

Once upon a time, there was a very dark Witch named Griselda. She lived in Grapland and every 100 years she would leave her home to trouble and destroy the lives of the happy. However, the Dark Witch wasn't always so dark. She used to be the queen of Grapland but one day, her King, Hadar, left her for a beautiful milkmaid, Isabella. The Queen did not understand why this poor working woman was so much more attractive and desirable than she. The Queen devoted her life to study dark magic and one day curse the woman with ugliness and misery. Many years passed and Hadar and Isabella filled them with love and happiness and even brought a beautiful baby, Devlin, into the world.

When Griselda finally mastered the art of dark magic and perfected her potion for Isabella, she called for a town celebration for the birth of Hadar and Isabella's baby. The festival was amazing, with court jesters, performers, and even a display by the local tree fairies. Everyone in the town was having a great time, and when no one was looking Griselda slipped the potion into poor Isabella's glass of gourd juice. Immediately there were no apparent effects. However, Isabella did feel a little nauseous so she left the party early to go lie down. Hours later, when Hadar finally arrived home, he nearly jumped out of his shoes at the disfigured sight he saw before him. All Hadar could see was a large cloaked form sitting on his bed. Hadar did not recognize it as Isabella so he thought there was an intruder in his house. "Who are you and where is my wife?" he yelled. All the figure could do was weep. He took a step closer and with a broom handle pushed the hood off the figure's head. To his disbelief, he saw that it was Isabella sitting before him. She was almost unrecognizable save for her striking crystal blue eyes. "What happened to you?" Hadar questioned. Once again, the only reply he got was more intense bawling.

Obviously, he wasn't going to get an answer tonight so Hadar just sat with Isabella all night reminding her how beautiful she was on the inside and that he never cared about her looks anyway.

By the morning, Isabella's transformation was complete. In place of her long billowing locks of blonde hair was a matted coat of brown strands. One may not even be able to identify it as hair. Her skin was full of blemishes and age marks, her teeth-rotted and loose, and her nails-yellowed and badly infected. It seemed as if Griselda's plan had worked. Isabella was hideous and there was no way Hadar could possibly love her anymore. Griselda was counting the minutes until Hadar went back to her to claim his true love, her. But Hadar never came. Griselda waited 13 days and 13 nights for her King. Getting restless, Griselda decided to search for Hadar. She went to his home only to find it deserted. She questioned the townspeople but no one had seen the family for over a week. Hadar and Isabella had run away, escaped the confines of Griselda's kingdom and ventured out for a life of their own, where no one would judge Isabella by the way she looked. After all, Griselda had not been able to rid Isabella of her true beauty, her heart. You see, there is no magic capable of destroying something so pure and simple. Love is the only enchantment stronger than dark magic and as long as one is true to oneself, he will carry the only antidote needed to counteract the poisons of witchcraft.

At this point, back in Grapland, Griselda was furious and even more evil, if possible. Her round bloodshot eyes bulged and her nostrils flared with rage. Her plan had failed. If Griselda could no be happy, neither could anyone else. She vowed to make all living souls alive as miserable as she could. She was the Queen, the mightiest woman of

the lands and she deserved happiness more than anyone else did. The only way she could be somewhat satisfied with her life was to see that it was better than everyone else's.

So now I bring you to the Land of Pohz. It was a beautiful stretch of mountains and valleys with lush forests and flowered fields. However, this land may seem a bit peculiar to the common man. You see, this land was magical and wonderful, a heaven on earth. The boarzahs were the main inhabitants of the land. These little creatures were about 4 feet tall when mature and had round furry faces decorated with large hazel eyes and a sweet round nose and large round ears on the tops of their heads. They wore long brown shirts tied with woven dragon hide belts. There were also wood nymphs and nokaroes. Wood nymphs were beautiful creatures with long shining hair and bright bodies. However, they possessed rather sharp fangs so no one has ever gotten close enough to one to recognize the details of the nymph. Nokaroes were interesting creatures to say the least. They had small buds on their heads and webbed fingers and toes with lush brown fur striped with every color imaginable. They had sweet temperaments and were even domesticated by some of the boarzahs. Some other exotic fauna included purple backed spoljoints,

That was until the evil Dark Witch took over and cursed the land. Griselda saw all of the different species coexisting happily and it sickened her. She knew she must do something to end the glee. Griselda made her way to the city leaving darkness and pain in her path. The trees lost their leaves and the grass turned gray, and the people had no reason to live. Their motions were slowed and the air reeked of lethargy. They followed the same schedule every day and lost interest and all things beautiful.

