

Arba and Bianca

By Ben Callahan

In the desert kingdom of Shalahaha, the Sultan's daughter, Princess Bianca Shi, would sneak out of the palace to find her two best friends, Arba and his adopted brother, Jet. Arba's and Jet's parents were hardworking street merchants. Arba and Jet did not have a noble upbringing or fancy clothes but at eight years old they already knew how to navigate the real world outside of the palace and protected Bianca outside of the palace walls. Together they would run through the bazaars looking for adventure and eat fruit with the shade of the trees keeping them cool. Despite coming from different worlds, they played happily together.

One day, when the children were now ten-years old, Arba and Jet went to find Bianca to play. However, when they found her in the garden, she said with eyes full of tears that she didn't want anything to do with them anymore! The previous night, Arba's uncle Drel was among a band of assassins who had attacked the Sultan's brother and family. Among the victims was Bianca's beloved cousin Rea. With Bianca full of hatred towards Arba's family and Drel having brought shame upon them, Arba, Jet and their parents moved to the outskirts of the city where a family friend, old Yama, lived.

Ten years passed and Arba had grown to be a strong, handsome young man. He spent most his days helping Old Yama run her trading post, and did his best to keep Jet from living the life of a thief. Over the years Arba never forgot Bianca but missed her more and more. He tried to accept that they wouldn't see each other again, until news spread that the young Emperor of Archfall, Gregory, had been engaged to the Sultan's eldest daughter, Bianca. He bore the pain of the thought of Bianca with Gregory for a week until he couldn't stand the joyful chattering of the upcoming wedding any longer. And so one morning Arba set out to the palace, determined to speak with Bianca.

It was the first Tuesday of the month—the day that the palace would open its doors to hear requests and settle disputes for the inhabitants of Shalahaha. When it was Arba's turn he was let into the throne room where the jolly old Sultan, Dormu Shi, was lazily sitting with a bottle in hand, overjoyed that his daughter had found a suitable suitor. And at his side was Bianca, but no longer was she the rowdy tomboy who would run through the bazaar, but a mature woman who no longer found joy in seeking danger.

“Bianca!” Arba exclaimed, “Do you not remember me? It’s me, Arba! Your old playmate!”

To these words Bianca returned a cold glare, not ready to forgive Arba’s family. The Sultan was confused, having not known about Bianca’s childhood playmate, so her bodyguard and caretaker explained. At that moment, Gregory, the Emperor of Archfall, had entered, curious what the commotion was about.

“I have returned, my love!” announced Gregory, as he bowed to the sultan and sauntered towards his fiancé. Then in a gentlemanly fashion, Gregory got down on one knee and kissed his bride’s hand.

“Arba, this is Gregory, my fiancé,” said Bianca coldly, “And Gregory, my love, this is Arba he used to be an old playmate of mine. And he was just leaving!”

“Wait!” Arba shouted, grabbing the attention of everyone in the room, including the Sultan, who was just falling into a stupor. “What if I could love you more than he ever could?”

The Sultan scoffed at Arba and motioning towards Gregory he exclaimed, “This man that stands before you is a true and worthy man! He has performed many great feats and on top of that is ruling an entire Empire at such a young age.”

“But what if I could prove myself worthier?” Arba persisted.

“Fascinating,” Gregory chimed in, “Our wedding will be held in three months, and yet in that short period of time you wish to prove yourself a worthier husband? If you can follow through with your words as well as win the affection of Bianca, then I will gladly return to Archfall alone, for I wish only the best for the lovely Bianca, for I am an honorable man.”

Bianca then said, “I will not allow it, for there is no way I can even call him a friend after what his family has done. And it would be a shame for even a wretch like him to risk his life in vain.”

“But I have already made up my mind,” Arba responded, “I would rather die than live my life without you in it, for I am nothing without you. And if I were to die at least it would be while fighting for love and glory.”

Seeing how persistent Arba was, the Sultan consented to the challenge, and it was agreed that Arba would return the next night to receive his first trial.

Later that night, Gregory had a meeting with his attendant, Sever. “There has been an interesting turn of events, Sever,” said Gregory.

"I have heard m' lord," Sever responded, "the servants won't stop talking about it. What shall we do? It is in the great djinn's will that this wedding transpire."

