Genoa, 1348

“The ships are in the harbor! The ships are in the harbor!”

The boy running down the street towards you excitedly continues his cry, his rhythm scarcely interrupted by his ever-shortening breath, not even as he bumps and crashes into what seems like every single person between the docks and…wherever it is he’s headed.

You wonder if a face full of dirt will dampen his spirits. You contemplate sticking out your foot at just the right time…imagining his arms cartwheeling through the air as his feet suddenly wonder where on Earth the earth went.

But, a face full of dirt probably wouldn’t ruin his day, not now. Plus, that would be an awfully mean thing to do, even after the day you’ve had – waking up before dawn to help dad get the pastry shop ready for the day’s business, the multiple trips to and from home, carrying heavy loads of the ingredients dad needs for his baked goods – all that with hardly any sleep last night because of the new baby. And, the truth is, this news about the ships has completely turned your day around as well, even if it’s coming from the world’s most annoying messenger.

The sun now a fading memory, unseen behind the roofs of the shops and apartments of Genoa’s business district, you decide it’s time to head home rather than running down to the docks to get a look at the ships. Besides, you’ve seen ships before, and these ships won’t even be docking until the morning – ships anchor further out in the harbor when they arrive at this time of day before docking and unloading their cargo the following day.

Ah, the ships – not an uncommon sight in your city of Genoa, a busy port city of Northern Italy, just a stone’s throw from France. In fact, Genoa runs on ships. Everyone in the city depends on them and the wealth they bring to the city, including your father. So, while there are always ships coming and going from Genoa’s harbor, every few weeks or so, it is an important and exciting event.

The most exciting part is finding out what’s in the ships. Do they come bearing goods from Arabia? Northern Europe? Silk from China? You’ve pretty much seen it all, from fine fabrics to precious jewelry to exotic animals. Still, it’s a thrill – and more importantly, the sailors and merchants on the ships, as well as the merchants that will be arriving in a few days to buy and sell whatever the ship was carrying – will be spending lots of money in your dad’s pastry shop. Maybe dad will even give you a few coins like he did last time, to spend on whatever you want…

With that thought, you drift off to sleep, exhausted, hoping that the ships will prove a well-deserved jolt of excitement to your otherwise boring life…

You awaken – still dark outside. It’s cold for Genoa, which even in January is usually pretty warm. The baby’s crying again. Drat that baby. You try to fall back asleep, but the noise, the cold, and your sudden recollection of the ships in the harbor lead you to decide to begin your day early again. In fact, if you can sneak out of the house now, you might avoid your dad’s unending list of chores again. You decide that you want to meet the ships at the docks, and be there when the first cargo is unloaded. You’ve only done that once or twice before, and who knows what you’ll see?

After a fifteen-minute stroll, made easier by the croissant you liberated from dad’s store, you arrive at the docks. It’s early for you, but there are already dozens of people waiting there, mostly men, looking to be hired to unload the ships or to serve as replacement sailors for any of the crew that might not have made it through the voyage. Life at sea was tough – there were bound to have been a few souls unlucky enough to have been washed overboard and eaten by sharks. At least, that’s what you always imagined.

With the sun just peeking over the horizon, turning the sky a beautiful and interesting, yet strangely ominous shade of red, the people around you seem to agree that the ships should be pulling up anchor and rowing in to port at any minute. Men begin jostling for position to be nearest the places where the gangways are lowered to unload the cargo.

Minutes pass quickly. People begin to mention how odd it is that there doesn’t seem to be much activity on deck. After some nervous grumblings, someone cracks a joke about how much the crews must have had to drink the night before, and everyone laughs. But as the sun becomes fully visible, and the rest of the city begins to awaken for the day, the noises and bustle of Genoa cannot cover up the growing sense of uneasiness that is creeping through the crowd on the docks, which has been growing ever larger since you arrived.

You don’t know how long you’ve been there – maybe almost two hours now. You think that maybe you should be getting back to dad’s pastry shop. No, you definitely should be getting back to dad’s pastry shop, dreading the trouble you’ll be in after having missed out on all the morning chores. But, your curiosity about the ships, what they’re carrying, and why they haven’t landed is stronger than your sense of familial duty, so you stay.

There’s definitely something wrong now. A few men have suggested that a boat be taken out to the ships to inquire as to the delay, but there aren’t any volunteers. Nobody has a good feeling about this, and everyone is pretty spooked. Some people start to leave, but overall, the crowd is growing, as word of the strange lack of activity aboard the ships has spread quickly.