News soon reached the city that Griselda was on her way and the boarzahs panicked. Everyone was in a rush to flee the city. However, the boarzahs were not fast enough. Griselda blanketed the city like a fire fed with petroleum. Yet, one person seemed immune to Griselda's terror. A young boarzah, Arash, was not affected by the gray tide of depression. He saw the town around him and how the boarzahs had changed. After a moment of shock had passed, Arash fled to the outskirts of the land to find sanctuary.

There Arash found that there was also another species who survived the storm. The wood nymphs were perfectly healthy and exuberant as always. For two nights, Arash braved the elements with only the shelter of a large formigg leaf. One morning, when almost all hope was lost, a small nymph named Nafeeza landed on Arash and awoke him my delicately tugging on his ear. The nymph had urgent news and begged Arash to follow her back to the old.... ..tree and speak with the nymph elder. The elder, a feeble yet brusque looking nymph landed on Arash's hand and told him the story of the great prophesy.

"Once upon a time," the nymph began, "there was a beautiful woman named Isabella whom everyone loved. But one day, an evil witch put a spell on her and she transformed into a hideous being. The woman fled the city along with her husband, Hadar, and baby. They finished out their days happily in the forest becoming great friends with all wild creatures. When finally it came time for the woman and her husband to pass on, the boy acclimated himself to the nearby village and even found a loving wife. They had a baby boy and he was loved by the entire town. Are you listening to me?" The nymph asked because it seemed like Arash was drifting off.

"Oh, sorry," he quickly rambled and the nymph with a slight sigh continued his story.

"There was something unique about that baby boy. He had a certain spirit and desire for knowledge. He would test everything and push his limits just to see how far he could go. He was sent to accomplish great things some people said. His name will be written among the stars someday, others claimed. It was clear this young man's destiny far surpassed the ordinary man. However, the child was not aware of his fate. He thought he was a normal boy doing normal boy things- climbing trees and running around. However, he always climbed a little bit higher and ran a little bit faster than all the other kids. This star child didn't have everything in life though. He always felt different. He looked different. He was taller than even the largest of his kind and possessed a lot less hair." Arash chuckled at this because it reminded him of him. "No one knows the end of that story yet Arash. I have received messages from the Great One, Arash. He has spoken to me and said the time for revolution is near. I have closely watched over the Marked Boy and patiently waited for this day. The day when the evil Griselda would meet her doom. Arash it is you and only you who has the power to defeat Griselda. You are the kin of Isabella and Hadar. Their blood runs through your veins. Their blood; your blood, is Griselda's one and only weakness."

"You can't be serious," Arash gasped. "I am *not* special, I can't kill *anyone*. I have *no* army, *no* experience, and *no* help."

"You do not need an army, or any battle experience. You will find help when you least expect it. Your heart will guide you and show you the way. The Great One has made

his plan and you are part of it. Griselda will be vanquished and you will be a hero. You're place among the stars calls to you, beckons you forward. This is all I can say for now. You must go. Follow the bright star and your next direction will come. Good luck young Arash, and may luck be on your side.

Stiff legged and utterly bewildered, Arash made his way from the tree and gazed upward for the bright star.

"What was the elder thinking? It is daylight there are no stars."

And it dawned on him, Arash needn't be so literal, maybe the bright star was the sun. But how could it be the sun? The sun moves throughout the sky so Arash's path would not be clear.

"Trust you heart Arash, trust it." A small voice in his head said.

And so Arash walked towards the sun for what seemed like hours and still no help came. Extremely frustrated, Arash sat down on a cool rock and splashed water on his face from a small trickling stream. He nearly choked at what he saw. Words began to appear in the water. Shining words, words made of fire!

"Her land is far away; your journey will be trying, follow your heart and listen to the right man."

What was that supposed to mean? He already knew to listen to his heart but who was the right man? This did not make him feel any better. Arash decided that his day was so

stressful that he deserved to go to bed early. Besides, he needed time to mull the day's events over. Arash found a nice cave and created a make shift bed out of fluffy

