

Piper's Wish
A Candlewick Company Story
By
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Once upon a light, a million miles and maybes away, there was a girl who named herself Piper. And while Piper became her name deep in her heart of hearts, it was not her first name. So, this story is both about Piper, and not. It is the story of how a young woman named Sophia became something far greater, and lost much besides.

Born to parents who could not afford her in a town whose love was overspent on an abundance of children, Sophia carved her own way through the riverside village called Hamelin. She lifted her voice to the music that she heard in what many would call a soul. It was not rare for a young girl to sing by the riverside in those days, but it was rare to hear such melodies as those that Sophia sang. Her laughter echoed with the lapping river current, and her sonorous voice carried with it the sound of the deep ocean.

Despite this, Sophia had few friends. Her ancestry, along with a distinct oddness about her character that one could only describe as ambition beyond her station, alienated her from many of those who might have been close loves in another place. Where others would console, Sophia chided. And while some would help those with less fortune, Sophia was not so generous. She believed in strength, and fortitude of the soul. Take care of yourself before others was a philosophy she held then, and still holds to this day. Another time, and Sophia may have been your best friend, a dear confidante, a love for the ages. Here and now though, in Hamelin during an age of darkness, a Jewish girl with a beautiful voice did not garner much sympathy.

As so often happens with beautiful souls that are misunderstood, as Sophia grew older her loneliness turned into resentment and pain. Her family, while loving, did not understand. Sophia's father, David, was a well-liked baker and on the council besides. He knew love from his doting wife and from the village people as a whole. He was generous, and always made more bread than he would need so that those who would have gone without otherwise would eat. In a town such as Hamelin, where roads meet and a strong river flows, prosperity could have found its way to Sophia and her family. She knew that if only her father sought for more than he had, they could do more than bake bread that whitened her hair and itched at her hands. But she could not be angry with her father. She had learned music from him. In those long hours before dawn broke, Sophia would be woken by her father and they would hum old songs from the Holy Land together. At those times, Sophia thought that maybe she could find peace in the warm smell of yeast and flame. But then the sun would rise, and the songs would end, and Sophia was left with a desire for something greater.

One day, Sophia was humming Fall to herself amidst the drifting leaves. She was hiding from her chores underneath the old wooden bridge that separated Hamelin from the wider world. Sophia often found herself by or beneath the bridge, listening to the echoes that water made as it rushed beneath the worn timber. This day, however, she heard something else on the bridge. A rumble. Normally, the road was populated by traders bringing what the people of Hamelin needed but couldn't get themselves. Things like news, and rumor, and salt. Today the roads carried a single cart across the bridge led by a single man. Sophia crept out from her hiding place to get a look at the stranger. He was tall and wore a coat that was half mustard yellow, and half red as autumn leaves. He bore the weight of his

cart himself, and was strapped to it with rough leathers. His burden was unadorned, but weighed down with dozens of empty cages of all sizes. The cages were filthy, as though their occupants had only recently vacated. As the man reached the other side of the bridge, he paused, and his eyes found hers. They were eyes that Sophia had never seen before, and they excited her to no end. Had she known better, she would have seen that they were the eyes of a man with no soul. He smiled, and Sophia smiled back.

"Are you a bridge troll, come to take a toll from me?" The man asked.

"Oh yes," Sophia said, scrunching up her face and rolling her eyes. "That's it exactly. You've fallen into my trap, human." She made her voice carry through the echoes beneath the bridge, and it did indeed sound like she was more than a thirteen year old girl.

"Alas." The man said, leaning against his straps. "Should've been more careful. Tell me, troll, the town across this bridge of yours, is it Hamelin? I have been traveling long to find such a place."

"And what if it is?" Sophia asked. "You may never reach it unless you can pay my price."

"Well," The man trailed off, looking vacantly at the town. "If it were, then I would pay any toll at all. Although..." He shrugged against his straps, looking wanly at Sophia. "I am somewhat occupied, could you perhaps help me?"

Sophia began to make her way up the bank she had been resting in when she paused. "What's your name?"

"My name? Is that your price, troll?"

"Alright, enough." Sophia said, "Come on, tell me who you are. You look like a bestiary, but you've no beasts. We don't trade in iron, and have no need for cages. So, out with it."

