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Pied Piper's Song

I'm haunted by a song I can never escape, one that taunts me endlessly. After fifty long years, my mind tortures me still by recalling the first time I heard his flute's bewitching tune. At that time, I was blissfully unaware of the disaster it would bring to our city.

In the year of our Lord 1284, I was a boy of merely 10 years old, living in a single room with my dear mother after losing my father to the plague two years before. We were grief-stricken by his passing, but it was not unusual to lose members of the household to sickness. My mother had no choice but to adopt my father's trade as a tailor and run his shop to feed us.

Back then, the town's rat infestation had reached its limit. The filthy creatures were everywhere—in the gaps between houses, in holes, they gnawed through wood, in the streets feeding on garbage, and in the granaries spoiling the city's food supply. I often found recently birthed babies living in my shoes or felt their parents nibble on my feet at night. Their excrement piled up in the corners of houses and inside the walls, putrefying over time if left unmanaged.

The summer had been unusually rainy that year, and we children of Hamelin enjoyed a scarce number of long, sunny days where we could play in the muddy dirt streets. During those times, I would enjoy time with my childhood friend Otto.

The memory of the day I saw the Pied Piper remains seared in my mind. My mother woke me up at dawn, her sweet, weary face already washed and prepared for the day, auburn hair

in two long plaits and tucked into a white linen wimple. She always rose early to dress so I wouldn't catch a glimpse of her skin, but I already knew about her secret.

Soon after my father's death, she began to pick at the skin beneath her tunic obsessively, causing red welts and scabs to form. She made long clothes to hide her habit and placed blind faith in the church, forsaking the ointments she used previously to lighten her complexion due to the teachings of local priests. It was clear she was anxious about leading the household alone; the task weighed on her more than she would ever admit. I only hoped the wounds scattered around her arms and chest wouldn't cause scarring or illness.

"Good morning, my dear Claus. Do not forget to say your prayers before opening the shop. I'll be down soon," she said, leaning over me to pat down any unruly hair that had gotten out of place overnight.

"Yes, Mother," I nodded, letting out a yawn and crawling out of bed.

I reached for my undergarments and changed into my breeches, stockings, and long-sleeved tunic before kneeling to pray at the simple cross hanging on the wall. Then, I rushed downstairs to open the shutters of our small shop, shooing away the rats running about the floor. At that moment, I heard the sweet tune of the Pied Piper's pipe echoing through the narrow streets of town, bouncing off the walls of old wooden houses sagging against one another. The melodic notes reached the ears of everyone in the city, popping their heads out of windows and stopping their actions as they heard the music. It was a playful song in a pleasing key, one that would have been beautiful if heard from a bard at an inn.

A neighboring hat maker nearly fell out of the doorframe as he leaned into the street to hear more of the tune that muddled one's mind, allowing space for only the deft notes. Everything around me felt fuzzy and unreal. Walls soaked and blended into the floor as if reality was naught but a dream, and I vaguely remember the Pied Piper passing by our storefront, a flash of black and white leading a long, moving grey mass on the way out of town. The mass grew slowly but stayed close to the ground, scuttling in the dirt.

It took me longer than I'd like to admit to realize the mass was composed of the rats that infested Hamelin; their population had multiplied to the point where the city folk could no longer ignore the problem. After a harsh winter during which the rats feasted on our food stores, in the spring, the mayor and town councilors sent out an offer to pay whoever could catch the rats handsomely. A few vermin poachers came and went, unable to deal with the immense number of rats infesting our city. Over the last fortnight, rumor said a pied tunic piper appeared, claiming he could rid the streets of the furry creatures. The mayor had no right to refuse the man's attempt; the situation became increasingly desperate as the rats continued to breed.

My nose burned, and a stench of rot and feces filled the air as the rats passed our shop, some bound together by their tails and feces. They crawled over one another and flowed like a river current down the streets, more appearing from every conceivable nook and cranny of city buildings. Many were missing an eye or a paw from living in excrement-filled spaces, fleas visible underneath their matted fur. From under my feet, the rats from our home scurried out to join the multitudes. I crumpled my nose and watched as the townsfolk eyed the creatures with disgust. After a while, the flow of rats thinned, then ceased entirely.

As the piper moved to the outskirts of town, I felt a weight lift from my mind, and the world came back into focus. Before that day, I never thought a mystical force existed outside of the miracles performed by God, but after witnessing the hoard of vermin following the Pied Piper with my own eyes, I could no longer feel that way.