penticlears and covered himself once again with formigg leaves. When morning came, the sun shone bright and Arash continued his journey. He still had no idea who the right man was but trusted that when he found the man he would know. Arash crossed the Swamp of No Return and traveled through the Bleeding Jungle, and met a few strange characters along the way. The swamp was home to many creatures, among them the wollipog, a fist sized frog with an abnormally large beak. In the Jungle were the infamous trollipping tulips. Vicious flowers that magically attracted a man and would then spit nectar into his eyes. That is the extent of the effect on large animals but the tulip nectar would paralyze smaller animals and then the tulip would be able to consume them. The Pit of Pansies, falsely named, gave Arash a bit of trouble. He was not expecting such a hard journey and he thought the Pit of Pansies would be a sweet relief. However, when he reached the edge and realized that the pit was down a huge cliff and full of new and strange organisms. The first challenge: how was Arash to climb down the cliff with no supplies? Second, once he was down there would Arash be able to cross and come out the other end. Then how was he supposed to climb back up the cliff? Arash sat on the edge of the cliff and tried to dangle his feet over the edge but he couldn't. There seemed to be an invisible floor over the pit. Excited, Arash jumped up and began to run over the pit. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences Arash had ever had. He laughed as he glided over the air and felt the breeze flowing through his hair. When the end felt within his grasp, the floor suddenly gave way and Arash began falling. He panicked and flailed

his arms and legs trying to reach the wall but his efforts were in vain. Arash fell for what seemed like hours and he got no closer to the ground. "What kind of trick was this?" he

wondered. Arash feared he would never escape and just keep falling until he met his death. A tear trickled down his cheek and fell below him down to the pansies. At once, he began spiraling and his surroundings became blurred. A strange bird came flying towards him and swept him upwards by his feet. He didn't know if the bird was well intentioned but his mind was too blurred to react. The bird kept flying towards the sky and then dropped Arash on the other side of the cliff. He had made it, but not without sweat and tears. In fact, that single tear is what saved Arash. The pit was created to stop evil from crossing. It was believed that only the pure hearted and well intentioned would show their true emotions in the face of peril. If a single tear fell and hit the bottom, a savior would reach out to the man and deliver them to safety.

Continuing his voyage, Arash crossed over a scorching desert and finally reached one of his last obstacles. There was an ocean separating him and Griselda. Once again he had no idea how to go about this task so he turned in for the night. When he awoke there was a beautiful little sailboat floating just off shore. He had no idea how it got there or who made it but inside was another message. Delicate miniature seashells were arranged spelling the words,

"The wind lies."

Again, a completely irrelevant clue, which Arash pushed aside. He climbed into the boat and set up the sail. The wind immediately grabbed hold and whisked the boat away and soon the shore disappeared. Arash hoped the boat knew where it was going because he

had no idea which direction he was going. Once stormy night the waves swelled over the sides and a sea creature was thrown on board. Arash tried to grab hold of it but when he did a searing pain shot through his arm and he had four bright green slashes along his hand. The creature was quite round and had dark seaweed colored scales with dark purple splotches all over. Its upper fin was sharp and tattered, like the fish had just had a great struggle. It looked up at Arash and spoke to him.

"Awful sorry about that. I thought you were going to eat me."

"Oh, that's okay," Arash spluttered. "If you don't mind me asking, what are you?"

"Funny, said the creature, I was going to ask you the same thing." Arash managed to form a weak smile. "The name's Gust, said the sea creature, I'm an Aquafipple. My kind is quite abundant in the sea."

"Well my name is Arash and I'm a child."

"Wow!! I've never seen a child before. I'm sure my family would love to meet you. Why don't you just come under for a minute or two so I can introduce you?"

"I can't hold my breath for two minutes. I'd drown!"

"Nonsense child, this is a magical land so what makes you think this water is ordinary. You can breathe under it."

Something in Arash's mind was telling him not to trust Gust. And then it clicked, "The wind lies." Of course! Gust must be the wind, he thought. But how was he supposed to get rid of the Aquafipple?

I don't think I should," Arash replied. "It's quite cold out here and I don't want to get all wet. It's not good for my health."

"Young Arash, the water is warm and the clouds will clear momentarily."

Gust said with a certain tone in his voice that frightened Arash and he feared the Aquafipple was becoming hostile. Arash made a quick decision and attempted to shove Gust out of the boat but the Aquafipple stung him again and this time on purpose. Arash quickly pulled away and gasped in pain.

"You are coming with me whether you like it or not," Gust sneered. He made a shrill screeching noise and all of the sudden the water started to bubble. The noise grew louder and louder until Arash thought his ears would split. The screeching suddenly stopped and as soon as Arash thought it was over, two dozen more Aquafipples burst out of the water and attached themselves to him. A searing pain like no other coursed through his body. The pain mounted so high but then a great calm swept over his body and he went to sleep.

The next morning Arash woke up dazed and confused. The events of the night were all jumbled in his head and the bright sunlight blurred his vision. However, he did remember that he was brutally attacked by a hoard of Aquafipples but he had no idea where they went or how he escaped them. No answers came to him, he expected to see words float across the sky or something but nothing happened. He decided not to worry

about how so much but just be thankful he was still alive. Arash turned the sail and he boat sped him away to Griselda's castle.