The man looked taken aback, and Sophia smiled. Men from outside of town never expected a young girl to know so much about how things worked. But Sophia was both bored and brilliant, and so while other children played with each other, she listened.

"You're not a troll at all, are you?" The man asked, frowning.

"No," Sophia said, dryly, her lips quirking into an almost-smile. "I'm the fairie king. I'm a will-o'-wisp. I'm Jack of Candles! I'm a beautiful, intelligent girl. Decide whatever's the most frightening to you and answer me."

"Alright, alright." He said, raising his eyebrows. "I guess I've no choice. But, in return, you must help me carry my burden into town. I've been alone for a long time and the leather's gone to chafing."

"Fine." Sophia said, ready to be done with this.

"Piper." The man said.

Sophia was about to retort back that Piper wasn't a name at all and to chide him for not taking her seriously, when she noticed that he was gripping something in his hands that she was certain hadn't been there before. Amidst the leathers wrapping Piper to the carriage, there were several thinner ones about his neck that held a smooth wooden flute. Even wrapped in all that leather, a few whispered notes escaped from it in the soft breeze. The notes hung in her head, like a song unraveled, and she stared at it instead of the man when she said: "I suppose you are."

Sophia climbed up back onto the road and, with Piper's help, they dragged the bedraggled carriage into Hamelin.

Her father was not pleased.

He cited all of the usual complaints, that it wasn't his daughter's job to help strange men, that she could have gotten

herself hurt, that the man could be mad or dangerous. Sophia didn't particularly care about any of that; she had already made up her mind about Piper, and was certain that he was all of those things already. She was also certain that there was something else at work. So, when Piper was begging her father in his flour-coated bakery to at least let him speak to the council to set up his carriage on the outskirts of town, Sophia was there to help.

"Please sir," Piper mewled, "I'm certain that there is a plague coming to this town, I have ways to prevent it, if you will but pay the sum I have given you--"

"You'll stop it. Yes, I've heard this speech before." Her father said, holding a hand up to silence the younger man when he looked like he would interrupt. "No, I'll hear no more. We are not a superstitious town, sir, and while we give homage to the Church and heed our God's word on Earth, we do not heed worrymongers like yourself. I'm sorry, but you'll find no victims here, or a bed for yourself. Be gone, sir."

Piper squirmed, frustrated, and Sophia looked at him, confused. Where was the savvy, wild man who had spoken to her at the bridge? This person hardly deserved to be called a man at all, and Sophia was worried that she had made a mistake. Still, she trusted her instincts, and believed that Piper knew what he was speaking of. So, when she was certain he would not do so himself, Sophia spoke up for Piper.

"Father," She said, "What harm can there be in letting him stay in the village for a few days? Let him have a loaf. We aren't superstitious, but will we be also known as cruel?"

"I... of course not." He said, crossing his arms, always a sign that he was bending. "But no meeting," He said with finality. "I won't help a trickster, no matter what my daughter may think."

"So I can stay?" Piper asked.

"Until you've caught your breath." Her father replied, already making his way to the door to let Piper out. "Now, Sophia, help him if that's what you desire. I'll even give him a loaf to send him on his way. But if I hear him spreading his foolishness to the other townsfolk, I will personally remove him."

Together, Piper and Sophia helped to spread the empty cages out in neat and orderly piles. They ranged from small like a flint box to large enough to hold a mastiff, and they were all filthy; covered in grime and what was most likely blood.

"It's not a pretty business, mine." Piper said tiredly, seeing Sophia staring at the cages after they had finished. The sun was beginning to set and mist was creeping in towards the town from the river near where they stood. Piper had set himself up as far away from the proper town as possible, so as not to offend her father and the townspeople.

"I've no friends in this world; people or animals. I fear that I'm so covered in the gore of troublesome beasts that all friendly creatures mistake me for their predators. No horse nor dog will come near me." He sighed, "Same goes for people, I suppose."

"Not me." Sophia said, stubbornly. No one would ever say that she was scared of a stranger, no matter how frightened she was inside. After listening to Piper for a while, she was sure that her first instincts had been right. The man was strange, and dangerous. She had to find out why.