It was a disquieting feeling; I had heard stories of demons and pagan magic from the priests of our city before but never quite believed them. Now, I knew for sure they existed, and it frightened me. As soon as I was able, I ran up to see my mother, who also appeared concerned by the piper's song. She wore a deep frown, eyebrows drawn together as she looked at me with sky-blue eyes. I could tell she was holding back from picking at the skin hidden beneath her clothes as she often did when she was nervous. "That was Satan's music, Claus! How could the mayor bring a demon into our town?"

Her words frightened me further, and I rushed to her side, burying my face in her long linen tunic. I began to tremble, my legs threatening to give out as I recalled the song's effects on my mind. My mother stroked my head, tucking my neck-length brown hair behind my ears. "Don't worry, my dear. Because your father is no longer with us, I will do everything I can to take care of you," she murmured, placing a kiss on my forehead before turning away to open a chest on the opposite side of the room. After a moment of digging, she fished out a silver necklace with a simple cross and turned back to me with a kind smile.

"This cross was your father's. He never wore it much, but I hope you will take care of it. If you do, I'm sure the Almighty will keep you safe from the dark magic in this world. Please, take it." She held the necklace out to me, and I took it, my eyes brimming with tears. I hung it around my neck, already feeling a sense of calm from the cold metal on my skin.

“Thank you, Mother. I will treasure it.”

I hugged her tight, and I could hear the smile in her voice as she said softly, “I know you will, Claus. You’ve always been such a sweet boy.”

After receiving the precious gift from my mother, the workday went on as usual. Townsfolk came to have their clothing altered or made, and we worked hard to craft our linen works to their specifications. Hamelin was buzzing with talk about the Pied Piper and his mystical flute. Some believed he was sent by the Almighty to put an end to our suffering, but others agreed with my mother and me and said it was the work of a demon. It was not until after dinner that my mother allowed me to go out and play with my childhood best friend, the hat maker’s son Otto.

About two hours remained until the sun set, so we decided to go to the outskirts of town and find some sticks to play Crusaders with. When we got to the city’s edge, a large group of citizens had gathered around the gates, talking amongst themselves. Most wore expressions of worry or concern, and my stomach began to twist, hoping nothing bad happened. As any curious boy would, Otto tugged on a stranger’s sleeve. “What’s going on? Did something happen?”

The older widow, hunched over after years of work dedicated to her craft, glanced down at us and shook her head, “It’s nothing that a pair of young boys like you should have to worry about.”

A nearby burgher heard the elderly woman and shook his head. “They look about the age at which they will soon be leaving home to take on apprenticeships of their own, and this strange business affects all the people of Hamelin.”

The widow tucked a piece of grey hair into her wimple with a sigh. “I suppose you’re right.”

“What happened? What’s going on?” Otto asked again, anxious to know what would be serious enough to be kept from him.

“The folks who farm out by the river say they saw hundreds, maybe thousands of rats jumping into the Weser River to drown. They said they’ve never seen anything like it. Nature under our Lord’s care doesn’t work like that. There must be some foul pagan magic afoot.” Her visage was grim, the lines of her wrinkles making the concern on her face even more severe.

Another woman in the crowd shushed her. “Quiet! You mustn’t say it. The demons may hear you and drag you to Hell along with them!”

“You’re right; please forgive me,” the widow nodded, then looked back down at us. “Go home, boys. You do not want to be caught outside when the sun sets. Stay with your parents where it’s safe.”

Otto frowned. His secular household did not believe much in God’s miracles or pagan magic. To him, this was little more than a disturbance. “...Okay, we’ll go home.”

On our walk home through Hamelin's dusty, winding streets, we took the long route to avoid the tanner and butcher side of town and its horrible smell.

"Do you think the farmer's story is true? Thousands of rats running into the water and drowning?" Otto asked, kicking up some dirt with his soft leather high-top boots.

I hesitated, not wanting to talk about it. Something about the Pied Piper caused me to shudder. "...Were you not awake when the Pied Piper played this morning? He passed your house. I saw your father nearly fall onto the street while listening to the piper's song."

Otto shook his head and grinned at me. "No, I was still sleeping. My mother doesn't wake me until she has breakfast ready. It must be awful having to help your mother with everything."

I felt a pang in my chest. "Who else would help her? My father is dead. I'm all she has left."

"I didn't mean it like that, Claus! You're always so serious. Can't you take a joke?" He rolled his eyes, and anger bubbled up inside of me. Otto never took the time to understand my emotions and bumbled his way through life. Sometimes, his happy-go-lucky way of doing things irritated me.

"Leave it alone, Otto. I don't feel like arguing." I said, grasping at the cross around my neck through the cloth of my shirt. Even though I only had it since the morning, it was a comfort and reminded me of my father's grounded nature.

Still trying to pick a fight, Otto snickered. “Just listen to you! You’re such a stick in the mud.” I shot him a glare to tell him I was serious, and he closed his mouth with a growl.

