

## The Story of Gildor

As the sun crept ever higher into the chill October morning sky the air was filled with the bustling sounds of merchants hawking their wares from their road side booths and wagons. All along the roughly cobbled streets of the town the lives of shoppers and travelers alike could be watched as they played out their day's games and tasks. In the distance the sounds of children playing and the steady pings of a blacksmith's hammer could be heard through the crowds. This was the everyday life of the small town of Brierstead; a normally busy stopping point for goods headed east into the kingdom and it is here in the town of Brierstead that this story begins.

Standing up from beside his old oak wagon Gildor stretched his aching muscles in relief. He was finally done, it had been a long and tiresome couple of days attempting to peddle his wares in the markets of Brierstead and he had still had to take on some odd jobs to end up making the money he needed, but now it was finally over and it was time for Gildor to head home. All that was left to do was finish packing the last of his purchases into the wagon and begin the long one day trip back to his warm home in the small hamlet of Havenwood, where his loving wife, two sons, and young daughter eagerly awaited his return. Warily but with purpose Gildor turned his attention back to the task of packing up his wagon. Though tiring it had actually been a fairly good trip, Gildor thought to himself as he placed the last of his parcels into the back of the wagon. He had managed to sell off the last of his wares in the small town and had used the money to purchase all of the provisions that his family would need to survive the quickly approaching winter. He had even been able to make enough money to buy a few small gifts for his family, including a beautiful yet simple dress for his beloved wife of thirteen years. A poor, hardworking man Gildor knew he would never be able to provide his family with the life he wished they could have, but even still he took pride in being able to provide these things for his family and he hoped this dress would make up for the hardships his wife had to endure in their simple life.

Nearly an hour later finally finished packing up the wagon and positive that nothing would fall off during the trip Gildor turned to face the sun to the east where he could feel it's warmth upon his skin even in the chilling morning air. Staring into the sun rise he could tell from where it set in the sky that if he were to leave now he would get home just after the sun had set below the horizon. Turning to reach the front of the wagon Gildor shivering slightly he also noted again the chill that was in the air. He knew it would be a cold night, like the last few before had been as well. The first frosts of winter and already started blanketing the landscape with a crystalline dusting just a few days before and it wouldn't be long before the first winter storm blew in from the north and covered everything in white. Climbing aboard the wagon Gildor settled himself as comfortably as was possible onto its hard, cold, wooden seat. Then taking the reins in his hands he gave them a whip and with a jolt the wagon set off down the dirt road leading from the outskirts and fields around Brierstead toward the distant forest path that would lead him to Havenwood.

A little before noon Gildor had reached the edge of the forest and staring into its gloom he could not help but think again, as he did on every trip, about all of the stories of disappearances that took place inside these ancient woods and for the brief moment he was filled with unease. It was said that horrifying beasts of all manners and shapes lived within the dark branches of this massive forest that stretched across the western portion of the kingdom and that travelers should be wary of venturing into the woods at night. These tales were whispered in the pubs of every town and told to the children to warn them away from playing in the forest. Gildor was a practical man however and always took these stories with a grain of salt, never for once actually believing that monster lurked behind every bush in the forest. In his mind stories like that were made up by those with nothing better to do with their time. They were just superstitions after all and he had traveled this very path with no incidents countless time before. Shaking his head at how gullible some people could be Gildor settled down further into the wagon for the long ride ahead. If only he had looked more closely into the gloom

however maybe he would have seen that already even at the forests edge there were eyes watching him. Maybe then he would have paid more attention to the old stories.

Hours later Gildor sat shivering under the blanket he kept under the seat of his wagon and cursing at his bad luck because the air had slowly grown bitterly cold as the day had worn on. The snowfall had started quiet suddenly and though it had only been falling for less than maybe half an hour it was already beginning to cover everything within sight in a thin sheet of white. The temperature had dropped quickly in the last few hours but he hadn't even noticed the clouds gather overhead through the trees until they had started to block out the slowly fading sun. He had known for weeks that winter was coming but he cursed the gods that it had come now when he was so close to home and he prayed the storm would get no worse. In the dimming light Gildor knew that he could only be but an hour or two away from the edge of the forest and from there he would be able to see Havenwood in the distance. With no way of starting a fire and no shelter from the storm he knew he had to keep going or risk freezing and so pulled his cloak and blanket more closely around him as urged his horse to continued on down the snow dusted path.