"No, not you." Piper said, smiling. "But you're not normal either, are you?"

"Well, a lady could take that statement in a variety of unpleasant ways." Sophia said haughtily. Piper laughed, and his pipe whistled in the wind. It was a laugh of pure mirth, as

though he were an instrument and joy blew through him like air. It was as unsettling as everything else about him.

"I guess, but I believe you'll have to take it as a compliment, my fearsome bridge troll."

"I'll ignore that." Sophia said, pointedly. Then, after a moment: "I wonder if it is a troll..." She mused, watching the fog rise. "That you're here for." She finished, seeing Piper's confused look.

"That would be something." Piper nodded. "I don't think I've ever seen a proper troll, let alone dealt with one. No, I'm afraid my lot in life is not one of a monster hunter but rather a shepherd of vermin. People may ignore my warnings, but I'm always right, in the end."

"You've been at this for a while then?"

"Longer than a while. Longer than forever, it feels like."

"How do you know?" Sophia asked, sitting down on one of the larger cages. "About what's coming, I mean. We've heard about plagues down south, but we're a clean town. All of our waste goes downstream, our drinking water comes from upstream and a well besides. We should be safe."

"And that's all well and good, but that's not going to stop this." He grimaced and began to fiddle with his flute. "It's... something that follows brilliance, and seeks to darken it. Think of it like a dark cloud that never seems to let the sun come out for more than a few moments on an otherwise bright day."

"Why would something like that come here?"

Piper stared off towards the river for a long while, and Sophia thought that she heard his flute whisper syncopation with the current. Then he began to sing, low and sweet like burnt blackberry syrup. He sang, and Sophia stared off into the river with this strange man with eyes that saw something that no one else could.

*In this darkened valley land
Stars rise, stars rise
Rivers flow and children sigh
Stars fall, stars fall
Wherever will my current flow
Stars cry, stars cry
Only Jack and my love know
Stars dream, stars dream
I wish a wish that cannot be
Stars know, stars know
But if my love could be with me
Then, oh then I might be free
Stars die, stars die*

Halfway through the song, Sophia found herself humming along with him, bringing the tones of the Holy Land to bear within his mysterious melody. Their harmony, and the water, ran down the river with the deep longing of two people long denied their future. By the time the song had ended, Sophia was weeping. At the unfairness of the world that denied wishes to those who deserved them.

"Do you have a wish, Piper?" Sophia asked, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"I do." He said.

"What is it?" She asked, thinking only too late how personal a question it was.

"When it comes true, Sophia, I hope that you'll be around to see it. I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise."

"But—"

"Later." He said, smiling. And for a moment Sophia was afraid of him, but the wind blew through the flute and washed her fear away. Just a half mile down, beneath the bridge where

this tale started, the duet's mournful song echoed; and a thousand pairs of red eyes opened.

* * *

They descended overnight, like a flood from the North. No one could say where they had come from, nor could a corpse ever be recovered. The rats took their own dead, and there were so many that there was never a shortage of carriers. By the end of the first day, it was as though the streets of Hamelin had become tributaries to a river of scabrous beasts. The town was in chaos. The council, Sophia's father included, met to arrange for methods of extermination-- but nothing kept. They tried poison, but the rats vomited the contaminated fruit onto the streets. They tried to capture and kill them, but there was no cage or net that could hold the vermin. Finally they tried to purge the town, close the doors and even burned down several buildings, but the rats seemed impervious to the flames and for that matter never seemed to die at all. There was no end to the rats. And they were indeed rats-- not the small ones you might see scurrying for a morsel beneath a bench or between stones. These rats were massive, the size of the small cats that they killed. All of the animals in the town were slaughtered within minutes by the swarm; throats were torn and bodies picked clean. On the dawn of the second day, people began to fall ill. It was by the end of that same day when people began to die. Some left this world peacefully, some howling and weeping. By midnight, many were dead. No children were touched by the illness, and for this the people of Hamelin were grateful to God. If only he cared.

