

The river Waysar flowered in a gleaming arch through the lush green lowlands and nestled against a graceful bend of its wide channel was the town of Hamlin. It was a proud market town, with streets paved with clean scrubbed cobbles, a cathedral to which some of the greatest glaziers and stone masons had lent their hands, with a soaring spire full of great brazen bells, and a wide plaza spread before its doors, large enough to hold all the colorful booths of those who came from near and far to sell their goods on market day. There was a fine harbor with deep berths for the merchant ships from which a broad thoroughfare edged with trees ran to the main market, lined with the impressive facades of fine inns and eaters to accommodate the traders and there were countless lesser artisans and solid townspeople thronging the streets, stopping to purchase a bite from the various street vendors whose carts filled the lanes with a delicious aroma, or pausing in their daily rounds to rest beside one of the city's many fine statues and fountains...and then there was the piper.

His name was Bernard and he was not a piper by trade. That, much less important, was in leather working, not something as specialized as a cobbler or a glover, just making pouches, belts, and the like. Rather, his playing of the pipe organ was what a casual observer might call a hobby, though this was far from an accurate reflection of its magnitude. It was his vocation, his obsession, the air he breathed. The first time he had played it, he had thought he was going to die. The sheer force of the energy that surged from it as it was played seemed like it was going to shake him to bits. He had gone home with arms and fingers aching. The next day, he could barely get dressed, being unable to raise his arms above his head and it was even longer before he could eat without pain, the knuckles screaming in protest if he attempted to curl them around the handle of knife or spoon. Fortunately, he had no pressing orders outstanding at the time for doing almost anything in his workshop was virtually impossible. And the whole time he could think of nothing but counting the days, no the seconds, until he could get back to play it again. For the moment he had laid his hands on the keys of the pipe organ and felt its power throb through him, it was as if he had come alive for the first time, as if his whole life up to then had been only some vague twilight dream that had, in that instant, burst into glorious blossom and golden sunlight. The gray, nebulous sorrow that dogged his days, that nothing had ever been able to banish long, had been blasted to shreds by the mighty voice from those thundering pipes.

It was a strange twist of fate that he had discovered it at all. One year, a few of the other minor craftsmen from about the neighborhood had persuaded him to join them in a collective rental of one of the stalls for the great spring market, the festival following the snow melt, when people from all over the countryside, released finally from the prison of winter, streamed into Hamlin, eager to rejoice and thus to spend liberally. Merchants of course, took full advantage of this and it was one of the most lucrative markets of the year, thus space in the square was much sought after and far beyond the means of all but the most prestigious local artisans. Together, however, the five of them had been able to manage and, while it was doubtful the profit they made justified the expense, the weaver, who had conceived the plan in first place, was more than convinced that their success would grow by the year as word of their collective spread. Wiser heads thought this unlikely but his high spirits were infectious and they all retired to a tavern, along with the sexton of one of Hamlin's many churches, who was a personal friend of the weaver.

All was jovial at first until the cooper, who had taken the largest loss of the lot, became hostile to the sexton and began to mock him for having a simple job that required no real talent unlike those of tradesmen like themselves. The sexton, already well into his cups, had taken up the gauntlet and invited them to come to the church to see for themselves just what his job demanded. Normally, any sensible tradesman would be heading home after such a long day, not traipsing across town to blunder about in an empty church. But the ale had been flowing freely and all but one of them agreed to go. They were unimpressed at first while the sexton dragged them here and there around the dull dusty building showing them the hedges he had trimmed, the plaster he had patched and the doors he had to

make sure were locked, until, perhaps as a last resort, he took them up to the pipe organ in the balcony over the door and said his job also included playing it when the service was lofty enough to call for it, then invited them to take a turn to see how hard it really was.

The others had not taken it seriously, tried a few haphazard chords, all uneven, but Bernard had been transfixed and kept entreating the sexton to show him how to do more until the others, especially the cooper, had become impatient and demanded they go. But before they went Bernard managed to take the sexton aside and make an arrangement to come back the following week to learn more, and the other, delighted at what he then saw as an easy source of additional income, was more than happy to oblige, if not regularly than with sufficient frequency that Bernard was able to make clear progress in his abilities. Over time, his fingers got more used to the demands placed upon them. He would recover faster after a practice session, though work the next day almost always hurt. His knuckles swelled and thickened and leathery calluses formed on his fingers, much more extensive than the few he had developed from work, so parts of his hands now resembled the leather he traded in. But, he never fully acclimated for, as his hands became better able to bear the rigors of the playing, he simply increased those rigors, striving ever to learn more complicated pieces, to play for longer, to strike the keys in just the right way to make the perfect ringing tone. And still it was not enough.