Arash saw on the horizon a large island consisting of dark jagged rocks and a few dead trees. A huge castle rose sharply over its surroundings as if announcing its ferocity and mystery. A threatening cloud loomed over the island and a bolt of lightning scorched a nearby bush leaving only a smoldering pile of ashes. Arash's boat hit shore and he hesitantly climbed out. Arash had no clue where to go from here. The castle was probably guarded and he had no plan. Arash began walking around the perimeter of the island looking around and brainstorming a possible strategy. He looked up to the sky and when he looked back, his boat was rocking. Odd Arash thought, seeing as the water was completely still. Arash froze and stared at the boat trying to see if there was someone, or something inside. But nobody was around; Arash was completely alone. The island was too quiet. He slowly approached the boat. All that was inside was a strangely shaped piece of coal. He had not noticed it before and wondered how it could have gotten in there. He picked the rock up and it began to squirm in his hand. Arash dropped the rock as if it was on fire and just before it hit the ground, it burst into a bird- the same bird that saved him from the pit of pansies. Was this bird his savior, had she saved him from the Aquafipples? What other explanation was there? Unfortunately, the one creature that Arash would actually like to talk to couldn't speak. But she knew what to do. She tugged his ear towards the castle and squawked urgently at him, reminding him that there was a very important task to be done.

Arash nervously followed the bird towards the castle. They weaved in and out of small caves and dark passageways and climbed many steep cliffs. The pair reached a crossroad and for once, the bird didn't know which way to go. Out of a dark side road walked three creatures. The tallest was bald and had large pointed ears and extremely long yellowed fingernails. He seemed like an oily man, not one to trust and he wore a long tattered cape. The other two were identical; short squat figures with flat snouts and pudgy eyes. They looked like two pigs gone bad. They wore torn maroon shirts tied with black belts and black pants. They had no shoes and only two toes on each foot. Both were smirking and Arash's stomach churned with fear.

The tall man spoke. "Young marauder, you have reached the fork of frauds. One of these passageways will lead you to the castle but the other will lead you to your doom. To choose the right path, you must make the right decision. Both of these men guard one path. One will tell you the truth. The other will lie. Choose the honest man and you will be on your way to the castle. Arash took a deep breathe and approached the man on the left.

"I know you desire young man. You want to defeat the Great Griselda. Let me tell you that is a near impossible task. She has one weakness. She is not immune to the most powerful and ancient form of magic. If you have a true heart, you can destroy the Queen. If not, you will become a statue added to her vast trophy collection. I will leave you with one last thing, child. Along this path, you will find help in the strangest of places. A cricket will follow you to the creek. Place it under water and listen. The crickets chirping will turn into a prophecy. Pay close attention and keep it near to your heart throughout

the remainder of your journey. Finally, when the trees start to weep make a right and the castle will be just up ahead."

With this, the left man bowed and retreated into the shadows of his path. Arash headed toward the right man and heard this,

"That man talks rubbish. Behind me awaits a world of strength and power. Within these depths, you will find the army necessary to defeat the Great Witch. You cannot win with your heart; she is too powerful. You are a child and need protection and experience. The best warriors are behind me and they are anxiously awaiting your orders. Good luck, child."

And with that, the right man backed away into his passageway.

"So now make your choice and walk enter your destiny," the tall man announced.

Arash did not know what to do. His heart told him to follow the left man's path but the right man had an army. Arash deeply desired to have backup with him when he faced the most powerful being in existence. He looked to the bird for advice but she said nothing. He racked his brain for an answer. It hit him, the fire words said, "The right man lies." Did that mean his right or the tall man's right? He could not afford to make a mistake. His heart racing, Arash once again looked to the bird for help. She was his only hope. He gazed into her eyes and saw the tall man's reflection. He was standing above everyone, maliciously smirking with his hands folded in front of him.

"Wait," Arash thought.

"He had two right hands! That must mean the right man was on Arash's right. Genius!"

A wide smile spread over Arash's face and he triumphantly walked towards the left path. He passed into the shadow, but once he crossed the threshold, the forest lit up and there was an amazing display of lights among the trees. Fairies danced around, the phoenixes sang a magical song, and the trees swayed to the music. The forest was alive and full of celebration. They knew Arash was on his way to defeat Griselda and they were buzzing with anticipation. He followed the path, but never alone. There was constantly a trail of excited animals behind him, jumping and running, flying and swooping. Arash finally retired near a humble creek, and the animals finally dispersed to go back to their homes and families.