During these three days, Sophia was kept busy. She and her father made bread for the town, hard bread that the rats would not touch. They did not sing as they made this bread. As well, each night she would sneak out and visit Piper. She was not

afraid of the rats, as she had noticed they retreated from her as though frightened themselves. For two nights Sophia visited Piper, and for two nights she attempted to convince him to save her town.

"Won't you stop this?" She would ask.

"Not until your father asks." He would reply.

Gone was the mysterious man who played troll with her only a few days ago. In his place, Sophia found a man hard with indignity and pride. She felt the truth but denied it to herself. She could not accept that she might have had a hand in the plague that so strangled her town. On the dawn of the third day, the council called Piper from his hovel outside of the town. Sophia delivered the news, much to her father's objections, and arrived with Piper. Before they entered into the church which had become a final stone bulwark against the disease, Sophia turned to him and leaned against the door. Her lips were thin, and her hair was bedraggled and covered in flour. She had not slept.

"What are you going to do?" She asked.

"Exactly what I came here for." He replied, grimly.

"Then why did you wait?!" She cried, flinging her arms out wide as if to show Piper the ruined town before him.

"You don't understand, you're just a child." He said, and Sophia's eyes widened with hatred.

"I don't understand?!" She asked incredulously. "Then, Piper, help me to. Help me understand why if you have this power you didn't help people from the start. Altruism is always repaid, or did you not learn that in whatever shack you were born in?" Piper laughed cruelly, then shook his head. "You don't believe that, I can see it in your eyes. The strong survive, isn't that right? A price always has to be paid, Sophia, always. The world doesn't work for free, nor does anything else."

Everything has a cost. If you don't understand that, if your town doesn't, then it's you who are backward, not me."

"Leave." Sophia said. Rage dripped from her mouth, and she could feel bile mix with flour in her throat. "Take your misery with you. We can stop this ourselves."

"No, you can't." Said Piper, simple as that, and Sophia believed him. She hated him, she knew what he had done, but she knew it was true. They couldn't stop it. They needed him.

"Move." He said. And she did. He opened the massive church doors easily, and Sophia was almost surprised. She might have thought that a church would not so casually allow evil to enter into it. As he passed the threshold, Sophia followed him. He strode determinedly down the aisle to the pulpit where the council stood. They opened their mouths to speak to him, but he walked straight past, and only turned to face them when he stood behind the lectern like a priest about to give a sermon.

"I am ready." He said.

"Sir," Jacob the Tailor began, his voice hoarse from screaming the night before as his wife had died in his arms. "Please, we beg you to help us. We've never seen an infestation like this, and you surely come as a gift from god."

"Quite," said the Priest, "I believe that you were sent to us as providence against this plague. If only we had heeded you sooner..." At this the whole of the council glared ferociously at Sophia's father, who looked enraged, but remained silent. Sophia wanted to scream.

"Had we but listened, we may have avoided this tragedy. So now, we are willing to hear you out. Name your price, and we will pay it. We only ask that you rid us of this calamity."

Piper nodded slowly as the council spoke to him, and, unsmiling, began to list his terms. It was an otherworldly sum, and would leave the town destitute for years to come. The people

of Hamelin exploded into not so discreet whispers of poverty and the unfairness of god, and yet...

"What choice do we have?" The Priest sighed. "We will, of course, pay you your fee."

"Wonderful." Piper said. "Please, follow me outside if you wish. You'll want to see what you've bought." And with that he marched down from into the throng of villagers who parted for him readily. Some followed, with Sophia in the lead. Others stayed behind, speaking their quiet furies. The church doors closed behind those who remained, and Sophia heard the heavy lock click.

"Cowards." Piper chided, quietly.

"You didn't give them a choice." Sophia said as they made their way towards the well that marked the center of town. The rats that carpeted the streets spread out away from them, weaving in between legs and chirruping peacefully. Sophia thought, for a moment, that the way the rats cavorted now made them seem almost cute, like small dogs at play. Then the light changed, and she saw the blood on their whiskers.

The wind was still, and Piper's flute was silent. As they reached the well Piper stood up on its stone lip and balanced himself joyfully, like a child preparing mischief. Still he did nothing wondrous, nor magical. The rats began to gather around the townsfolk, with Sophia and Piper in the center.