We walked the rest of the way home in silence, the shadows growing long as the sun set, and I tried not to let Otto’s irritation get to me more than it already had. It’s not like he knew how it felt to live without his father, to be forced into the position of the man of the household. Up until three years ago, I hadn’t either.

We parted ways when we got to our houses, and I could tell my mother had arrived home only a moment before me by how she was taking off a shawl draped around her shoulders. It wasn’t like her to be out at this time of day, and as I took off my boots, I asked, “Where did you go today, Mother? I thought you would be working until later this evening.”

She folded her shawl and placed it on a table, closing the shop’s shutters and barring them from the inside. “I went down to talk to the council about our experience this morning with the devil’s music. It turns out that many other citizens were there to do the same thing and have gone there all day to tell the mayor about how that ungodly tune made them feel.”

I stopped in my tracks, feeling ill as I remembered the tune. “What are they going to do about it? They must know it’s some dark magic.”

My mother looked around the shop as if the walls had ears. “Let’s go upstairs, shall we, my dear? Let’s discuss this by the cross.” I agreed, understanding what she meant, and followed her lead up to the room we shared together. I took a seat in a chair by the cross on the wall. She stood above me and drew me close to kiss my head before speaking. “The mayor and councilors

have decided not to pay for getting rid of the rats because he was in concert with the devil when doing so. They warned him to leave the city before dawn or face imprisonment.”

I let out a sigh of relief. I never wanted to hear that pipe again. Even if it did sound bewitchingly pleasant when I heard it, the way it made my head feel fuzzy and out of my control gave me the sense that it was dangerous and not of this world.

“Let’s get to bed early, hm? I’m sure this nonsense will be over when we wake up.” She gave me a small smile, moving across the room to tighten the binds on our straw-filled beds, squishing the fleas that fled from the motion.

That sounded good. After being on edge all day, I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to return to normalcy. We both washed our faces with cold water and climbed into our beds after removing our clothes.

The last thing I remember that day was my mother blowing out the pig-fat candle and sinking into bed, clutching the silver cross around my neck for comfort.

Sometime during the night, I awoke to a distant sound drifting in through the cracks in the shutters. At first, my heart froze. It was similar to the song I had heard the previous morning but no longer playful and light. This piece was in a harrowing key, its notes still beautiful but tinged with malice and anger. I felt like throwing up as my head spun, and I tried to open my mouth to speak to my mother but found that I could not. As the melody came closer, I found my body somehow moving of its own accord. Dark magic was causing my limbs to move, to climb

out of bed from under the blankets to the cool evening air, my body completely bare and shivering as it forced me down the stairs.

In a panic, I glanced over at the cross and prayed to God to help me fight the demon inside me, but I kept moving to the bottom of the stairs to the doorway. I removed the bolt like I was going out on an errand, and the music hit me harder when I opened the door. Outside, the Pied Piper stood tall in the middle of the road, draped in shadow, waiting for me and the other children of our street, playing his silver pipe as it shone in the moonlight. His form so greatly emanated darkness that I couldn't even see his face, as if he were a shadow himself.

Children of all ages and social classes stood in their doorways as I did, dazed and naked. The moon was full that night, illuminating our fair European skin while we congregated in the middle of the road. If they were like me, they were fully conscious, doing all they could to fight the cursed music. We were like the hairless newborn rats I often found in my shoes.

From there, everything blurred together. I couldn't feel anything except the numbing cold against my skin and the soft earth underneath my feet as I was made to walk for miles, surrounded by every child in the city. Through the blurriness, I saw Otto and tried to call out to him but found I couldn't move my jaw or tongue. My eyes fixed on the shadowy figure leading us, his black and white pied tunic standing out in the darkness. If my body had been my own, I would have cried, tears spilling onto my face, but I could not. I had never known what a blessing it was to cry.

Eventually, we reached the woods near a cliff. The widow's words from the day before seized me, and my stomach twisted in the worst type of way. The farmers said they watched

thousands of rats jump off a cliff into the river to their deaths. I did everything I could to stop my limbs from moving forward to the cliff, but I couldn't stop them. I watched helplessly as the first of the children massed at the edge walked off, falling into the Weser River's swirling depths. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I could do nothing.

The splashes were deafening in the silence of the night, noise increasing as the number of children falling into the water multiplied. There was no order to it, either. Everyone walked to their deaths like a pack of animals run off a cliff by hunters— all at once.

As I approached the cliff, I braced myself for death by drowning. I didn't want to die. There were still so many things I wanted to do with my mother and Otto. I prayed to God to protect my soul as it ascended to heaven and prayed to my father, telling him I was sorry to leave my mother on earth alone.