The sexton, as he had admitted the first night, was only an occasional organ player and had received little formal training so, while Bernard was certainly not his equal in ability, he reached a point where he was no longer able to increase his skills as the sexton knew not how to teach more than the basics and was no longer providing him with challenges. After, perhaps, a year of this frustration, he gathered his courage to assay something more ambitious. After much searching, Bernard was able to contact the organist of the Cathedral himself who agreed for what, to a tradesman like Bernard, was a somewhat steep fee, to give him lessons in playing the organ during his off hours. It was far from pleasant at first as training under an actual professional organist forced him to abruptly confront how wretchedly inadequate were his skills, won with years of devotion and suffering of which he had been so proud, coupled with long months of painful unlearning of poor habits he had picked up from the sexton who knew no better.

Nevertheless, every week, he was able to enter under the great vaulted ceiling, with the colored light from the stained glass washing over him and, immerse himself, if only for an hour, in the most sublime wonder. Even before he came into the presence of the pipe organ, as he waited for the organist to arrive, flexing and stretching his fingers to prepare them for the punishment they were about to receive, he could feel the world falling away, all its sorrows and bitterness and frustrations dwindling as his mind became focused solely on the thing that was about to happen. As soon as he laid his fingers on the keys, it was as if an electrical shock went through him and he knew he touched something beyond the mortal world. The resonance in the organ pulsed through his soul, lifting it with the vastness of the sound, into the dark wood of the soaring roof and beyond to heaven. Though he had tried hard to be devout all his life, Bernard had never felt the inner call he believed was the true mark of faith. But now, at last, he felt something. When he played the organ he was in the presence of the divine, the music he made was his devotion and his prayer and through it, the blazing white, holy fire poured into him.

The cathedral was nearly an hour's travel from Bernard's house but every week, he trudged there and back gladly, in the icy winds of winter and summer's heavy heat, nibbling at what food he was able to carry with him, heart pounding in anticipation, or delirious with delight, wrapped in the euphoria that always lingered after a lesson. Many was the time he stumbled on uneven paving stones, missed the path he needed to follow and had to retrace his steps, or narrowly escaped blundering into the path of an on-coming wagon, for though his body was walking down the city street, his soul was still seated in rapture before the pipe organ and would not fully rejoin its fleshly shell until some hours had passed.

And still he hungered for more, chafed with frustration at the slow speed at which he mastered the ever more intricate patterns, learning to work on higher and higher keyboards, or use each hand on a separate keyboard, gradually adding in more complicated foot pedal work, but could not afford the cost of more frequent lessons. As he went about his day, cutting out, stitching, and stamping the leather, any time his hands were not otherwise occupied, his fingers would be twitching, miming the key patterns, his feet tapping out the rhythms. At last, after saving his coin for a long time, he managed to purchase a very small, second-hand harpsichord, just a box, without legs, the strings short and mechanism simplistic. He got no joy from playing it, for it lacked the all consuming might of the pipe organ. It was not even adequate training as the keys were too light and did not require enough finger strength to press. The keyboard was smaller and everything was closer together so the demands of dexterity were much less, to say nothing of the fact that there was only the single keyboard. Still, it allowed him to maintain a base level of strength and skill and to approximate some of the more challenging patterns so he could make the most of his lessons on the actual organ.

And so the years passed, though Bernard hardly marked their passing, noting only his, sometimes erratic and painfully slow, increase in skill, and the shifts in the seasonal round that could make the pilgrimage to the cathedral more or less arduous. When he was not actually in his workshop, Bernard was forever wandering the city in his half dream, humming the tunes to whatever organ pieces he was currently working on, running over the fingering in his mind as he did so, so that passers by could sometimes see his hands twitch and flex oddly. They called him the pied piper for this habit and for the strange mismatched clothing he wore, often without fully realizing it for the lion's share of both his thoughts and his money belonging exclusively to the organ. Some said the name with malice and some with a sort of affection, but all knew he was basically harmless and he became something of a local character. Bernard did not care one way or another. He had eyes and heart only for his beloved and, as long as he was left in peace to pour out his passion, the world could do what it would.

The wealth of Hamlin was the great trading ships, always sailing up the river and docking at the quays to unload their goods for the market. Magnificent products from all over the world could be seen going in steady procession to and from the port, vibrant carpets covered in intricate patterns and twining vines, great casks of wine in barrels of dark wood, spices of every kind, scenting the air in a wide swath around them, finely worked broaches and clasps in gold and silver, set with round stones, dully gleaming. The people of Hamlin rejoiced in the bounty and showed their pride in their fair city by commissioning a statue of the town founder, astride a magnificent steed, cloak swirling about him, to be placed in the square before the cathedral, in the midst of the market. And every week, Bernard walked through that market, all the riches of the world spread out on every side of him, a riot of colors and a feast for the senses, thinking only to thread his way through the close packed crowds as swiftly as possible, to reach the doors of the cathedral and the dark, dusty loft below the great rose window, where the pipe organ waited. And so all in the town were happy, secure in the progression of their aims.

