**“Remember the Roses” / 1498**

The town of Hamlin is famous for growing roses. We lived for roses, and we died with them. Perhaps it is why they twist through the history of my life, from beginning to end- thorns, tangled stems, and breathtaking beauty. *There will always be roses in Hamlin*, my grandfather was fond of telling me. Always. But one summer, both he and the roses were no more.

 That summer began with two arrivals: the coming of the rats and that of Colin.

 Colin showed up in Hamlin one day without warning, his patched cloak covered in dust and a worn flute on a string around his neck. The children of Hamlin, sitting on the stoops of their homes, squinted at him in the hot sun and snickered, “Piebald, piebald,” pointing at his quilt-like cloak.

 Colin only smiled at them, and after that he was friends with every child in Hamlin. He was a halfway-creature, not quite an adult and not a child like us. He never told us where he came from, but we all knew somehow that he was from Hamlin. It was the way he handled roses, I think, without thorns drawing a single drop of his blood.

 Not long after Colin came, the rats came also- hundreds of them, black, squeaking, scratching, scrabbling- they had a taste for roses, and soon the blood-red rose fields of Hamlin were replaced with a wasteland of black tangled thorns and dry crumbling petals.

 I ran frantically up and down the briary maze, gathering the crushed petals in my hands like I could bring them back to life, thaw them with tears. My grandfather took a more practical approach. He gathered the seeds from the rosebuds with shaking fingers and packed them carefully in a worn leather bag around his neck. “The roses will come back to Hamlin,” he told me. “You’ll see.”

 But the mayor of Hamlin had other ideas. “This is what comes of growing silly flowers rather than food,” he said. “Now we’ll starve, unless we eat the rats.”

 “Hamlin has fallen on hard times before,” my grandfather said. “We will not starve.”

 Another old man said, “In the previous times you spoke of, we sent the children away to work in distant fields where there was still food. The rats have infiltrated every field within a hundred miles of Hamlin. There’s nowhere to go.”

 The mayor sneered. “Then we must send the children farther still.”

 I shivered in the sun, listening to them from the far side of the pavilion where I sat with the other children and Colin. I noticed Colin’s knuckles whitening on his flute.

 “It’s our only option,” the mayor continued. “The children will send back money for food and we will resuscitate our economy. It will be better for everyone.”

 Colin jumped to his feet. “You can’t send them away. I- I won’t *let* you.”

 The mayor laughed. “Won’t let me? Who are you to *let* me do anything?”

 “I came from the fields,” Colin said quietly. “I know what it’s like there. I’m the only one that ever made it back to Hamlin. I won’t go back, and neither will they.”

 The mayor looked at Colin with pity, a false kind of compassion that almost always hides thorns underneath. “I didn’t know you came from the fields. You must have witnessed that horrible *accident*, the one that killed all the other children.”

 “It wasn’t an accident,” Colin said through his teeth. “It was ten years of neglect. Ten children that are buried far from Hamlin and have no roses growing over their graves.”

 The mayor’s fists clenched. “It was an accident,” he insisted. “It was a mishap. It won’t happen again.” He turned to the people, and said with a voice that sounded bigger than it was, “It won’t happen again.”

 “No,” Colin said fiercely, “it won’t.”

 The next few days were spent in hurried preparation, as my mother packed my things into an old cloth that smelled like roses and tears. “It’s only for a little while,” she said, and I believed her. My grandfather went on collecting rose seeds.

 The day the field-workers came to take us away was the last day of summer, and all the adults had gone to a town hall meeting arranged by the mayor. I think the mayor felt it would be easier for us to leave that way, gone without a final goodbye. My mother tied my belongings to a stick and watched the way it fit across my shoulder- a bit long. “It’ll fit when you come back,” she said.

My grandfather slept in his chair, rose seeds hung around his neck.

 At noon, when all the children were once again seated on their doorstep, waiting, the sound of piping drifted over the hot wind.

 “Colin,” I whispered.

 He came up the main road to town, just like he had at the beginning of the summer, and his pied cloak was covered with dust again. As he passed the doorsteps of the houses, he said, “Follow me,” and they did. Other times he just held out his hand to help them up. Every child in Hamlin followed along behind.

 When he came to me, I stared up at him from the doorstep. “I can’t go,” I said, and wondered at how much it hurt to say so.

 “Of course not,” Colin said. “You’ve forgotten something.”

 Standing behind me, on the doorstep, was my grandfather, holding out the bag full of rose seeds. “The roses will come back to Hamlin,” he said. “You will bring them back.” I reached for the bag, and he pulled me close enough to whisper, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” I couldn’t help but feel he was talking about the seeds he pressed into my hand. *What love? What sins?*

 As we walked away from Hamlin, away from everything I knew, the song of the pipes grew wild and brambly in my heart, the call of everything unknown and yet to be. I forgot many things over the years, but that song stays with me even now.

 It was a long time before I returned to Hamlin, a young man with a short stick over his shoulder and a bag of rose seeds against his heart. The bag was emptier than I would have liked, because the law of Hamlin says you must plant roses over the graves of the dead. I had lost many friends.

 I saw the town from a long way off, a ghost town of black briary hedges and abandoned houses. As I walked the streets, a bony hand fell on my shoulder from behind. “You,” rasped the former mayor of Hamlin. “I know you.”

 He said it like a man who has been alone for a long time, and I knew the mayor was the type of person to pine for his enemies when in exile rather than his friends. The mayor gripped my arm with fingers like steel and hissed, “Where is he? Tell me where he is.”

 “Who?”

 “The Pied Piper. The thief. The kidnapper.”

 *Colin*, I thought.

 “Why do you want to know?”

 The mayor smiled a sickly sort of smile and spread his arms. “Look around you, boy. Do you see people? No? They are gone. They starved, the little wretches, like I said they would. And why? Because their children abandoned them. They followed that false Piper away into the hills rather than to the fields. Look at what it cost.”

 I looked, and wondered how many of the rose thorns covered graves.

 “Blood,” the mayor said, “does not forget. It cannot. It remembers all the sins and cries out, forever, for justice. Blood for blood. And it will be the Pied Piper who pays.”

 I had no choice. I took the mayor over the hills, into the forest, to the house that was once the home of the children of Hamlin. “He is there,” I said, and the mayor knelt by the Piper’s grave and tore at the crooked roses growing over it. I left him there, knowing that the blood he sought would never fill the vengeful void in his heart.

 When I returned to Hamlin, I pulled up the thorns in the field with my hands, and this time they cut me. They, like many, had forgotten the children of Hamlin.

I planted the rose seeds at the doorstep where I sat once on the last day of summer. From those roses, I gathered seeds and planted more, and more, and more, until the tangling thorns and blood-red petals covered every trace of the town that was once Hamlin.

 Love covers a multitude of sins, my grandfather said, and he was right. People say love remembers, but I know that love must forget, when blood cannot. When I am gone, I hope people will remember the roses that grew here and not the blood that watered them.

There will always be roses in Hamlin.