"It will happen, Sever," said Gregory, "The boy does not possess the blessings of Dajaha, as I do. We shall see how well he performs the first task and act if things go too far."

"Very well m' lord," said Sever.

The following night approached slowly for Arba as anticipation ate away at him, but at last the hour came and Arba returned to the throne room as Dormu requested. Like the previous afternoon, Arba found the Sultan in his throne, only without his bottle and he was sitting up straight. And again at his side was Bianca, even more beautiful than the day before. And at her side was Gregory, but there was another man at Gregory's side wearing a black robe. "Our brave hero has arrived!" announced a servant, followed by the blaring of a horn.

"We meet again, my rival," Gregory said with a grin. He then gestured toward the man in robes and said, "Allow me to introduce my faithful servant, Sever, the High Priest of Archfall." Again, there was the blaring of a horn to call order.

The Sultan, Dormu Shi, then addressed Arba, "Young man, you claim to be the worthier groom to my precious daughter, Bianca! To prove so you must face three treacherous trials in the span of three months. The High Priest of the Archfall Empire shall now give you your challenge!"

Sever then cleared his throat and said, "Your first trial is to travel to the far ends of Shalahaha in search of an ancient wine merchant. You will be given three gold pieces to buy his best tasting wine and bring the sealed bottle back. You have one month to accomplish your task. May the divine djinn, Dajaha, look after you."

Arba then went home to get some sleep and the next morning he prepared for his long trek through the desert. He prepared food, water, a cloak, a scimitar and a camel and was at the border of the city when a voice called out to him.

"Wait!" In the distance a girl came running up to Arba and said, "Greetings Arba, I am Di, Bianca's sister! I have heard of your courage and I want to help you on your journey. Please take this compass, just ask it nicely to lead you where you want to go and it will lead you."

"Thank you, Di," Arba responded, "I'm glad I have someone rooting for me."

And with that Arba left the safe walls of the city he grew up into the mysteries ahead. "Please lead me to the ancient wine merchant," Arba asked the compass. A few minutes passed and nothing happened. Arba was about to put the compass away when the needle began spinning, pointing him southeast. For ten days and ten nights Arba followed the compass through the sandy plains of Shalahaha. He was beginning to give up hope when he saw a silhouette in the distance. And then finally he found the ancient wine merchant. He exchanged the three pieces of gold for the merchant's best tasting wine and again asked the compass to lead him home. After the twentieth day of being away he returned safely to the city and presented the wine to the Sultan.

"This is the best wine I have ever tasted!" the Sultan exclaimed, "Let us offer up a toast for the young man who brought us this wine!" A banquet was then held in Arba's honor and afterward he was instructed to return on the first night of the next month to receive his next trial.

The new month had begun and on that night Arba went to again to the throne room of Dormu to receive his next trial. As it happened before, Sever read aloud the trial to Arba, "Your second trial is to venture out into the desert and find the oasis, where the only green in this land is found, retrieve the two largest melons you can find and present them to the Sultan. Your time limit is one month. May the divine djinn, Dajaha, look after you."

Again, Arba slept and in the morning prepared food, water, a scimitar, a cloak, a camel and the compass that Di had given him and once he had reached the edge of the city, Di came running to him again. Except this time there was a man at her side.

"Hello again Arba! Bianca's bodyguard, Monkey has something to give you!"

The tall, brooding man at her side said to Arba, "Greetings Master Arba. You may remember how I kept watch over you, your brother and my liege, Bianca, when you would play in the gardens. I have come to warn you that there are many bandits that guard the oasis and they will surely kill you. So please take this scimitar. There is not a single battle I have lost while wielding this scimitar."

So Arba took the new scimitar and gave Monkey the old one he was about to bring with him. "Thank you Monkey," said Arba, "I will be careful while looking for the oasis, and I promise to return it when this ordeal is over." And so Arba once again rode his camel to the desert.