But the ships that brought the town's wealth also brought rats, sheltering in their holds. When the ships docked at the quays, they could be seen streaming from the hulls like a black tide, tumbling down the wooden sides and bobbing in the water. The harbor master paid gangs of boys to prowl the piers with heavy cudgels and bludgeon the pests as they came ashore, but they were never able to catch all of them. There was always a thriving rat population, lurking in the alleys and scuttling about the edges of the marketplace and it increased steadily year by year, as the established residents bred and their numbers were swelled by new beasts coming off the ships. From time to time, the town council would organize purges, traps, poisons, or just more mobs of boys with cudgels, to bring their numbers down but they were never able to completely weed them out and, after a season or a year, the population would surge again to even greater numbers than before the purge. The rest of the time, the

people did their best to ignore this blight on their fair city, overlooking the thousand issues great and small. From the chewed up dolls of the elite's daughters to the far more menacing bites and food thieved, sometimes off the very tables, of the less fortunate, all the townspeople simply lived with the rats, as one would live with a drafty window or a leaky roof. Until the day the rats brought plague.

It was the grandest ship yet that had come to Hamlin, its vast hold packed to straining with silk and spices. People danced in the streets at their supreme good fortune, went in procession to the market place and feasted around great bonfires, never dreaming that, before the moon had turned again, they would curse themselves for their arrogant stupidity in reveling so joyously when their doom already walked among them. For, as the goods were carried ashore, the rats came too, as they always did. These looked no different than any of the others that had come before, but they carried, invisible inside them, the seeds of a deadly sickness, that spread like fire, first through the native rat population, and then through the human one.

First the harbor was closed and the market suspended and there were strident objections from those most directly affected, the sea captains, the dock owners, and the merchants who managed the market, as well as on a lesser scale, those who ran the inns and eating houses. But everyone felt stirrings of dread for trade were the lifeblood of the city and if the city's fortune was ruined by this action, as the whispered rumor ran through the lanes that it would be, all the citizens of Hamlin would suffer, no matter how tangentially connected to the market. But, with the toll of bodies mounting every day, they dared not do otherwise. And then, rapidly, one after another, the lesser trades began to shut down or, at least, to operate in a convoluted fashion designed to minimize exposure. One could still buy bread but it was no longer possible to inspect the loaves directly before selecting one. The baker would hang a red flag out his upstairs window when there was bread for sale and customers would approach, carefully, and one at a time, drop coins into a slot he had rigged up. The counter window where he used to set out the loaves for inspection was rapidly replaced by an enclosed box, divided down the middle over a revolving platform. When sufficient payment had been received, he would open his end of the box, place a loaf on the platform and rotate it so the bread moved around the divider to the other side. Then he would close the door and knock on the wall to let the customer know his goods were in place. The person on the outside could then open the outer door and take the bread. Other tradesmen, including Bernard himself, were adopting similar measures.

Of course, there were incidents where an honest citizen would pay the money, only to be shoved aside by some wastrel who would then make off with the goods by force. But this happened less often than might have been expected, especially since the plague had also disrupted some of the church's charitable activities, meaning there were yet more people in need, as attempting to rob someone in this way would necessitate the very close, physical contact, the whole system was designed to prevent and even those who did not respect human laws, had no choice but to respect the natural law of the plague and feared its spread as much as the rest of the people. But there were still great shortages since everything now moved with painful slowness as most craftsmen insisted on long pauses between each step of the process. When the leather and thread were delivered to Bernard house, via the revolving platform in reverse, he let them stand in the inner section of the box for a day before opening his door to remove them, in the hope that any plague seeds they harbored might wither before coming in contact with him. The tailor, the cobbler, and others like them followed similar procedures.

Conversations could be conducted by yelling through the box or through the door. Some enterprising individuals had started installing special tubes in the wall of their house to facilitate talk but, even in the best of circumstances, this was a poor substitute for normal conversation. You could not see the face of the person with whom you spoke and the words came distorted and garbled through the barrier. A great deal of yelling and repeating was necessary to convey even the simplest ideas and remaining pressed against the wall at the correct height, which was the only way anything at all could

be heard, rapidly became excruciatingly uncomfortable. Both parties had to stand as if the one inside the house sat down, the one on the outside would have to squat to be close enough. For all these reasons, conversations were kept as short and utilitarian as possible. Still, such approaches enabled the citizens of Hamlin to continue doing business, after a fashion, and even exchange some bits and scraps of news. Bernard was fortunate, in a way, that he had always been a bit of a loner so the enforced isolation was less of a painful shock for him than it must be for some of his neighbors who, he knew well, had been wont to go to the tavern or hang about gossiping in the square most every night. He had no idea how they could bear what was happening now. For him, there was but one thing that mattered. As long as he could continue to play the pipe organ the rest of the world could do as it willed.