The next morning there was a tiny cricket sitting on Arash's nose chirping. He awoke with a start but immediately knew what he had to do. So far, the left man had been right so he continued to follow his orders and placed the cricket under water. Out of the crickets, mouth came the most beautiful noise Arash had ever heard.

A woman sang, "Dear child the end is near

Follow your heart, the path will be clear.

The witch cannot harm you,

Your ancestors have charmed you.

Climb to the top of the tower.

Don't even go near her,

For she will sense you there.

Prepare your mind and think very hard.

Your struggle will soon end,
But it will be hard.

When it seems all hope is lost.
Look not for worldly help,
But help within yourself
At sundown, she may shield her eyes.
Now is your chance,
The witch, she dies.
Destroy her, end your pain
Remember,
Remember, young boy,
This is not in vain."

The song melted away and Arash pulled the cricket out of the creek. He kept on chirping and Arash released him. That was a lot to remember. The prophecy did not make much sense but it excited Arash and he hastily continued his trek to the castle. Only fifteen minutes later, the trees began to cry. Sap ran down their trunks and their wails filled the forest with agony. Arash made a right as told even though there was no beaten path and pushed his way through brush and vines. He came out at the base of the castle. It was even more intimidating up close. The turrets ran high and swayed in the wind. This building was obviously held together by magic. Expecting some sort of trap, Arash slowly crept towards the castle but nothing happened. He opened the door with ease and

when he looked inside, it was as if his breathe was sucked from his soul. The ceiling was over 100 feet high and the walls were black and dusty. The floors had an odd greenish glow to them and the air hung thick with death and pain. Otherwise, the room was completely empty. It looked completely untouched and eerily quiet. Every move Arash made echoed in the hall and made the dust stir. He made his way to a winding marble staircase, upwards towards the tallest tower.

When he reached the top, he found nothing. Just an empty room. But oddly, it was completely white. Everything about it glowed with purity. Griselda must not have ever entered that room because clearly she would have turned it black. Arash had no idea what to do next. He couldn't remember any orders about what to do except center himself and prepare his mind. He sat in a corner and closed his eyes. He cleared his mind of all negative thoughts and imagined himself back in Pohz with all his friends happily playing a game of tetherball. Just as he finally came to peace, the bird squawked with all her might. The sound was so shrill and loud that the room shook. Eight stories below, Griselda stirred, unsure of what the strange sound was. She arose from her pedestal and made her way to the marble staircase. The bird squawked again, this time louder. With each floor Griselda rose, the bird screamed progressively louder until Griselda was right outside the door. At this point Arash was crouched in a ball trying with all his might to shield himself from the constant noise. The door burst open and the bird fell silent. There Griselda stood, a huge shadow in the archway. Arash opened his eyes and instantly stood, almost falling out the window. Shaking with fear, Arash tried to steady his posture and

put up a fair fight. He had no hope left in him. Griselda walked through the door way and bellowed,

"How dare you intrude into my castle? You are a child, a mere speck in the scope of time, so I am sure no one will miss you after I turn you to stone."

With that, she reached into her robe and extracted a long scepter. She pointed it at Arash as he huddled in the corner, but something magical happened, but it didn't come out of the end of her scepter. The sun lowered and shone through the window blinding

Griselda. In a moment of panic, Arash hurriedly looked down, picked up a shiny rock and angled the sunbeam directly into the end of Griselda's scepter. He had no idea why he did that, it just felt right. And it was right. Her scepter shattered and she screamed with pain as she burst into a million tiny specks that flew into the sky. At the same time, Arash felt a swift tug and swirled into the air as the white backdrop melted away. He landed in a soft pile of shrubbery. He couldn't stand, he couldn't think. His vision was blurred and his mind hazy. He laid there for a good five minutes processing what had just happened.

There was something hard in his hand and when he looked down, he realized it was the bird, except she was now a piece of coal again. Arash finally stood and slowly walked out of the woods. He had no idea where he was but when he entered the clearing he immediately recognized his surroundings. Arash was home, everything was green again and the people were all happy. It was as if nothing had happened. No one remembered being neither unhappy, nor Arash's elongated absence from the town. The only proof Arash had of his expedition was his word, the miniature bird, and his name written among the stars. Griselda, in all her magnificent pieces, had marked Arash's place among

the heroes forever. Although no one knew just how amazing Arash was, just as the prophecy had said, his efforts weren't in vain. He had saved his family, his friends, the people he loved. No award or respect could top that prize. This boy found the hero in himself, even when all hope was lost. As long as you're true to your heart and push through the struggles, you too can be a hero. Your own hero, and a hero to the people you love.