I knew losing me would break her. If she already picked at her flesh daily now, body bloody and scabbed, what would happen when she learned I had died as well? I didn't want to imagine it. I wanted to see her again in heaven, to live as a family with my father, but the priests said anyone who killed themselves would go straight to Hell. I didn't want to think of her sweet face contorting in the hellfire.

At about ten paces away, something behind me tugged my neck, causing me to fall into the underbrush. My body kept trying to get up and follow the other children, but something was stuck or caught.

I realized a strong branch had snagged my father's cross, preventing me from moving forward. My heart raced, unsure if the Pied Piper saw me fall or if I was safe. While scanning the

cliff, a bottomless, dark pit formed inside of me as I saw Otto on the edge, only a step away from death. Again, with all my strength, I tried to scream—to stop my best friend from taking that step, but I couldn't. I watched, eyes wide, as he tumbled into the water, swallowed by the swirling dark. He never came back up.

That morning, the citizens of Hamelin found the bodies of 130 children on the river's shores downstream. Two farmers heard me in the underbrush by the ledge, shivering and sobbing. They weren't gentle when they pulled me from the branches, panic and despair pinching their faces. When they asked me what happened, I couldn't speak. How could I, after witnessing something so horrific, so monstrous? I could only gaze up at them with hollow eyes. It would be a week before I found my voice again.

All of Hamelin grieved. The loss of the children meant a loss of the future. Many of the children lost to the Weser had shown promise as artisans or other roles as pillars in the community, and such children could never be replaced. Several parents lost more than one child, and how they howled when clutching onto their bluish corpses, once filled with so much warmth and life. The whole town wore dark or black clothes for months as we mourned the massive loss, and there wasn't a day that went by when we didn't hear a mother wailing in the streets.

My mother and I were harshly ostracized. Why was I the only child who survived? I was neither the godliest nor the kindest among us. Often, we were stoned on the streets by weeping parents as we walked by, their red faces swollen and sorrowful as they grappled with the fact that

their child would never come home. Even Otto's parents, who had once welcomed me as their son's friend, now cursed us both whenever they caught sight of us.

No one could accept that I may have survived through the Lord's grace or out of pure chance. Among those I thought to be such godly people, rumors began to circulate that I was only alive through the use of black magic. One night, an angry mob made of the mourning parents gathered at our door with torches and demanded we leave Hamelin. Threatened with violence, we had no choice but to leave that night, packing only what little we could carry. We spent months traveling on dangerous roads filled with highwaymen and bandits before finding a town that would accept us. Although my mother was a talented tailor, we never again possessed a shop of our own. Instead, we were forced to live like rats at the side of the street, begging for maggot-ridden bread.

As we struggled, my mother's stress ate her alive. Her self-harm spread to the visible areas of skin on her face and hands, bloody red welts leading some to believe she had the plague and pushing us further away from society. Even during that time, she would hold me close in our squalor, telling me how glad she was that I survived. When I looked at our situation, it was difficult to believe, but I knew she meant it. She had always loved me, no matter the circumstances.

Shortly after moving, her self-inflicted wounds became infected from the filth we lived in, and with our lack of money, we could not afford for her to see a doctor. She died on a frigid December night, leaving me alone on the streets. Through my grief, I could only be relieved that she hadn't taken her own life. Someday, I could meet her in heaven with my father. I knew he would take care of her until that day came.

When I ran out of money, I tried to go to the church for help, to tell them the tale of the tragedy that unfolded that day, one made possible by what must have been pagan dark magic, but they never believed my story. Some thought I was mad. They said the 130 children perished from a plague, were lured away by a pagan cult, or joined a new crusade like the Children's Crusade 70 years before. But I knew what happened to me was the truth. I became disillusioned with the church but still held fast to my father's cross. I didn't have it in me to get rid of it.

With nowhere else to go, I became a wanderer, traveling from town to town, seeking odd jobs wherever I could find them. I slept on floors of churches, stables, inns, or homes that were generous enough to let me stay for the night, but I could never sleep more than a couple hours at a time. I could never forget his song, the one that stole my best friend's life and drove a whole town into despair.

Slowly, I was driven mad by my nightmares. For my own piece of mind, I knew I had to find the Pied Piper and began to search every city I came across for evidence that he had been there. I still seek him to this day; tracking him has been the challenge of a lifetime. Finding the Pied Piper is like finding a ghost or mystical creature. No matter what I do and how much planning I put into my preparations, I am always one step behind him.

I am close now. Recently, I heard rumors at the inn that he has taken up residence in a tavern across town. When I find him, perhaps he will grant me my ultimate desire: to join my friends in the place where I have always belonged—the depths of the Weser River.

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