“Are you not afraid?” the potter's wife had called through the wall when she came to drop off her money for a new purse and he had told her she would have to wait an extra day because the event he most eagerly awaited was rapidly approaching and he always took off at least half a day to accommodate his trip to the cathedral for his time at the organ. Bernard turned his face away, even though she could not see him and awkwardly parried the questions. Yes, he was afraid. He was terrified. But nothing, nothing, would keep him from his act of worship. He had to minimize the danger of the plague in his mind, to summon his courage to show his devotion. He had purchased for himself a small bottle of aqua vitae to wipe on his hands whenever he touched something beyond the walls of his home and, although he knew this was not adequate protection, it was the best he could do. Many had taken to wearing gloves whenever they went out but even the thinnest, most flexible leather would impede his ability to play the organ so he would have to settle for using the aqua vitae every time he paused in his playing and simply pray it would be enough. But, by the time of his next lesson, the doors of the cathedral were closed with a great padlock and chain. It was unthinkable that such a thing should happen, that the faithful should be denied the comforts of religion when they needed them most. But it had. In the weeks that followed, the great bells hung silent, along with the mighty organ itself and the dust gathered thick under and around the pews.

Bernard became numb with shock. The core of his life had been taken out from inside of him, leaving a gaping black hole, howling in the torment of its emptiness. As long as he could experience the joy of playing the organ, feel the power surge up into him with the thrumming vibrations as he pressed the keys, he felt he could do anything, that a part of that power resided in him as well. For it he would have faced the plague head on. Without it, he saw no point in taking the least risk. After learning of the closing of the cathedral, Bernard sat for a long time in the dark and cold of his house, for he was too distraught to build up the fire, flexing and curling his fingers slowly and deliberately. He rubbed one hand with the others, feeling the worn and thickened spots he had built up over his years of playing the organ. In his mind, he ran through the intricate fingering of the latest song he was learning which involved rapid fingering on the uppermost keyboard, for which he did not fully possess the dexterity yet, especially while tensing the muscles needed to hold his arm up so high for an extended period, that he had been working on for months and had only barely been able to get right at his last lessons. Until he learned of the disaster that had befallen, his heart had been galloping with excitement that he might be able to build on this. He clutched his hands over his head and lowered his forehead to the wall in agony. Now all that would be lost. Who knew how long it would be before he could touch a pipe organ again, sitting helpless as he watched all the years and years of hard won strength and skill, earned through uncounted hours of pain and dogged repetition, atrophy and crumble in to dust.

Soon, he had reasons beyond his grief and the general danger, to keep to his home. Some enterprising physician had invented a paste of crushed herbs and minerals which was found to keep the rats at a distance but it could only work by being rubbed into human skin, needing the gentle, gradual warmth of the body to release its properties. Bernard shook his head and could take no comfort in this

discovery, for he recognized some of the ingredients, as well as its side effect of dyeing the skin a deep purplish red, from a similar paste that had been proposed some years back as a conditioner for leather. He had spoken to other leather workers who had employed it with no ill effects, apart from the temporary discoloration, but Bernard had been unable to make use of it, for he suffered a violent reaction to some of the components, which made his fingers, especially the knuckles become inflamed and swollen until he could not fully bend them at all, or even move them without great effort and pain. Worse, it caused similar swelling in his throat, constricting the passage of his breath until he felt he was reduced to frantic gasping, his brain convinced he was being strangled. So, not only could he make no use of this new form of protection, its use by others only made his plight worse as, while repelling the rats did help lessen the risk of infection, the paste was certainly not complete proof against the plague. Rather, it instilled the other townspeople with false confidence, so that they began to move about more freely and with less caution. A few of his clients even made complaint that he was still using the tube and revolving box. After all, the weaver and the joiner the next block over, had gone back to having an open shop window where one could peruse the goods before paying. Of course, shortly after that, the weaver had to cease operating entirely, being laid up in bed with the plague.

At this point, Bernard lost all track of time. With nothing to look forward to, nothing to do beyond the basic rudiments of filling his belly, one day was no different from the next. The sun rose and set. He would receive supplies, both personal necessities and raw materials for his craft, in through the revolving door and send any completed merchandise out the same way. He never saw another human face. As soon as the cathedral closed and he had resolved not to go out, he had made an agreement with the tailor's wife a few houses down, to bring him goods from the market in return for a somewhat steep payment. Bernard did not hesitate. What did it matter? With his beloved organ forbidden, what else did he have to spend his money on anyway? Only rarely did he hear another human voice. Most items passed back and forth through the revolving window automatically by prearrangement. Only when a customer wanted to order something special would he hear the garbled words come through the tube in the wall. Used to silence stretching for days, sometimes he would leap up startled, when he heard it and then have to think for a moment to recall how to make his tongue form words. He remembered not even what day of the week it was. Without the sound of church bells to mark the passage of time, even the hour of the day was now imprecise, able to be guessed at only by the position of the sun in the sky. Ere long, all time had become condensed into two basic categories, when there was light enough for him to work without aid and when there was not, though, frequently, even this ceased to matter, as he did not have a great deal of work to do and spent much of his time sitting with his hands in his lap staring blankly in front of him as clear memories of things like the feel of wind on his face, the sight of the open sky or the sounds and smells of the busy streets faded from his mind and he began to wonder if such things had ever been real.

