

"I remember back when Hillford still stood. Are you certain you wish to hear the strange tale of the vanished city, from an old man, such as myself," asked the old man? He had grey hair with a lengthy beard of the same colour. With cloudy eyes, he looked at the young girl.

Her red hair bobbed with the nodding of her head. She was no older than nine; though her curiosity of the world that once was is unending.

The old man smiled and continued with his story, "Hillford was a small city just North of Golds' Wood. The original settlers rode through the vast forest. The soon to be mayor, Edwin Hillford, was extremely wealthy; so they took the most excellent horses and mules. The journey took four days and four nights through the dense woods."

The little girl interrupted, "could they not go 'round the forest?"

"Fair question, though I fear not. For the woods was much larger back in that day; the trek around would have taken a fierce week," the man looked at the girl and asked, "Any more questions as of now?"

The girl shook her head.

"Right, now. As the party was so large, they need not worry about what beasts lay within the woods. They came out the other side of those woods, right on schedule. They got to work quickly; setting up shops, farms, houses, and a wall to surround them. They completed the majority of the homes and the entirety of the wall in a pair of fortnights. On the next week, the first frigid flake of snow dropped, signalling the start of what would be a severe winter. Through some luck, and many trials, not a soul died that winter." The old man looked at the girl. She seemed deeply interested in the story; so he continued, "At the first break of spring, Mayor Hillford set off for more supplies; he went back to the city he left to start his own, back here, to Bellmere. Mr Hillford, as I knew him, found my father (an excellent seller of wares back then). He asked my father to come to Hillford and sell the citizens his wares; my father agreed, thinking about the new customers he could get. My father bade me join him, as I was set to take up the family business, once I grew. Can you guess my age then?" He looked inquisitively at the girl.

"I don't," she said shaking her head. As she did so, her fiery hair flew about her small head.

"I was no older than you, I suppose. With a face, I think, less lovely." He gave her a smile.

The little girl asked, "But you cannot see well can you?"

"No, I cannot, though I like to think of cute faces, don't you?"

"I suppose. Can you continue with the story now?"

"Yes, of course. My apologies, madam. Now, I went with my father, a few other merchants and Mr Hillford through Golds' Wood. Our party was small, meaning we could travel through the underbrush quicker, though our numbers did not scare off the beasts of the woods. The first night, we were attacked by a pack of starving wolves, they came at us from the West. I remember the growling of their mouths and stomachs echoing in my ears for the next two nights we spent in the forest. Their assault on us lasted a never-ending couple of minutes. I had armed

myself with a long dagger from my father's cart; we hit two of them, deadly the shots were not. Though, I think, they left us in search of a meal that would not fight back."

The girl's face turned to shock as she listened to this account of the man's childhood. She asked, "Where you frightened?"

The man pulled his fingers through his beard and said, "Of course I was afraid, though we had to fight back. If we didn't, they would have eaten us and our wares."

Her face returned to an intrigued formation. The sun shone on her face lighting up the features in her small, freckled face. The man looked at her interested with a hint of recognition.

Then the old man continued, "The following nights, nothing came to us in hunger. A few curious birds approached wondering our business in their domain; other than those few birds nothing approached us. We got through the forest and found the city in perfect formation. Once we entered Hillford, my father quickly set up his stall; he forced me to watch to ensure I knew what to do. Once he turned his back on me, I quickly dashed away to explore this new town. I met many friendly people, all members of the original settling party. There were not many children in the hamlet, and many of them were much younger than me, still required carrying. Though I found one girl about my age, we became fast friends; later I learned her to be the daughter of Mayor Hillford. Her name, Nella Hillford; she had long and flowing blonde hair, her face was freckled. And come to think of her again your face and her's could be changed without the knowledge of anyone."

"Did she really look that much like me," the girl asked of the man.

"Aye, her eyes as green and large as yours. Freckles stood proudly atop her nose. And the nose just as small and cute."

"Was her name really Nella?"

"But of course, why would I lie about that, Nella?"

"Because you know my name. You must have thought it would make me more interested if I was named after someone in this story."

"I swear on her honour it to be true."

"Very well. What was she like?"

"First we must talk of what happened with my father's business. He left his brother running the shops in Bellmere, while he bought a house and shop in Hillford. Once I aged to thirteen, he gifted me the store and spent the years travelling between the two growing cities. Now to answer your question. We grew and remained friends we would get into much trouble together, to the anger of our fathers."

The little girl looked at the old man and asked, "What kind of trouble would you get into?"

"I'll tell you, only if you promise not to get into this sort of trouble," laughed the old man. Nella quickly nodded her head, not giving her hair a chance to catch up with her head.

"Very well, we would steal loaves of bread, and hunks of cheese."

"Were not both of you relatively wealthy?"

"We did not take for the food, we ended up giving it away to the birds. We stole for the fun of the theft. Anyway, we also snuck ale, beer, and whiskey from the pub on the corner. We always waited for someone to order, then from across the room, one of us would call to them in a strange voice; while the other grabbed the drink from the counter."

"You got drunk together?"

"Aye, by then we had known each other for two years."

"You were only two years older than I?"

"Around there," laughed the old man.

"I can assure you, sir, I will not be getting into that sort of trouble," Nella scolded.

"That may be what you think now; however, I think it best if you wait for some years until you meet a young lad you fancy. You may find yourself shocked."

"Are you hinting that the girl fancied you?"

"We fancied each other, and the both of us knew it. I used to go to her father's house and stand below her window, there I would wait for her to climb down. By night we would do things that would startle a young lass like yourself," the old man recalled.

The young girl got interested, "Like what? What would you do?"

The old man looked about and said, "I think your ears are too young for those details; perhaps when you are older." He could see the girl frown. "Don't worry I shan't go dying without giving you that story. Shall I continue the story at hand?"

The girl nodded without looking at the wrinkled old face.

"Very good. After we had turned of proper age, we decided to become wed. As Hillford had no church of its own, we had to head for Bellmere. As we were in no hurry to make it there, we went around Golds' Wood."

"What is it you did on the trek around the forest?"

"We enjoyed our pre-wedding party."

"What does that mean?"

"We enjoyed each other's company."

"For a week? It sounds incredibly boring."

"Perhaps when you meet a lad you take a liking to, you'll find his company all you need."

Nella looked at him disgustingly.

The old man noticed and said, "Either way; it is beside the point. After we were wed, we left Bellmere for Hillford. Once we arrived; however, we found ourselves beholding the empty city walls. The city had gone, the people had gone; the only remnants of the town was the wall and personal possessions of the villagers."

"How long had you been in Bellmere," the young girl asked with a face contorted by bewildering thought.

The old man saw her little mind working and responded, "We spent three days in Bellmere and a fortnight for travel."

"Yet, people's gardens were gone? And their homes, the streets? In a fortnight?"

"Yes, do you see now why it is a mystery?"

"I do. It is strange indeed," the young Nella said; then continued, "One day will you take me to where Hillford once stood?"

"I am getting old and may die before that day comes. Though should you turn fifteen, before I die, and still find it intriguing; I shall take you."

"Thank you," she said. With that, she turned causing her fiery hair to twirl, and it danced to keep up with her.

The old man looked out over to Golds' Wood and to the sunset.