"Everyone." Piper interrupted, his eyes alight for the first time since Sophia had met him. "Watch closely."

The rats suddenly surged at Piper's words, fear alighting in their red eyes. The townsfolk screamed, and Piper smiled, still doing nothing. The rats were almost upon them. They scratched at ankles and at the hems of dresses. They climbed torn cloth. Sophia could almost hear amidst screams the rats' terror; whatever Piper was about to do, they did not want it to

happen. Piper lifted his flute to his lips, and inhaled. The world seemed to still, the wind blew.

Then Piper began to play, and sound crashed over Sophia's mind like a flood.

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Sophia woke to music. She didn't open her eyes; she had been having a wonderful dream. In her dream, she was marching with thousands of children, her age and younger. They were marching up a flower-crusting hill. The flowers were sometimes blue, sometimes red like berries. As they marched, Sophia heard a tune at the hill's peak, and she tried so hard to see who was making such wonderful music. It sounded of cornucopia, and eternity. However, the sun was in her eyes and she could not see who was playing. She could smell the flowers though, and they smelled so wonderful. Sweet and heady, like rising yeast. Moving like sweet molasses, they journeyed through the flowers towards the ultimate pinnacle. Sophia knew that if she could only finish the dream she would find what she had been seeking her whole life.

As she lay there, feeling more than hearing the sounds all around her, Sophia willed herself back to sleep. If only she could finish the dream... but it escaped her. She opened her eyes to see her father and mother looking down at her with bedraggled expressions of worry.

"Thank God. Thank God." Her mother whispered. She was barely audible over the sounds of celebration, and a song just out of earshot rang in her head. Sophia's father hugged her tightly, as she strained to hear what she had thought was jubilation.

"You're alive." Her father said, and again, he too spoke maddeningly soft. Could they not understand how quiet they were?

"Of course I am. Speak up, I can't hear you." Sophia said loudly, struggling out of her parent's grip and standing. Suddenly her vision went spotty and Sophia was filled with nausea. After a moment her eyes cleared and she saw that she was back in her home. Her parents had lain her on her bed, using what seemed to be the blankets of the entire town to make the straw mattress more comfortable. Instead, she felt smothered. The room was dark and damp, and a large plank of wood covered the window. It was like Sophia had not truly woken up at all.

Sophia sat up again, this time more, carefully. The music was so loud, that she could barely get her bearings. She didn't know how long she had been asleep, nor where the rats had gone. Was all lost? Had Piper, despite his promises, failed to rid them of the vermin?

"What happened?" She asked. Her parents looked at each other before smiling anxiously.

"All that matters is that you're safe, habiba." Her father said, brushing hair from Sophia's eyes.

Her mother said something, Sophia could see her lips move, but it was so quiet against the sound of the music that she could not make it out. She asked her to repeat it, and she did.

"You were asleep for days, we thought you would never wake. But you are here, and we are blessed."

"What?" Sophia asked, incredulous. She held up her hands when her mother, looking worried, began to repeat herself again. "No, I heard you. But how many days? What's happened? Who is playing the music? Is Piper still here?"

Her parent's eyes darkened, and her father's thick eyebrows drew together in anguish. His face wrinkled, and for the first time in her life, Sophia thought that her father may one day become old.

"No, that man is not here." He said after a moment. "He took what he wanted, then left."

"He took the money?" Sophia asked. "I had hoped—" She stopped at the look on her father's face.

"He did not take the money." Her father said, his eyes closed. "We... the council would not pay him." He held his head back to hide his tears from his wife and daughter, and especially from himself. "After the rats vanished and you collapsed, they refused to pay him. You had been hurt!" He said angrily, and Sophia's mother flinched. "I... we didn't know what else to do. He could not wake you. Or rather, he refused to. He said..."

"She has her own song to sing." Her mother said. "We did not understand, and the council demanded that he leave."

"He was furious," her father continued. "He picked his flute right back up, and began to play again. And then..." He stood up and pulled the wood from the window. Where Sophia had expected to find the source of the music, she saw nothing but an empty street. There was nothing outside, as though the rats had scoured the streets of everything but the dirt beneath their feet. There were no chickens, no goats, nor were there any children to play with them.