But worse was yet to come, for the town council, just as they had closed the port, and the market, and the cathedral itself, now issued an edict that for anyone to go abroad, they must wear the rat repelling paste, a thing that was easy to tell because of the way it discolored the skin. Now people were forever demanding to see one another's hands or trying to peer under hat brims, squinting in the darkness to catch the tell-tale tint, despite the fact that separation would still have been a better protection measure. Bernard felt his heart drop to the earth when he heard the news and, for many hours after, sat, staring blankly at the wall, a blackness before his eyes, seeing nothing, numb and without feeling so great was the horror. Though he had always been a loner, he had never been nor wished to be utterly solitary. Now, in one stroke, the council had severed his fate from that of the rest of humanity. Though he had no one with whom to share the experience in words, even if lengthy conversation through the tube had been a realistic possibility, he had drawn some comfort from the thought that he and the other citizens of Hamlin were going through the ordeal side by side, that the

privations and close quarters, the overwhelming loneliness, and the always present creeping fear were the common lot of all even if the very necessity of keeping apart meant one could never speak of these things. From now on, he would experience these things radically differently and in unequal measure from the people around him and he was completely and utterly alone. The only comfort he could find in all of this was, with the cathedral closed, he had no desire to leave, which made the cage somewhat less oppressive, though cage it still was, and, with the false confidence the use of the paste inspired, it looked likely that rash risk takers, such as the weaver, would cause the disease to spread and, thus, the cathedral to be locked, for far longer.

This last thought chilled Bernard's heart in another way. Several weeks, more than a moon, perhaps two, had passed since his sanctuary had been closed to him and he had retreated into his house. It was difficult to track the passage of time precisely, when one day bled into the next with no change to mark their comings and goings, and no hope of change. But he knew time was passing, and that it was becoming significant. In the past, in the incredibly rare chance that he had to miss an opportunity to play the organ, with illness, injury, or having to travel beyond the city, like for significant family matters being the only things that could cause him to do so and only in their most extreme forms, he could feel the difference the next time he played. After only a week or two, his fingers would start becoming stiff, he would become tired more quickly, and his legs would cramp, being again unused to being held always ready to push the pedals. He recalled one particularly grim memory when he had traveled especially late in the year, to attend the celebrations held by his cousin in the next town over to mark the birth of his long awaited first child and Bernard had been laid up with sickness while he was there. It was relatively early in his pursuit of the pipe organ and within the last year he had finally been able to achieve strong even chords on the top keyboard. But, after the time away, he had utterly lost the ability and it had taken six long months, burning with shame and frustration, for him to slowly and painfully recover it. By this point, it was doubtless gone again and worse would come if he did not do something. Since the day he had found the church barred to him, Bernard had tried his best to not think on the organ at all, to forget it and not torment himself with what he could no longer have, praying desperately that the plague would pass before lasting damage was done. But he knew that, as the plague showed no sign of abating, rather the reverse, now he could afford to wait no longer and must confront to full force of his pain and loss.

Lighting a single candle, Bernard pulled up a bench next to table on which rested his old harpsichord. With a ragged breath, he threw back the lid, sending up a shower of dust for he had not played the thing in many months. He pressed down on a key and it gave like butter. How small and tinny the note sounded, like a tiny pathetic cry, quickly lost and swallowed up even in the limited space of his house, nothing at all like the great voice of the organ that could shake the lofty rafters of the cathedral. Hot rage surged up inside him and he wanted to crash his fist into the old worn timbers of the harpsichord. It was nothing short of sheer blasphemy to see this...this...weak, whimpering...thing as having any relation at all to the majestic organ. But, just in time, he stopped himself. The harpsichord was all he had now. Wretched and inadequate as it was, this was the only way he could try to retain even a sliver of his ability to play the organ and so he must endure it. However much it galled him, through his attentions to this impostor he would show his devotion to the true divine vessel. And so Bernard played on, every key stroke feeling like it was pressing down on his heart. It had only one keyboard and no pedals depriving him of almost all the mental as well as physical challenge he needed to maintain his skill, let alone to provide him with the feeling of soaring euphoria he was starving for. After forcing himself to continue to play for the better part of an hour, Bernard allowed the lid to fall back into place and slumped forward against the closed box. His heart and soul were exhausted and wretched but only those. The burning and aching in his hands, the stiff swelling in his fingers, that accompanied vigorous work at the organ were entirely absent.