Finally, Mr. Jean-Francois, a Frenchman, and one of the richest merchants in town, has come down to the docks. He has been waiting for some very important cargo to arrive for weeks, and is in a hurry to have it unloaded. He thinks that the merchants on the ship might be playing some sort of game, bluffing that they may not port and sail elsewhere in order to negotiate a better price for their goods. He asks for volunteers to take a boat out to the ship. When no one offers, he then agrees to pay anyone willing to go 3 florins each.

Three florins buys pastries for an entire family at your dad’s shop, so you think, “why not?” and raise your hand. Nobody seems to realize you’re pretty young, or maybe they just don’t care. A few other men (and one woman, too) also agree to go, and suddenly, before you fully realize what’s going on, you’re in a boat, oar in hand, rowing the half mile that sits between the Genoan docks and the mystery ships. You briefly think about the excitement of the boy in the street the day before, and how you couldn’t have imagined yourself in these circumstances less than a day ago.

Within minutes, you and your crew have pulled alongside the largest of the ships, and one of the men on the boat calls out to those on board. There is no response. Calling louder, he makes a joke about the strength of the “water” on board and the curiosity of the Genoans…again no response. No voices, no movement, no lowering of a rope ladder.

Your crew has brought some boarding ropes with hooks, so the men cast them up over the side of the ship. At this point, no one really wants to be the first to climb over the side. You think about sneaking out of the house that morning, skipping chores, volunteering to go on the boat – you’re kind of on a roll, so why back down now? With a growing lump in your throat, you start to shimmy up the rope, wondering what you’ll see when you get over the side of the ship.

What if bloodthirsty pirates have taken over the ship, waiting to kidnap and ransom the first people over the side? What if everyone on board was drowned at sea, and their ghosts brought the ships to port, waiting to drag all who enter down to share their watery grave? With your breath held tight, you swing your leg up over the side, and jump down onto the deck. Looking back, you see that no one else has bothered to start climbing up after you. You’re on your own.

You survey the deck of the ship, not seeing anyone at first glance. In fact, there’s not much of anything to see, other than a few piles of sacks and unidentifiable rubbish. Another look reveals a pair of legs sticking out from behind the thick center mast. You call out, “Are you the captain?” No answer. You begin to approach slowly, scanning the deck for anything you might use as a weapon. You also wonder how fast you can jump over the side of the ship if you have to, how cold the water is, and if your “friends” in the boat will bother to pick you up if you do.

“Are you the captain?” Your voice is barely louder than an urgent whisper now. At first, there is no response, but then you vaguely hear a hoarse whisper coming from the general vicinity of the pair of legs you’re approaching. As you step closer, you can definitely tell that the person is saying something, but you can’t make out what. Still behind the mast, you can’t see the person’s face yet – you wonder if you want to.

You’re almost close enough now to touch the man’s legs (if it is a man), but you think it’s a good idea to keep the mast between you and…it. One more time, you ask, “Are you the captain?” The whispers come again. The person is repeating the same thing over and over – “It’s too late. It’s too late.”

Your legs refuse to move. You try to speak, but you can’t. Closing your eyes, you summon the last ounce of courage you have, and as you step around the mast, you boldly (or as boldly as you can) ask, “Please, sir. Mr. Jean-Francois would like to know of your cargo.”

As you look down, your heart fills with dread at the sight before you. A pale, emaciated man stares up at you. With eyes half closed, yet unblinking, he reaches toward you with his right hand – a hand covered in odd-looking bruises and a reddish rash. You try to step back, but your legs have failed you. You feel as if you have been nailed to the deck of the ship.

Then you notice the odd bruises on his wrists and neck. Oh, the neck. His neck, on either side of and just under his chin, is marked by two grotesque, egg-sized swellings. His lips and cheeks appear to be smeared with just a splash of dried blood. He opens his lips to speak, and for the first time, he speaks loudly and clearly:

“Our cargo? You want to know of our…cargo?” He pauses, as the talking is very difficult for him. He coughs, hard, several times before he emits a soft groan. He coughs again, this time with the cough fading into a strange, croaking laugh. He suddenly stops, staring right through you, with terror in his eyes, as if some monstrous beast only he could see was creeping upon you.

That’s when you look around and realize that the deck isn’t covered in random piles of rubbish. Those heaps of sacks are people. Bodies. They aren’t moving. You start to see a few patches of exposed skin, all of them bearing the same rashes and bruises of the man before you.

“Our cargo,” the man sighs. “I’ll tell you what we carry.

We bring death.”

Created by Cole Pomeroy, Park Middle School (2014)