upon layers of the thinnest, finest pale blue chiffon. Next came the over-tunic, a deep shade of sapphire that was dyed with faint traces of seafoam, and the wide sash, a beautifully stitched periwinkle with shining pearls and tanzanites hanging off its tassels.

"Ohhh ..." gasped Shayda's mother, "You look- you are-"

"Shay," whispered an amazed Aria, "you look like a princess!"

Shayda turned slowly, the dress flowing delicately around her. The soft silk caressed her skin and lent a warm glow to her complexion. It flattered her figure, accentuating her small waist and sun kissed shoulders. She raised her head and felt, for a moment, truly beautiful. Her mother's hands trembled slightly as they swiftly brushed Shayda's hair till it was as soft as her silken gown. There were tears in her mother's eyes as she placed a delicate mother of pearl comb in Shayda's ebony hair.



Her little sisters rushed this way and that, bringing small good luck tokens to tuck in her sash and a vial of scent to dab on her wrists. Her mother, in control of her emotions once more, hugged her tight and whispered in her ear.

“I have never been so proud of you, my little singer.”

Shayda walked slowly and gracefully to the bonfire, her dress flowing around her. The entire tribe had gathered for her coming of age celebration and none had seen her save her female relatives, according to tribal tradition. With a happy shock she realized her brother and her father were both pleasantly surprised by her appearance. Her cheeks glowed with pleasure as she saw the whole tribe’s awed expression as she advanced towards the fire. She glanced around at the whole camp, a circle of tents warding off the cold chills of night under the starry sky. She also noticed the lucky full moon and imagined it a kindly grandmother’s face smiling down on her, making the jewels on her dress gleam and glitter. All around the fire were friendly faces, people she had grown up with.

The Sheik came forward and, with a lighthearted grin, began the ceremony.

“Moonrise,” he sang,
“Lights up the dark,
Your smile
Warms your tribe’s heart,
Our proud people,
Set you forth today
Your future bright,
All you must say ... “

The Sheik held the long low note there, waiting for Shayda to join him. In a voice as clear as mountain air and as delicate as a tinkling bell, Shayda sang the duet part with him.

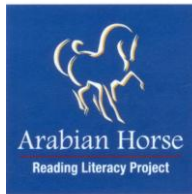
“Yes, Alayet!” She began a teasing, rousing tune.

“What’s that you say?” he answered in his strong voice.

“Yes, Alayet!” She repeated in a sing-song tone,

“It starts today,
Yes to a hearth,
Yes to home,
My home is the desert,
And I’ll always roam.”





“Yes, Alayet!” the whole tribe sang together a melodious, merry cacophony whose sound spiraled through the quiet desert landscape. The dancing began full swing then with much clapping and whooping, lady’s ankle bracelets clinking and men spinning like whirling dervishes.

“YES, ALAYET!” the crowd roared.

Then all of a sudden, they quieted, shushing one another and becoming completely still, breathless, waiting. This next part was the most important because it was Shayda’s solo piece and if she made a mistake- just one mind you- she would be cursed with bad luck for the rest of her life.

“What’s that you say?” sand the Sheik slowly, completely serious now.

Shayda matched his slow tempo and sang, perfectly,

“It starts today,
Yes to a he-arth,
Yes to a ho-ome
My home is the desert
And I’ll al-ways roam ... “ she finished, her voice sure and steady.

“YES, ALAYET!” the relieved tribe roared with her one last time.

Their whoops and hollers soon faded into the dark stillness.

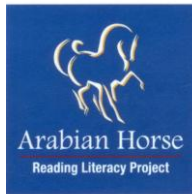
The riotous celebration soon started to dissipate; the noise settling down and the men sitting down to do some serious drinking. Their poison of choice was *maledete*, literally, in the Bedolin tongue, ‘the curse’. It was a heady drink made of fermented palm juice and goats milk.

“All right, all right you addlebrained idjits ... settle down settle down,” Shayda’s father said drunkenly, swaying a bit and sloshing his drink, “I have a gift to bestow on my daughter.”

The crowd cheered, more than a little drunkenly. There was going to be a morning of annoying headaches ahead.

“It is time,” Shayda’s father announced, attempting to be serious despite swaying like a sailing ship on rollicking waves, “to bring out the traditional gift of an Arad- Allay- Well, a horse!”

There was another roar of approval as a fine, high-stepping Aladian mare was lead amongst the crowd.



Shayda had tears in her eyes as she ran to the mare, examining her and stroking her silken coat. The mare was pitch black with a glossy blue sheen like a raven's wing. She had finely chiseled features and a long arched neck. She held her head high and seemed to prance more than walk. She was perfect.