From then on, as the enforced solitude of the plague lengthened, Bernard kept up a regular schedule of practice. Every second or third day, he would sit before the harpsichord and force himself to go through the most rigorous exercises he could devise for the tiny, flimsy instrument. In short order, he hated the thing with a bitter, smoldering hatred. Every second he spent in its presence was salt rubbed into the wound of his exile from the true object of his reverence, keeping the memory of what he was denied ever fresh in the front of his mind. On the days he had pledged himself to practice, he woke to a feeling of black despair, the thought of what he had to do, pressing down on him like a cloud of misery as soon as he was conscious. Often he would be so overcome that he could restrain himself no longer and, losing all ability to continue, he would slump down on the lid of the harpsichord and sob uncontrollably for several minutes. Then, he would force himself back up again, placing his hands again on the hateful keys, and go on, tears continuing to trickle from his eyes even as he played. Bernard would have given anything to be able to stop playing the harpsichord. If he could no longer experience the rapture of the pipe organ, he wanted only to forget it and cease being tormented by what he could no longer have. It would have made all other privations of the plague so much easier to bear. But only by continuously and voluntarily subjecting himself to this torment could he hope to preserve even the last tiny vestige of ability to play.

After many moons had passed, though of course he could not be sure how many for he could not see the moon from any of the windows of his home, and the plague showed no sign of abating, he could bear it no more. Through the word of mouth, primarily via the sacristan of the cathedral, one of his regular clients, he was able to get word to one of the church organists, now out of work as all houses of worship were shut, who agreed, for some small coin to come stand outside and yell instructions through the tube in the wall. Although the organist was able to do little with regards to actually improving his skills, giving the insurmountable limitations of the harpsichord, he did achieve the primary purpose for which Bernard had hired him, to provide externally enforced practice exercises and time for doing them as the grief stricken piper no longer possessed the mental ability to come up with these himself or the force of will to make himself enact them. And, with this one change, all continued on as before for many, indeterminate, moons more.

Then the news came that he had known would come and that he had been bracing himself in dread of ever since the town council had endorsed that horrible paste. The number of plague cases had fallen low enough that, spurred by the incessant petitions of the merchants and craftsmen, they allowed the markets and docks and other public facilities to re-open...including the cathedral. But, of course, the edict that all must use the repellent was still in force. Bernard screamed until his voice cracked, falling away, dry like dust. Up and down he paced, hour after hour, from one end of his small house to the other, viciously punching and kicking the walls, like a wild beast savagely circling in a cage, for now it was a cage indeed. The thing he wanted most was no longer forbidden...except to him because of a freak accident of birth. He thought wildly of making the attempt. Had he not said he would allow nothing to keep him from that which he treasured, been willing to face death at the hands of the plague for it? But this was different. Steeling himself to voluntarily endure that horrible suffocating feeling was one thing and something that he might have been able to do, with much agony, if his calling had been something that involved sitting quietly, like calligraphy, or even one of the many branches of his own trade in leather working. But the energy and effort it took to play the organ could not be sustained with the limited air he would have, to say nothing of the swelling and numbing of his fingers. It was impossible but still, a part of him felt that his inability to overcome even these physical limitations made him unworthy, like it was a sign the organ was not really his heart and soul, the way he had always believed it was. And now, not only did he have to sit in prison while others walked free, even to the place where every fiber of his being ached to go, but, in doing so, they were continuing to spread the plague, making the time he must stay so imprisoned longer and longer.

The weeks and months dragged while Bernard remained crushed in this despair. He knew not how much time had passed but, from his vague awareness of the seasons outside he knew it must be nearly a year that he had been shut within his house, denied that which he longed for most, or even the sight of another human face, when he began to hear bits and pieces of rumors trickle in from people such as the potter's wife from three streets over who had the running of her husband's store and was adept at ferreting out all the latest news from her customers. She had heard through the rumor mill that some apothecary was attempting to concoct a potion that would prevent one from contracting the plague. Much better than an external rat repellent, this would, if it worked, allow one to resist the sickness from within, even if one were forced to go into dangerous circumstances. It was just a vague rumor but, nevertheless, when he heard it, Bernard felt faint. He had to put his hand on the wall to steady himself and his heart hammered. He lost all sense of anything beyond the wild hope surging inside him until he heard the potter's wife make an impatient sound on the other end of the tube. Swiftly and awkwardly, he completed the rest of their transaction in a daze only half aware of what he was doing.