"He took them." Her father said, facing Sophia directly so she could hear him. "He took every single child. We don't understand it, but when he began to play, they all stood and marched out with him. They... they were smiling, Sophia. They smiled like you did while you were asleep." Sophia's father held her head against his chest, and she could smell sweat and flour. He sobbed quietly, and while Sophia still could not fully grasp what had happened, she allowed her father this moment. But only a moment, the music throbbed in her head, and she felt as though

her heart would jump out of her chest. She pulled herself away from her father and leaned against the windowsill.

Sophia wanted to run a million directions at once, all of them, but one, away from Hamelin. Some directions were in that of revenge, to find Piper and stop him. Some were of fear, to flee this town and hopefully escape the half-finished song. But that one direction kept her frozen, that desire to run back into her father's arms and weep. She wished that she could not believe what she was hearing, that Piper would never do this. But...

"I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise..." Is this what he had meant? Had this been his intention all along? Rage born of betrayal and confusion began to build inside of Sophia's heart, burning her up and blocking out, for the first time since she woke, the rat-song. For that was what it was, she realized. The half-finished song that linked the rats to Piper, the song that she had helped him complete on that evening by the riverbank. That was why she could hear it still, it was her song too. This was her responsibility, and while she wanted to run in as many directions as there were stars in the sky, she knew that there was only one way that she could go.

"Why?" She asked, and she realized suddenly that she was crying. She wiped her tears away roughly.

"What is it habiba?" Her father rushed to her side, afraid that Sophia would vanish into smoke any second.

"Why didn't you listen to me?"

Her father had no response. His silence was answer enough.

"Still." Her mother said, gripping her daughter tightly and speaking into her ear. "You're still here. The town still has one child. You'll be beloved, Sophia. This village will raise you together, and we will all love you even more now than we

already did. So sit down, habiba. Sit, and let me get you something. You must be thirsty."

Sophia's mother moved off, taking her father with her into the next room. By the time they came back with the water, Sophia had gone.

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At first Sophia ran without any thought as to where she was going. She traveled to the bridge first, moving quickly and quietly lest the townsfolk find her. She knew that if they saw she had left they would do anything to stop her. Sophia thought she remembered a story then, a story much like her own, where a child was left behind. He was made lame by the town, so that he could never escape. Sophia knew the risks of leaving, but she could not lay in bed like a princess with the song so powerful in her head and Piper's will weighing so strongly on her heart. She crossed the bridge and continued running to the beat of the music that was driving her mad.

Sophia was surprised at how easily she found Piper. All it took was for her to follow the music in her mind. It grew louder and more complex when she faced the direction he was heading, and if she kept on the same path, it came so tantalizingly close to finishing that she felt as though she would lose her mind. Despite the ease her ease in tracking the man, it still took her several days to catch up. In those days she ran and ran and ran, eating food she had stolen from her home only when she had to and sleeping not at all. Each time she closed her eyes she could feel herself being drawn up that flower-crueted hill by the inexorable tune. In the late times when she was awake, she would stumble forward in the dark, with no candle to light her way.

Sophia found her way to Piper on the eve of the third day, by the time it was dusk. She found a small grassy hill where a

familiar tent had been erected, and several cages were full of terrible red eyes.

Piper saw Sophia, and the moment their eyes locked, the song faded from her mind, and Sophia knew peace. She wanted to weep for joy, to embrace the man who had alleviated her sorrow. But her purpose was clear, and she stood strong before him.

"Whatever are you doing here, young bridge troll?" Piper asked teasingly. He was sitting on one of his cages full of rats, smiling out at her. There were more cages than she remembered, and they were all replete with their contents. Standing behind the cages, looking like ill-cared-for dolls, were the children of Hamelin. They were hunched and hollow, their eyes focused on something both inward and far away. They were empty and smiling vacantly.

"I'm here for them." Sophia replied, pointing to the children. Although she was less sure now than she had been. Something wasn't right here, they weren't right.

"Oh, them?" Piper said, tousling the hair of a young brown-eyed girl named Margaret. She seemed pleased, although it might have been the light of Piper's fire playing tricks with Sophia's eyes. "Yes, fine. Go ahead then. Take them." He gestured and the children all moved in unison towards Sophia like wooden puppets. Sophia backed away, horrified. "Stop it!" She cried, and the children stopped. Piper was not smiling anymore.

