

Name: Megan Gleason
Grade: 11th
Title: The Legend of Ayeddis

In the olden days, there was a legend that told of a she-wolf named Ayeddis, with a coat as white and pure as the Northern Mountains. She was born to human parents, but was cursed by a forest witch at the age of eighteen. She was doomed to be a fearsome wolf by day, and a beautiful lady by night. Her name inspired fear in the villagers; they called her a freak and a monster. People said she had a strange aura around her, as if some of the old witch's magic had seeped into her skin. Her eyes were an unusual blue, the color of the sea. She lived on her own for several years in a cottage buried deep in the woods, but hunters began to search for her, hoping to become rich by selling her beautiful coat. She was forced to find refuge deeper into the forest, where no human ventured. She was never seen again.

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Harvey's Tavern was alive with activity, despite the late hour. Musicians struggled through a rendition of an old folk tune while their fiddler lay fast asleep on the floor, a tankard of ale in his hand. A few men lay slumped on the cracked wooden tables, drool oozing from their gaping mouths. A merry crowd of drunks had begun to play a rather colorful game of poker on one side of the room.

A grey-cloaked figure sat alone in the corner of the tavern, a hood pulled low over his face. The stranger's feet rested on the lowest rung of an old bar stool, his thick wool socks peeking through the holes in his leather boots.

A loud guffaw sounded from the other side of the tavern, where the poker game had been interrupted. A large beefy man had spilled a tankard of beer down his front and was arguing with a young man with a wispy beard. "Cheater!" the beefy man yelled, wagging his finger at the young man.

The young man grinned, displaying his winning cards. "I won, fair and square."

The beefy man's eyes crossed. "Naw, you's a cheater, I sees you bein' fancy with the cards!"

The young man shrugged his shoulders, turning away from the beefy man. "I didn't cheat."

"I sees you!" the beefy man became more agitated, his lips flecked with spit.

"You're drunk, Ed," the young man responded casually, tossing his cards back on the table.

Ed frowned, seeming confused.

The younger man got up from his chair, and patted Ed on the shoulder. "Yes, I'm afraid you're drunk."

Ed's eyes rolled wildly, his frown deepening into a scowl. "You insultin' me?" he growled, shoving the man's hand off his shoulder.

The young man put his hand to his heart in a mock show of hurt feelings. "Me? Insult you? Never."

Ed's eyes narrowed. "Son of a pig!" he shouted, uprooting himself from his chair and lunging for the young man.

The young man danced away from the large man's reach. "A pig? I always thought of you as a cow."

A crowd began to assemble around the fighters, rapt with attention as they waited for the brawl to begin. Emboldened by the crowd, the young man circled Ed, making him turn around in circles.

"Cow....Son of a deranged bull...stupid drunken coward-"

Ed stewed in silence, his mustache quivering in anger. Without warning, he punched the young man in the face, sending him sprawling onto the floor.

The young man rolled out of the way as Ed went for him again, and scrambled to his feet. The young man's eyes were bright with anger, and he let out a yell as he ran for Ed, butting him in the stomach with his head.

Ed stumbled back, enraged, and tried to punch the young man again. The young man ducked, and punched Ed in the face.

Ed roared in fury and punched the young man in the ribs. Winded, the young man stumbled back against the wall, and cried out in pain as Ed pummeled him with his fists. Blood began to run down the young man's face, dripping onto the wooden floor.

"Come on, Henry!" someone in the crowd shouted.

Henry threw back his head and bashed Ed's head with his own, giving him just enough time to free himself.

"Cheater!" Ed bellowed, slamming Henry against the wall. He punched him in the jaw, the jawbone cracking with a sickening snap.

Henry weakly tried to escape, but it was no use. Ed was enjoying himself, his lips split in a gaping grin, displaying his impressive array of rotten teeth.

Ed began to punch Henry's side, and there was an impressive crack as one of his ribs snapped. Henry slumped, clutching his side helplessly as Ed punched the side of his head.

The crowd had gone silent, their eyes glued to the two fighters. A sharp voice broke the silence. "Stop!"

The crowd parted, and a tall grey-cloaked stranger approached the two men, a hood obscuring his face.

Ed grunted in surprise, letting Henry slump to the ground in a pitiful heap. "Who're you?" Ed growled.

The stranger ignored him, crossing his arms.

Ed's face turned a putrid shade of purple. "I said *who're you!*" he bellowed, spit flying from his fleshy lips.

"Who are *you?*" the stranger asked curtly.

Ed crossed his arms stubbornly. "None of your biz'ness."

"And my name is none of yours."

Ed frowned, rubbing the top of his head. "Your voice is like a girl's."

The stranger made no movement, as still as a rock.

Ed grinned slyly, and reached for the stranger's hood, but the stranger darted out of the way, his grey cloak trailing on the ground.

Ed's grin widened. "You's afraid, eh? Afraid of some'un discoverin' your secret?" He made another grab for the stranger's hood, this time pulling it off his head-or rather, *her* head.

Ed's eyes widened, and he teetered backwards. "You's a lady!"

The woman was young, around twenty years old. She had high cheekbones, and an arched nose. Her skin was a creamy pale color, like the face of the moon, and her curly dark hair lay in a tangled mess on her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes were like small pieces of ice. Their gaze sent a shiver down Ed's spine.

"I'm afraid that's true," the woman said calmly.

"Those eyes..." Ed mumbled, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. His eyes rolled in fear, and he stumbled away from the woman.

"Some find them frightening," the woman said softly.

Ed turned pale, his skin blotched. He shook his head, moaning. "Stop, don't look a' me!"

The woman arched an eyebrow, and turned away. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of metal, and whipped around.

Ed had pulled out a dagger, and was pointing it towards her chest, the tip quivering in his shaky hands. "Don't...move..." he panted.

"Ed, no!" Several men ran towards Ed, trying to stop him, but the woman told them off. "Let him be a fool, if he wishes," she said sharply, her eyes gleaming in the dim light.

Ed howled in anger, and charged the woman with the dagger, aiming straight for her heart.

But before the dagger could pierce her skin, the woman began to change. Her pale skin began to grow long silvery hairs, and her back arched and shrank. Her arms shortened, as if a string had pulled them back into their sockets, becoming sinewy and muscular. Her fingertips grew black curved claws, and her hands became padded and hairy paws. Her nose stretched into a delicate snout, whiskers sprouted from her cheeks. Only her eyes remained unchanged, blue as the sea. All of this happened in less than a second, and Ed screamed as he found himself facing an arctic wolf.

The wolf barked and growled, jumping up and hanging onto Ed's arm with its teeth. Ed squealed in pain, and fell to the floor with a heavy thud. The wolf pounced on top of him, baring its teeth as it prepared for the kill.

Several men detached themselves from the crowd and tried to pry the wolf off the Ed, but it snapped at them and would not be moved. The wolf stared at Ed, its icy blue eyes meeting his. He whimpered in fear, and struggled to free himself, but the wolf bared its teeth, and he was still.

I am Ayeddis. Every person in the room felt the weight of the words, and at the same time knew that the wolf had spoken to each of them, her clear voice penetrating their minds. The she-wolf had returned.