This was his chance at freedom. For the first time, really since the wretched plague had begun, certainly since the requirements about the paste had forced him to remain trapped in his house while everyone else walked free, Bernard felt a glimmer of hope. This could be a chance, at last, to even the score, a protective measure he could use, to win himself the liberties others already enjoyed. But how long, how long? Yes, the physician was experimenting but there was no way to know when or even if, he would discover the exact combination of substances to achieve the desired effect. From then on, Bernard became a man obsessed. Every day in his prison felt unbearable and it was more than he could do to keep from grilling every client who came by for news on the progress of the medicinal formula. Many were in ignorance and, those who were not became heartily sick of his questioning but, in this way, he slowly gleaned bits and scraps of news. There had been some dead ends and false starts but, as the months crawled by, the alchemist, rumor had it, inched with agonizing slowness towards his goal as Bernard played always on the hateful harpsichord dreaming as he did so now of a vial of bitter tincture he could swallow down to prove his devotion and so be set free of this burden forever. And so it went, until, at last, he received the word he had been so eagerly awaiting. The apothecary had perfected the formula and the elixir was ready.

At first, people could not take the potion fast enough. The apothecary was kept brewing day and night and had to hire assistants to help him and still he had to turn people away every day when his current batch ran out, despite the fact that drinking the potion made most people become violently ill for several days after. When his turn came, Bernard drained the beaker of viscous yellow fluid gladly, ignoring its sharp, bitter taste, and managed to make it home before the effects came on him. Through the next days of gut twisting nausea, pounding head, and dazed, wandering mind, he clung always to a hazy, drifting image of sun on a hillside, grass and flowers bending in the wind, the sweet smell of fresh damp soil, and light glinting off the rippling surface of the river Waysar, representing all of the vast world that he had been barred from so long that he could scarce remember it now...all but one thing. Turn his pain blurred mind's eye a slightly different way and all this would shift and resolve anew to the great wheel of a stained glass rose window and below it...below it...waited... He hardly dared even think of it now but it was what he suffered for. This pain was his show of devotion, his proof he was worthy. Once the potion had run its course and his period of agony was over, he would be redeemed...

...Only to learn, when rose from his bed recovered, that the town council had decreed that the potion would not count towards winning a person the right to move about without restriction. The paste and the paste alone would continue to be the sole key to freedom and the common people were for the most part in agreement with this decision, or at least found it benign enough that it was not

worth their while to oppose it, though it remained unclear to what extent the people were simply going with the flow of the council's decision and to what extent the council had made the decision because it knew that was what the people...or the preeminent business owners of the town...wished. Regardless of whose idea it had been, the decision, for Bernard, was anything but benign. For him, it was all the difference between normal life and solitary confinement in a dark hole, while, clearly, to the majority of the people, the minor inconvenience of having to use the paste was not worth bothering about. In addition to the privations of the confinement itself, he was also crushed by the sense of shame at his abnormality, his weakness that he simply could not tolerate what was next to nothing for everyone else, so minor in fact that most could not even truly conceive of his limitation, as well as his helpless rage that, as one man, especially one who was not prestigious or wealthy, his voice would never carry enough weight to count for anything. Worst of all, since people were not required to, or even rewarded for, swallowing the potion, their interest in doing so soon waned and his desperate hope that enough would do so to make all further need for protective measures unnecessary, soon withered into bitter irony.

If it was not enough that he still must be imprisoned while they all went free, the people showed not the slightest concern for his plight or that of any like him. Rather, they scorned and mocked those who did not use the paste, regardless of their reason for doing so, or even treated them with open hostility and anger. The term pale hands became an expression of disgust leveled at those whose skin did not bear the stain of the paste, the substance absorbed into his skin that would reduce him to a gasping, nauseous, panicked wreck. Although she did not say it directly to him, he heard the potter's wife use the expression derisively to her husband, while he was attempting to order a new leather roll for storing his tools. She may not have known that Bernard could hear her or even that he was one of the ones to whom she was referring but he was still filled with rage and despair at the casual hatred leveled upon him from every quarter and felt a great desire to deny her further business but lacked the courage to do so. And everywhere were the hateful signs, crudely painted or scratched into wood, or scrawled on scraps of rag nailed beside doors proclaiming that entry was forbidden to all those who could not display use of the rat repellent "regardless of whether they have drunk the protective elixir or no." While Bernard's level of literacy was not much to speak of, next to nothing really, he soon learned to recognize *that* particular string of letters, not that it was difficult as it seemed, almost any direction he turn his gaze, there it was again. Every shop and institution was now displaying a banner proudly proclaiming his unwelcomeness and the cathedral was no exception.