"What's with you, kid?" He asked, his accent changing almost imperceptibly. "You've been off since I met you, but I didn't think I'd find someone actually interesting down in that town. World's still full of surprises I guess." He didn't seem pleased by this revelation. "Tell you what, you want the kids, you can have them. My power over them will break soon as you cross the river. But..." He kicked the rat cage he was sitting on, and the vermin inside began to squirm unpleasantly. "I'll

stick around here until sunset tomorrow. In case you want to come with me."

"Why would I ever want to see you again, Piper?" Sophia asked cruelly, turning his name into a curse. She gestured for the children to follow her. She turned her back on the hideous man and took the children of Hamelin back down the hill.

"They'll never understand, Sophia." He called, although she could barely hear him over the growing sound of music. "You're special. You deserve more than they can give you. I wish you could understand that!"

Not all wishes come true, she thought. Traveling with her new coterie back into town.

It didn't take long for Sophia to find her way into Hamelin and across the river. As soon as the water was beneath them, the children began to stir, and she could feel the mysterious hold over them begin to break. Piper's song now seemed to exist only for her. Despite this, however, the children did not speak. Instead, they all grouped together and wept silently.

"Why did you take us away?" A younger girl pleaded, grasping at Sophia's pantlegs. "We were in heaven, and you've taken us back down into hell."

"No..." Sophia said, staring straight at the girl's mouth, trying hard to understand her over the music. "No, you're safe now. You'll see." Then the parents came. First they were confused, as though Sophia had indeed brought their children back from the dead. Then there was celebration, as hugs were given and names exalted. Then, there was silence, as the children continued to cry and mourn the loss of salvation. It was, for them, as though all joy was gone from the world, and no wish on earth was within their grasp.

"What did you do?" Asked the Priest, accusingly. "What sorcery did you work to bring these souls back from heaven?"

"I didn't!" Sophia said, shocked.

"We saw them go, taken by that devil. You must have gone into hell to bring them back."

"That's ridiculous!" Sophia said, distracted by the music that was pounding in her head. If she could focus, then they would have to understand. "You can't honestly believe--"

The priest dismissed her with a disgusted wave of a ringed hand and rounded on her father.

"David the Jew, were you aware that your daughter was a witch? That she made a compact with hellish forces to draw these children away from paradise?"

"Will, come now, this is nonsense!" Her father said, coming forward. Sophia's mother, however, stayed back with fear in her eyes. A fear all too familiar. "Sophia, you went against my will, against all of our wishes by leaving... that is true. But you did bring the children back, surely," He gestured to the town, "Surely that's all that matters."

"Listen to me!" Sophia cried, but no one would. They had begun to argue amongst themselves, and her words were drowned out by harsh words and beautiful music. They would not hear that superstition was clouding their thoughts, nor would they understand that something terrible had been done to the children that might even be fixed in time. Instead, they were convinced that the children were all but cherubim descended from heaven, cursed to walk the earth.

"If the actor upon them were drowned," The Priest said decisively, "Then surely the spell will be broken."

"Yes!"

"Drown her!"

"Bring our children back!"

Sophia looked desperately at her father who, in his panic, looked like nothing more or less than a wild animal. He

whispered, no, no, no, no. Sophia turned to run, but there was nowhere to go. The townsfolk had encircled her, and they had begun to shout and chant. The children were sobbing louder than ever, and the music. The music! Sophia felt herself lifted into the air, and only just managed to call out one final time: "Please, listen to me!" Before the water cocooned her in darkness.

* * *

In her dream, Sophia was standing on top of a hill encrusted with stars. Above her were constellations of red flowers, hundreds of them, all glowing with their own light. Amidst the constellations was Piper, playing his sad song and calling beads of light towards him. Sophia wanted to join him, but their worlds were separated even as they were similar, and she could not reach him. So she began to hum, and she lit a fire of her own. The smells of spice and of yeast filled the air, and slowly, very slowly, beads of light came to her instead. She was in control.