In half an hour the storm's fury had only increased and now added to the thick snowfall was a blistering wind that howled through the trees. The ever increasing darkness mixed with the blizzard around him made it almost impossible for Gildor to see anything that was more than just a few feet away from where he sat in any direction. Slumped low into his seat Gildor wished desperately that he was somewhere warm and safe. He didn't care where; he just wanted badly to be out of the storm. Ever deeper he sank into his thoughts of warmer places and times until he barely seemed to remember the raging storm around him. Suddenly a loud crack broke through the restless din of the wind and drew Gildor out of his thoughts. Looking up he barely had time to see a dim light fly into the forest as an old, dead oak tree near the edge of the path started to come down right on top of his wagon. With only seconds to react Gildor sprang from his seat and out of the path of the falling timber. Landing roughly on

the snow covered ground off to the side of the path Gildor heard the sound of the oak crashing through the front of his wagon. Seconds later he heard the startled whines of his horse, the sound of hoofs muffled by the snow, and strangely he thought he heard the faint sounds of childish laughter. Rolling over Gildor pushed himself into sitting position and stared dazedly at the scene of destruction before him. The front end of his wagon had been completely crushed beneath the old oak and many of the things he had so carefully packed into the back earlier that day were now scattered throughout the snow. Then shaking his head to clear away the dazed feeling Gildor jumped to his feet in horror as he realized that his horse was nowhere to be seen. Running over to the fallen tree and looking about he quickly spotted the horse's tracks in the snow on the opposite side of the oak. Following them with his gaze he saw that the startled horse had bolted down the path the second it was free of the wagon; but even as he watched the tracks were quickly covered over by the falling snow.

Thinking quickly Gildor realizing that he could not stay put where he was in this abysmal storm with no way to start a fire and no way to protect himself from the cold. He also knew that he had to be within a short distance from Havenwood which set just outside the other side of the forest. So wrapping his cloak tightly around himself Gildor checked that nothing of his goods would blow away and decided to continue down the path on foot and come back for everything in the morning. He hoped that he would be able to locate his missing horse somewhere just down the path ahead but even if he didn't he figured he could head to one of the first houses outside the forest. Silently he prayed to old gods that he would be able to make it home safely to his family and set off down the path in the dim light.

What felt like hours passed by as the icy sting of winter's cold breath penetrated every inch of Gildor's being as it billowed through the forest. Its howling screech filled his ears with a song of fury and malcontent. Twigs snapped off their trees like fragile glass and flew in all directions, and all around him was the blinding, swirling cyclones of snow. The sun had fully set by now and Gildor could not understand why he had not yet stumbled upon any sign of his horse or of Havenwood. Desperately he

scanned the darkness around him for something anything; but all he saw was snow and darkness. Numb to his very core and his limbs starting to fail him Gildor knew it was time to admit it, though he dreaded the thought. He was clearly lost, and there was nothing he could do about it. He must have stubble off the path and now he would never be able to find his way out of the forest in this blizzard. He would never again see his home or his family. With every step Gildor took nature seemed to counteract him, mislead him, and push him back almost like something, a voice at the edge of his thoughts, was guiding him. At last he realized this was the end. All hope gone he fell to his knees; his head slumped against his chest. With freezing tears in his eyes Gildor started to look up toward the sky when something caught his eye. Slightly to his left he saw a dim light shining though the darkness and with astonished joy he slow forced himself back onto his feet. As exhausted as he was Gildor staggered his way slowly though the forest toward the light but no matter how far he walked Gildor never seemed to get any closer. It almost seemed that the light was moving and bobbing through the trees away from him like a lantern carried by a man. Calling out weakly for its holder Gildor's confused mind could just make out the sounds of a child's voice calling to him, asking him to follow. After what seemed to him to be hours Gildor finally came upon the source. The light was coming out of a small cave entrance tall enough for a man to get through without stooping but so thin that one would have to turn sideways to squeeze through. Doing just this Gildor used the last of his strength to squeeze through, following the voice that beckoned him hurriedly inside.

Once through the cave entrance Gildor found himself in a small one room cave that was bathed in light from an unknown source. Blinking away the pain the light caused his eyes Gildor looked around the enclosed space for whoever dwelled inside. Finally his gaze fell upon the pile of bones and skulls that rested in the far corner. Horrified Gildor's numb brain realized that many of the skulls he saw were human in shape and turning his head he watched as a ball of light moved toward him; calling his name in a child's voice. As it came into focus Gildor realized that the light was emanating from a small creature

that hovered in the air. It was a pixie, a human like creature only about at height of one's hand and robed in a dress of pure sparkling white that was speckled with red. It's most entrancing features however were the two long, clear, silk like wings that sprouted from its back. Staring transfixed at this creature Gildor shivered in horror as the beautiful little pixie pulled back its lips in a twisted, evil smile revealing two rows of tiny red needle like teeth. Then across the cave dozens of other pixies crept from cracks in the walls and the room was flooded with blinding light. Stumbling backward Gildor fell to the floor and it was there that fear and exhaustion finally overcame him as he slipped into unconsciousness as the first needle like prick bit into his flesh.

Three days later after the storm had ended a search party from Havenwood set out to search for Gildor whose horse had shown up in town dragging part the wagon frame behind it. Soon after they discovered the remains of Gildor's wagon half crushed beneath a tree and buried in the snow. The wagon was found on the side of the road just twenty minutes outside the nearby hamlet, and though the search party searched for several days no sign of Gildor was ever found. Most believed he had wandered off and froze somewhere in the woods, but in whispered voices late at night they would tell the story of Gildor another soul lost to the monsters of the forest; and though no two stories were ever exactly the same who could ever know the truth of what happens in the dark.