That he should be forbidden to practice but for an hour isolated up in the choir balcony when, at every service, the pews were packed with those who may not have had even one dose of the potion galled Bernard's heart and soul like bitter acid. He screamed wordlessly, as his finger nails dug into the wood of the table. This agony was more than his present suffering. It was now eternal. Once the plague ended, his hell would not. Rather it would but grow worse and worse for he could not re-enter a community that had so utterly refused to in any way accommodate or even show compassion or understanding for his needs. Concern for safety was one thing but it was impossible to now pretend that this was any such thing for the safest thing would be to require everyone to take the potion. If the town council, the cathedral, or anyone else had demanded both, he would have forgiven them, for it would have shown a true concern for safety and the high level of protection would have sped the end of the plague. Instead, all preventative measures had been thrown to the winds, except the one he could not do and he was forced to watch them all go about their lives, in essence as they had always done, as they continue to spread the sickness through their faulty defenses, continuously and indefinitely extending the time he had to remain in his prison and giving no care for that whatsoever.

Some resisted swallowing the brew because of additional pains it brought, but the main objection to the elixir was that it was invisible. Unlike the stained skin, the sight of which now

revolted him, the potion left no mark on those who drank it, making it impossible to tell if one were telling the truth about having consumed it. People had come to associate the stained skin of the paste with a reassuring feeling of safety and felt vulnerable without the visual confirmation even when the invisible protection was at least as strong, a fact confirmed when the potter's wife told him in a superior tone that she would certainly not want him in her shop...for her own safety you understand, nothing personal of course, and had declined to respond when he acidly asked if she kept away from all the customers who came in with stained hands for fear that they had not taken the potion. This time he did refuse to do further business with her in reality, not just in his mind. Yes, there could have been some sort of registration system, like the one use for the guilds but neither the council nor the businesses wanted to take on the burden of investigating and verifying if someone was really telling the truth about what they had or had not drunk. It was so much more convenient just to look at their hands and so he was to be sacrificed on the altar of expediency and false security.

Now, more than ever, anything beyond his tiny, plague fenced world seemed like a dream. With horror, Bernard realized he could no longer clearly remember what the sight of sun and clouds in the sky looked like, the feeling of a rain drop splatting against his skin. Had he ever actually walked down open streets, looked up to see nothing above his head, or wandered through the market place, people crowding close shoulder to shoulder without fear, smelled the exotic imports and the hearty street food wafting from the stalls, or heard the strolling musicians playing, seated at the foot of the grand statue or on the lip of the fountain, a hat or cloak spread before them to collect donations? Had he ever acknowledged familiar greetings when those he knew passed him on the street, or accept their invitation to join them at the ale house or seated on the low wall by one of the many vendors? All this was now hazy to him and came to seem more and more likely that he had simply imagined it all. The plague was all. It had always been and it would continue forever. All of creation was only his own tiny house. Existence stopped at his front door. The goods that passed in and out through the revolving platform were conjured by the divine force that ruled the universe, as part of some magical pact of sustenance. They came from nowhere and they went to nowhere, winking in and out of existence as they entered and left his house, for there was nowhere else for them to be when they were not under his roof.

But that again was another thing that he was now convinced had been a dream, the communal act of worship. Only inside his mind, had he ever stood within a church, surrounded by fellow worshipers, smelled the thick sweet incense, and raised his voice in songs of praise along with those of all the others around him. It was a strange, recurring dream that seemed so real, but it could not be for there were no such things as churches, his house being the only building that existed, there were no other people besides himself. He hated himself for conjuring up these beautiful, ghostly flights of fancy, as ridiculous and unreal as the dream of being a dragon slayer that he had harbored as a boy and had never truly relinquished in his heart of hearts, making him discontent with the prosaic, routine life of a craftsman. And then he had found the one thing that had spoken to that deep longing, made him feel mighty the way he had imagined...or had he? With a sick horror, Bernard realized that, if there was no church, there was no organ and the most important thing in his life had also not been real. Certainly, there was no way to prove it for the calluses and swollen knuckles that would have confirmed his past devotions had long since vanished, if they had ever been there in the first place. At the very least, he realized, in a flash of wrenching clarity, that he had completely lost all memory of what it felt like to play the organ. He could not call up the blessed wonder, even in his mind. Everything, everything that mattered, that made him someone, that anchored him, however tenuously to some form of reality, was fading as the, probably imaginary, sun faded the colors of paint on a, probably imaginary, wall.

Then he would sink to the floor shaking, breaking out in a cold sweat at the helpless horror of it all, as if he might suddenly see his own hands start to dissolve before his eyes right then and there.

Several minutes, an hour, a day, the dread might last, but not longer, for the needs of the body still had too great a hold on Bernard, despite his crumbling mind, and hunger would drive him to eat. Food must be paid for, so he would then need to turn to his work and, out of necessity to be able to do these things, he would force his blind panic back into some deep close sealed part of himself, where he could forget about it and do what he must do, but where it still lurked waiting, always, until the next time it burst free. And so the cycle of rage, misery, scrabbling existential terror, and grim, plodding practicality went on and on, eternal as the plague that had spawned it.