“Please show me the way to the green oasis,” Arba asked the compass, and again the needle began spinning, this time leading him southwest. He rode for five days and five nights when he saw a small hut. Arba dismounted the camel to get a good look at it, when out came twenty bandits, armed with scimitars, daggers and bows. Arba quickly mounted his camel and attempted to avoid the horde, but they had mounted ostriches and soon caught up to him. With no other choice, Arba drew the scimitar and was able to kill three bandits. The bandits with daggers and scimitars then retreated, leaving Arba with the ones who could strike from afar. For lack of a shield, Arba had to make a run for the Oasis, where he was sure he could find some coverage from the volleys of arrows. He finally made it and it seemed as though the bandits had stopped following him. He was confused why they had stopped their pursuit, but then he realized why. Sitting in the oasis was a giant scorpion.

“Who goes there?” Arba looked for where the voice had come from until he figured out it was the scorpion talking to him. “I said, who goes there?” bellowed the scorpion.

“I am but a man seeking out the two largest melons that grow in these groves,” Arba responded, bewildered by the enlarged, talking scorpion.

“Only three melons grow in these groves a year,” said the scorpion, “And I had one of those three for breakfast yesterday and I wanted to have the second for dinner tonight. For trespassing and attempting to steal my fruit, you must die!”

The scorpion then took a giant leap and Arba quickly dodged and only just avoided the beast’s deadly stinger. Arba attempted to cut its tail off, but the scorpion’s tail, back and head were heavily armored. Arba had been running from the scorpion’s stinger for three hours until in desperation he swung his scimitar at the scorpion’s underside, and it began to bleed. While the monster was on its back, Arba continued slashing at its stomach until it gave up its struggle. “I am sorry it must end this way,” Arba apologized, “but I need these melons.”

The scorpion then responded, “Not at all, boy! By no means am I dying, I stand here and guard these sacred fruits and only give them to those who can defeat me, and you bare that strength. I will be reborn out of the sands in a week. Please take my hide and make a shield out of it to use against those terrible bandits. May you have safe travels.”

And so Arba took the two melons and made a shield of the scorpion’s armor, and traveled five days and five nights to get home under the guidance of the compass.

“This is the sweetest melon I have ever tasted!” exclaimed the Sultan with a mouthful of melon, “And there is more than enough to go around!”

Meanwhile, Di whispered to Bianca, “What’s the matter sister, you’ve been staring at Arba since he returned?”

Having snapped out of her trance, Bianca hastily responded, “Nothing is the matter and I was not staring at the peasant. I was just looking at the painting behind him.”

“Oh,” Di responded. The banquet soon came to an end and again Arba went home to wait for his final trial the following month.

Slowly had the night arrived when Arba would receive his final trial. With much anticipation he walked into the throne room and one thing he noticed was that Bianca no longer gave him a cold glare, but this time she seemed a bit concerned.

“You have done well to complete two dangerous trials, but this final one shall trump them all!” announced the Sultan.

Sever cleared his throat and said, “Your final trial is to bring back three locks of hair from the beard of the fierce dragon Rata. Your time limit is until the end of the wedding ceremony, so you have three weeks. May the divine djinn, Dajaha, look after you.”

The words Sever spoke shook the entire room. Even Monkey, as straight faced and stone like as he seemed, was startled by Sever’s description of the last trial.

Arba left the palace in despair. There was no way he could even get near a dragon as fierce as Rata. “Should I just give up?” Arba asked himself, “Bianca is also required to return my affection for me to win her hand in marriage. Besides, what good is it risking my life for a woman who can’t stand the sight of me, but what about her expression tonight? And I thought she was admiring a painting behind me at the banquet, but could she have been looking at me?”

A papaya had then hit him in the head. He looked up to find his stepbrother, Jet, sitting in the canopy above him. In Arba’s room he told Jet of his trouble and Jet responded, “I’m afraid you might have to try for Bianca’s safety.”

Surprised Arba asked, “What do you mean for Bianca’s safety?” Jet then responded saying, “I was napping in a canopy in one of the back allies when I heard the Emperor’s attendant talking to some more men in black robes. He told them that they must find an impossible trial for you, because after Bianca

marries the Gregory, he will sacrifice her to some divine djinn Dajaha, or something or other.”

“Then I really do have to complete this trial,” said Arba, “Even if Bianca doesn't love me back I must at least save her life.”

Jet then asked, “Why can't you tell the Sultan and Bianca about this?”

“It was only ten years ago that uncle Drel was arrested,” Arba responded, “I could easily be accused of jealousy or attempted assassination.”