* * *

Sophia woke, sputtering, on the riverbank far down from Hamelin. The sun was just cresting its apex and beginning to set. She stood and, without waiting for her clothes to dry, she ran. The music in her head guiding her feet.

She caught up with Piper as easily as before. He was on the road, pulling his cart even more slowly than when she first met him all those few days ago. For now his cart was stacked even higher with cages filled with rats. Rats that had children in their red eyes. She could see them now, clear as day.

"Piper?" She called, and he stopped, sighing; the music was gone again.

"Didn't work out, huh?" He asked.

"No." She replied, sadly.

"Sorry about that." He said, "People never understand, and I wish I could have stopped this. But... it had to happen. It had to..." His voice trailed off, although Sophia felt like she understood now.

"What's your name?" She asked, "Your real name."

They walked in silence, birdsong silenced at Piper's steps and insects parted before them.

"I never told you, did I?" He smiled. "I guess I'm still under your power then, aren't I? Troll."

"I guess you are, monster." She said.

"Then I decline to mention it to you, Sophia, with the hope that you will use this power to your own ends."

"You're insane."

"Yes." He said sadly. "But by choice. More's the pity. What I wouldn't give for some unwanted madness. It would break up the tedium nicely."

"Can I ask..."

"What I want?" Piper finished for her. "I don't think you'd understand, you're too young."

"You took care of that." Sophia replied coldly. "At least you can do me the decency of telling me why this happened."

"That's fair, I suppose." Piper mused, frowning. "I am sorry about all this, I wish it didn't have to be this way, but..." Sophia could tell he was lying, not only to her, but to himself. In a way, she pitied the man. He was as miserable as he was cruel, and that was the saddest part of him.

"I made a wish." He answered. And would say no more on it.

* * *

Piper was asleep, and Sophia held a jagged knife in her hand. She was contemplating where best to place it, and could not decide on her throat or his. To make matters worse, Sophia

was unsure whether he would even die if she went through with it. After all that they had gone through together, was she even capable of such a thing? In the most practical sense, she relied on him. Without his proximity, the music would overwhelm her. He failed to mention how his magic worked, and only said that certain conditions had to be met. It was all nonsense, but still... The song was unfinished, and she could not hear anything but its anarchic frenzy.

She lay back onto the grass, only now realizing just how hungry she was. It was such a mundane feeling that she began to weep for it. How could she feel hungry now, now that her life was over? From the oilcloth sack that she had taken with her at the start of her journey, she withdrew the remains of a slightly damp loaf of her father's hard bread. She ate it quietly, humming to herself the parts for herself and her father. The stars shined above, calling to her.

"*I made a wish.*" He said. Well, maybe she would make one too.

"I wish they would know me." She said, to a tune imperceptible, a tune only the stars know. "I wish they would see my heart and know. I wish they would hear me." She breathed, and the cosmos listened.

"I wish they would listen."

Piper's flute began to glow, and Sophia finally understood the music in her head. It wasn't half finished, it was a counter-point. She began to sing, and the music filled her head with her own desires. It was sweet, and heady like summer bread. Like tobacco. Like a corpse. A star shone brightly overhead, and a beam of light fell from the heavens to lay at her feet. When the light faded, six pots and a smoking pipe were before her, and Sophia took them without hesitation. She knew as soon as she saw them what they were, and what power they would grant her.

With these tools, now they would listen. As soon as the objects touched her skin, she was gone from this world.

Sophia floated in blackness, suspended on nothing. She was surrounded by the void, but she could feel light all around her. That light focused, and Sophia felt warmth and love from an unknown being that was cool as her mother's skin. As rough as her father's whiskers. She could see a bright light rushing towards her, folding back the darkness.

"Wish-maker." It said, "I have heard your call and granted your desire. Now you must help us. It will be dangerous, and the road long, for your wish is one of power and consequence. Do you agree to the compact?"

"I do." Sophia said.

"So it is agreed." The being whispered in her ear, and the music began again. Together, they flew towards an unknown destination where anything was possible.

"What is your name, child of my heart? Tell me, that the stars may whisper it."

The girl from Hamelin thought, and then answered.

"Piper." She said, and it was a real name, after all, wasn't it?