



The Piper's Song

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Retold Fairy Tales

Motherhood is often a tale of joy and love, but not in the case of the girl who believed she was owed the world.

Once upon a time, many moons ago, she became a mother to a whole town of children.

On a day so hot that the soil had begun to blister, she arrived. Her patchwork skirt skimmed over the ground, lilted, dancing mere inches from the mud.

The earth was cracking apart, and still she smiled.

“I hear you have a problem,” she said, appearing in the mayor’s office like a wisp of a daydream.

He looked up, eyes shuttered thin; he had the weight of a town strapped to his crumbling shoulders. “Aye,” he said, a hand at his forehead. “And what would you be able to do about it? We have had fifty people through these doors promising a solution... we have not found one yet.” His eyes trailed from the crown of her head, to her bare toes. “No supposed saviour has looked quite like you, however...”

Men from all across the kingdom had barrelled through the mayor’s door: fat, thin, young, old, handsome, ugly, rich, poor... but all male.

“Oh my,” she said, red hair shining in the sunrise like a copper coin, “Perhaps that is where you are going wrong. Such a problem can only be solved with a woman’s touch.”

“Very well,” the mayor boomed, peering from his window with a grimace smeared across his cheeks. “If you

succeed, you will be rewarded with one thousand gold pieces.”

She drifted away, passing the next hopeful saviour, who stood by a giant iron contraption with heaving jaws.

Her laughter tinkled in the ears of the mayor long after she had disappeared.

Stood atop a velvet hill of emerald grass, she lifted a flute from within her skirts and drew it to her lips.

Music poured out of her like wine to a goblet: rich, silky, luxurious. With every note that fluttered from her mouth, the world seemed to bloom a little brighter. At first, a whisper, and then a full-bodied trill of joy, the air crackled into life, electrified with sound.

From the stillness poked one tiny, furry head.

She played on, twisting and twirling with the wind, the song lurching and swaying with her breath.

Another body crept from hiding.

The music dared not stop, scaling the edges of the hill and tumbling down across the village.

There was a scatter of feet.

One grey rat sat by her toes, beady black eyes latched onto her face. Another melody soared from her tongue. A duet of rats scampered forwards.

In minutes, the crowd of rats had grown into a writhing parade of squirming, squealing creatures.

The piper had not finished her song.

She span through open gutters, crumbling brick buildings, mud paths, and broken windows; her brigade scurried behind her.

The baker let out an indignant yelp as he saw the rats. He turned his sign to ‘closed’ and barred the door.

“Those rats have ruined my life enough,” he complained to the customers, “They ate a month’s worth of bread!”

“They contaminated all of my meat!” cried the butcher.

“They chewed through all of my clothes!” said the tailor.

“This town will never know peace until they are gone,” the baker said darkly.

The piper waved a hand to the crowd, the light tune dowsing the space.

The butcher gaped. “God above!” he coughed, “She’s in control of the rats!”

They ran to the windows, hands grubby against the glass. The tailor’s glasses shifted as his mouth dropped open, and fell to the floor with a bright tinkle.

All around the village, people stared, entranced by the sight of the woman charming the plague of rats. She moved like she was possessed, her hips the base for her luxurious swaying and swooping.

She winked with one emerald eye.

The mayor stared from his office, mouth agape. Once she had twirled away from sight, a tornado of bold colours and music, he scrambled into his office. With a heavy clunk, he opened an oak draw, scrambling his hands against the empty wood. Moment after moment, he drew open cupboards and secret nooks, searching for something he knew did not exist.

A thousand gold coins was a hefty reward to pay.

The piper had never had a name besides ‘the piper,’ for she had grown up on the streets of a faraway kingdom, playing the flute to buy her meagre meals. Once, when she had tried to sell her pipe to leave her past life behind, the instrument had glued fiercely to her skin. She had never been able to let the flute pass to another’s hands. Call it magic, call it a curse, call it what you will, but she had grown to love the cold steel that rolled in her palms when she played. She felt powerful. She had grown into her power like a prince grows into his crown.

With a final glance upon the vermin, she hopped into the deep stream, her skirts floating around her knees. The tune whistled with melancholy as the rats followed her and covered the riverbed with their dying panic.