The next morning Arba prepared food, water, a cloak, Monkey's scimitar, a camel, the scorpion shield Di's compass and put on a set of the guards armor, supplied to him by Sever and with a heavy heart approached the gates. Then a voice called “Wait!” but this time it wasn't Di or Monkey, it was Bianca's servant, Sonia. “Master Arba! I have an important message for you!” she proclaimed.

“What is it, Sonia?” Arba asked.

“M' lady Bianca wanted me to tell you that it was her who sent you the compass and requested that Monkey give you his scimitar.” Sonia gasped, having run out of breath after running so fast, “She was about to send them with this message, afraid that last night was the last time she would see you, but then a request came from Sever asking that Di remain in the castle to try on her bridesmaid's dress and that Monkey oversee security preparations for the wedding. So m' lady sent me!”

“Thank you, Sonia!” Arba said, “I'm happy to hear that.”

Sonia then added, “What's more is that Bianca at first thought she was doing these things in pity for you, but at the last banquet she realized that it was not fair to blame your family for her cousin's death and that she loves you!” After having heard this, Arba was filled with courage and knew that he now needed to save Bianca from death and an unhappy marriage.

After thanking Sonia for the precious message, Arba asked the compass, “Will you please take me to the dragon Rata?” and set off on his camel for what might be the final time.

He journeyed north for seven days and seven nights until he came upon a large mountain, and at the base was the dreaded beast, staring at him with fierce red eyes. The dragon was long and sand-colored, with a light beard on his chin. Rata then spread his large wings and began kicking up a sand storm with a quick flap of his wings. Arba shielded his eyes from the gust of sand just to afterward see the dragon flying straight toward him. Rata began spewing fire from his mouth as he approached Arba and the boy lifted his shield to counter, and then the dragon attempted to slash at him with his

claws. When he began to ascend he felt something weighing him down by the tail, slowly making its way up to his back. He tried to shake the boy off, but Arba held on and once Rata calmed down he began delivering blow after blow on the creature's back. Rata then dove down and just before hitting the ground, Arba let go and the dragon then began burrowing through the sand. Arba looked around then suddenly the dragon's head popped up from the ground and breathed more fire, which Arba then countered by charging with his shield in front and made a swift slash, effectively leaving a scar in the place of Rata's left eye. The dragon flew upward in rage, giving Arba time to cut off the tip of its tail. The dragon then started flying fast toward Arba, with fire spewing out of its wide-open mouth. Arba quickly shoved his shield into its mouth and knocked the butt of his sword against the dragon's skull.

The dragon then flew high into the air, let out a deafening roar and shouted, "Enough! Young mortal, why do you fight so persistently?"

Arba took a few seconds to gather his thoughts and responded, "I need three locks of hair from your beard, or else the woman I love will be killed."

"A noble cause indeed," the dragon responded, "But unfortunately for you I am very fond of my beard and it takes centuries for it to grow back."

"Please!" Arba pleaded, "The love of my life will be sacrificed to a djinn within the month and I must retrieve three locks."

"A djinn?" The dragon asked, "What is his name?"

"I think it was Dajaha," Arba responded.

"Dajaha?" the dragon exclaimed in surprise, "Very well, you shall have three locks of hair from my beard. Dajaha is a wicked djinn who seeks the destruction of civilization. And if your loved one were to be sacrificed to this djinn, her royal blood may give him enough power to cause serious damage. Take no more than three locks and go quickly."

"Thank you!" Arba exclaimed. He then cut off exactly three locks of hair and asked the compass to take him home one last time. His camel had been injured during the fight so it took fourteen days to return to the city, and as soon as Arba arrived, he ran through the winding roads of the bazaars and dashed through the palace gates and found the gardens.

"Arba?" Bianca said as she saw her true love standing at the other end of the aisle. The wedding ceremony had begun and she was just about to exchange rings with Gregory when Arba arrived. He limped down the aisle and lifted the locks of Rata's beard for her and Gregory to see. Bianca then caught him in a warm embrace and the wedding was called off.

One year later, Arba and Bianca were married and the cake was decorated with the amazing feats that Arba had to perform and it was the most joyous occasion the kingdom had ever seen in a century. With the two childhood friends being reunited and honor being restored to Arba's family, Arba and his beloved wife Bianca lived happily ever after.