"I name you ... Laila!" Shayda announced, "The daughter of the night."

Shayda's father cleared his throat, "Well chosen my daughter," he continues, a hint of mischief in his eyes, "why don't you take her for a ride?"

Shayda hugged her father tight and ran to embrace each of her family members. Then, she leapt astride Laila in her beautiful dress and rode off into the night.

Shayda rode swiftly, bending her body into the wind. Her obsidian hair flowed behind her, mingling with the mare's coal black mane. The wind whipped by, reddening her cheeks as Laila's hooves churned the golden desert sand. The moon was low in the sky then, so that horse and rider was a perfect silhouette against its porcelain face.

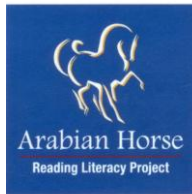
Shayda felt free and alive, her senses invigorated during her wild ride. She luxuriated in the silence pounding in her ears and the feel of Laila's soft mane in her hands.

It was then that she heard the screams begin.

Fire lit up the night and streaked the sky an angry, blistering red. Torches were held aloft by bandits in the rough garb of the Nomgols, the bandits and highwaymen of the desert. They ran about, killing, maiming and looting the Alayets and their tents as they saw fit. Women screamed and ran, clutching crying children and babies but the men were too drunken to fight back. The bandits had chosen their time well.

Shayda charged ahead on Laila, racing to help her tribe. Unfortunately for Shayda, the bandits were brutally efficient. After taking complete control of the camp, he beheaded the Sheik. Shayda felt daggers burst through her heart as the man who had once lead her people fell, staining the sands crimson with blood. She urged Laila faster and faster, but to no avail. By the time she reached the camp, only the wounded and the dead remained the rest of her people taken as slaves.

She comforted and helped the wounded as best she could, but stayed away from the dead. She was afraid she would get sick and vomit. The smell was awful, the charred cloth and flesh mixed with the odor of fear made for a sickening perfume.



Shayda was furious. How could the bandits destroy what took so long to create in such a short time?

It was then that she heard a voice beside her.

“Shayda!” the voice whispered in her ear, “Shayda!”

Shayda whirled around, scared and confused. There was no one beside her. She and Laila sat alone in the desert sands.

“Shayda!” the velvety voice whispered, “It’s me, Laila!”

“Shayda gasped and stared the mare in her soulful eyes. She was speaking to her urgently and rapidly, as though it was not unusual for horse to speak to a person.

“I have an urgent message for you Shayda!” Laila stage whispered. “From the Empress!”

Shayda immediately knelt in the sand, showing respect for her tribe’s legendary creator.

“Get up, child,” Laila whispered, “Mother Moon has a special task for you.”

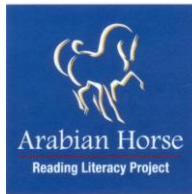
“I live to serve her Ladyship,” Shayda mumbled. She was shocked and awed that the legends she had half believed in her whole life were true. Her thoughts were jumbled in her mind, swirling like the desert sands. Laila knelt next to her and allowed her to clamber on her back. She swayed to her feet and snorted, saying to Shayda, “You’d better hang on tight.”

The mare cantered faster and faster, running up a sand dune. Her hoofbeats seemed to pulse through Shayda’s veins and synchronizing with her racing heart beat. Then, Shayda hardly believing her eyes, they rode into the night sky.

They flew through the night sky, their dark hair flowing behind them. Shayda could see her ruined home far below, and the bandit’s camp up ahead. Fierce rage filled her, enveloping her entire being.

Laila touched down lightly near the camp and Shayda dismounted. She felt such anger within her that it was as if the blood was boiling in her veins. But, just then, she looked up at the moon and felt a moment of utter calm.

“Never fear, my brave one,” a calm voice spoke in her mind, “the way will be illuminated for you. Now go, go! Save my people!”



Shayda stood in the moonlight and appeared to glow with energy. She felt each of the tribe's thoughts in her mind. She drew on the moon's power and rode through the bandit's camp, her fury, matching that of the desert storms. Suddenly, light flooded the encampment and the bandits fled from the warrior girl astride on her magnificent rearing Aladian horse, her sharp dagger glinting in the sudden burst of moonlight. Shayda scared the bulk of the bandits away simply with her sudden and fearsome appearance, moonlight seeming to emanate from her every pore. The rest, she struck down without mercy.

"Shay!" cried a young girl's voice from outside one of the tents, "Shay!"

It was Sofia! Bound together with the rest of Shayda's family, the little girl looked both frightened and relieved. Shayda ran toward them, steadily glowing less and looking more normal as she approached.

And a very special girl's fourteenth birthday came to an end.

Lara Hon