After mere seconds, the world fell into silence. She tucked away her flute, hauled up her skirts and stood on the riverbank – hair, and eyes wild. She smiled brightly, as though she held the sun within her.

She bowed her head, not taking her gaze from the crowd. She pushed through the very centre, ignoring the whispers crawling around her.

With an almighty clatter, she strode into the mayor's office. She had the same effect as an earthquake.

"I am here for my reward," she said, water pooling around her and sluicing to the floor.

"The reward..." the mayor smiled, teeth crooked and broken like a wartime row of houses. "There has been a slight change, but I am sure the new reward will satisfy your needs just as much, Ma'am."

Her eyes narrowed, until her stare was cutting through slices of skin.

"Here we are!" he said, flinging open a door and leading a young gentleman into the room.

He stood, gilded in gold, with eyes like sapphires and hair like sunflower petals. His finery shone in the low sunlight, making his every move as alive as a flame.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am..." he said, pressing warm lips to the piper's hand.

She clawed it away.

"What is this?"

"Your reward!" the mayor beamed, "This is Prince Claude, the youngest son of the King. For your immense service to the town of Hamelin, you are betrothed to him."

"I don't want your foolish prince!" she snapped, "I want the reward you promised me!"

The prince's lips flickered into a brief grimace, before he alit with all the joy of a bad actor.

“What if I had been a man?” the piper demanded, “Give me the prize you would give a man.”

“Ah...” the mayor wiped a hand over his obnoxiously scarlet forehead, “The thing is... my dear... we didn’t expect you to succeed... and we really do not have one thousand gold pieces to spare...”

“So you shall betroth me to the prince of a poor nation... and not even the prince set to be King?” the piper swept towards the mayor, a fire crackling in her eyes. “What could this lousy princeling ever do for me?”

“He could squire your children... save you from spinsterhood...”

The piper glared at the prince.

“I am sure he would be delighted to.” Her burning eyes turned to the mayor. “Perhaps you are right... Perhaps I should become a mother...”

“You are getting no younger,” offered the prince with a gleaming smile.

“You are right!” she smiled, although her gaze still held the essence of nightmares, “If you have no money for me, I shall take the preciousness of Hamelin and have children of my very own! I have never been the maternal sort, but you have inspired a change in me, dear mayor.”

The mayor’s lips widened into a shaky crescent moon, “I will organise a royal wedding at once!”

The piper smiled as though her gums were poisoned. “Thank you for the advice, mayor. It is you who is to thank for what may come.”

The night settled over Hamelin, and Prince Claude disguised himself in some local tavern, mourning the freedoms he had grown to know as the unmarried sixth son of the King. Drunk on sour wine, and sweet kisses, he was slumped against the bar as the clock rung out twelve strikes.

The piper stared through the window, eyes on her husband-to-be, his curved back, and overly dirtied peasant clothes – the town knew his face, anyway, so the pretence was exhausting. He shouted out in a rough voice and grabbed the waitress as she scurried past. She dissolved into a fit of hacking giggles, plum in the face, eyes hungry for the prince's touch.

The piper turned away, jaw set.

Slowly, gently, like handling an ancient, holy treasure, she lifted her flute to her lips and played a whisper of a song.

Morning rose.

Hamelin, the sleepy town, was alive with the clawing shrieks of mothers with cracked hearts.

The mayor, white-faced, shaking, stood atop the hill, sobbing parents dropping at his feet.

“My boy has gone!” cried the butcher, “His bed was half-slept in and his window open!”

“My daughter is missing! She will not survive! Her shoes and coat are left behind!”

“All six of my children have vanished without a trace!” the baker's wife screamed, “What terrible curse have you brought on this town, mayor?”

“First the rats!” the blacksmith bellowed, “And now our children!”

“You curse us, mayor!” the tailor accused, lifting one trembling finger, “You curse us all!”

The piper, miles away, had dry lips from the hours of playing.

The children that followed her could not feel their aching limbs or broken feet.

She smiled and continued to dance.

Some say that on quiet nights her tune can still be heard.

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