

# Corpses

Cicilia was out of the house again, walking idly past the different trading stands, hearing the calls of the merchants advertising their goods. She wished she was at the trading post of Antonio already- she hated the loud noises of the market and despised how she knew she couldn't afford a single thing. She wished she looked more capable so that the tramps' eyes wouldn't follow her with hunger, even though she was only nine years old. She wished her mother hadn't sent her outside.

"*Ciccìa*, stop getting under my feet and get under Antonio's instead!" Tomasia had snapped when Cicilia had wandered through the kitchen for the seventh time that morning. "Help him out for a bit and come back when it's lunchtime. Maybe then I'll have gotten something done!" Cicilia had grimaced with distaste upon hearing the name *Antonio*. Although her mother's cousin was friendly, Cicilia did not like Antonio's brusque way of dealing with everything. When he had welcomed her family into the city of Caffa, he offered no sympathy, only shelter for two weeks while they got back on their feet. Cicilia wanted to beg to return to their home in Tana, but she knew it would be suicide.

She remembered every detail from that morning six days ago, when her father, Iacopo, had barged in from the front door, eyes wide with fear. He spoke urgently with Tomasia before shepherding the kids into the wagon that they owned. Cicilia overheard bits of the conversation between her parents. "...a fight in the market... some *l cattolici idiot... un musulmano murdered...*" when she heard that, Cicilia decided to stop listening. "Come on, *cucciolo*, little puppy." Iacopo had beckoned to her, using one of her numerous nicknames. They had boarded their wagon, riding to the music of the angry yells coming from the village. A Muslim, murdered in Catholic Tana? The Italians were no longer safe. The Mongols would be after them, hungry for blood.

And so Caffa became a haven for the Catholics, despite it being owned by the Genoese, close friends of the Mongols. Cicilia didn't know how long they would be safe there, and whenever she asked her parents, they evaded the question one way or another.

The little girl looked up, realizing that she was at the end of her journey. The door to Antonio's trading house was in front of her, and she could hear the sounds of business bustling inside. Opening the door, she crept in nervously. Antonio's trading house was an epicenter for activity- the best goods arrived there first, so the consumers consisted of smaller trade business owners as well, collecting their goods to sell. Antonio knew what he was doing when he had set up shop in Caffa. He was taking orders at that moment, Cicilia noted, as her

eyes caught his. He raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment, finished his conversation with the current customer and then strutted briskly in the direction of little Cicilia. “*Buongiorno, cipollina,*” he greeted her formally before directing her to the cash register. “Think you can handle this for now? I’ll be with you in a moment.”

As Cicilia worked the cash register, she reflected on how much she hated Antonio. *No one calls a child “little onion,”* she grumbled in her head. Her normal reluctance to interact with him was heightened when she realized she’d have to explain that her mother had sent her away for him to deal with again. Cicilia was in no mood to be laughed at today. Unfortunately, Antonio came towards her in that moment, for she had finished working with the last customer. There would be a moment’s respite until the next one- and most likely a long moment. The line was shorter than usual that day.

“What are you doing here?” Antonio inquired shortly. That was it- no “how are you?” Or “what’s up?” Her mother’s cousin had the mind of a business man, and that mind didn’t want to waste a moment’s time.

“I just felt like helping out.” Cicilia shrugged, then nimbly changed the subject. “I was also looking for Lorenzo- where is he?” Lorenzo was her brother, and liked to help at the trading house in his free time.

“Out looking for new jobs, I suppose,” Antonio mused thoughtfully, eyes darting towards the records that Lorenzo looked over. They were disheveled as usual- Lorenzo jumped from one idea to another, usually leaving projects half-way done. They both sighed and walked across to straighten the files.

“Antonio?” Cicilia asked after a moment.

“*Che cosa?*”

“How long will we be safe from the Mongols?”

Antonio paused in his work. Cicilia looked up at him nervously.

“*Cipollina,* haven’t your parents told you? The Mongols have already besieged this city.”

Cicilia suddenly found it hard to breathe.

“Didn’t you notice the line was shorter than usual? The only goods I have been able to acquire are from the locals who trade here. I can’t get anything from outside.”

As Cicilia stared at him in shock, Antonio finished straightening the last of his pile and sat down tiredly. Not used to such a show of emotion from such an emotionless man, Cicilia said nothing. “I’m sorry, Cicilia. I didn’t think your parents had hidden it from you. It is unlikely that this city will last another week.” Antonio gazed at her uneasily as she continued to stay silent. “Hey, *gufu,* you wide-eyed owlet, don’t you have anything to say?” Getting up, he

went back to the counter and began checking the math that she had done for the cash register.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Cicilia took a deep breath. “Antonio... Are we going to die?”

*Crash!* The front door blew open as Lorenzo burst in, panic echoing in his footsteps. Cicilia whipped around as Antonio jerked his head up, narrowing his eyes at the scene. “What’s wrong with you, Lorenzo?”

For a moment, it seemed as though Cicilia’s brother wouldn’t be able to get the words out. Then he choked out one word.

“Corpses.”

He slumped against the door as though he couldn’t hold his own weight. Cicilia turned slowly towards Antonio, who was frozen. Then he charged towards the door and Cicilia scrambled to follow, leaving her brother sitting on the floor, gasping for breath.

As the two ran outside, Cicilia immediately became aware of the screams of terror flooding her ears. *Corpses? Does he mean...* She hoped with all her might that this was not a repeat of the terrors in Tana, hoped that she wouldn’t stumble across the dead bodies of Italians as the Mongols took their revenge. Suddenly someone screamed, “The wall!” And then Antonio was taking her hand and running with her towards their house, away from the wall that had kept out their attackers for so long. But Cicilia pulled away and sprinted towards it, because she had seen her mother and father. She opened her mouth to call out to them, but as they came closer, she realized they were running with...running with...

Cicilia’s heart dropped to her stomach. *Her parents were running with dead bodies.*

“Mom? Dad!” They passed her without a moment’s hesitation, the bodies in their arms clanking as their armor was jolted around. *Armor?* She didn’t wait to understand what was happening; she bolted towards the wall of Caffa, not heeding the frantic calls of Antonio, not listening to the screams coming from the sea end of the city. She could see Lorenzo, out of his stupor, shooting towards the wall as well. Suddenly Cicilia was aware of the masses of people flooding past her, almost knocking her off balance. Some of them were carrying the dead, some of them clutching the hands of their children, some of them just running away, away from...

“*Dio mio*, the sky!” The terrified voice a man flashed past her as Cicilia slowed to a stop and looked up as though ordered by him, the wall only a couple houses away now. A sickening realization spread through her as she saw the horrific scene in front of her.

Corpses. Corpses were falling from the sky.

Cicilia could feel vomit rising in her throat as she took in the smell, the state that the

bodies were in, the sight of which only victims of the Black Death were subjected to. The Bubonic Plague had reached the Mongols, and the bodies launched over the wall carried the same sickness. Everyone in Caffa was doomed.

*My mother. My father.* Both were carrying bodies, both were now infected, both had only days. Anyone here breathing in the smell...

Cicilia stumbled away as her ears started to ring, unsteady and dizzy. She was infected. Lorenzo was infected. They were all going to die.

“Cicilia!” She did not notice when Antonio snatched her hand. She did not see Lorenzo ducking away from a falling corpse, then turning around to grab the same body and sprint towards the sea. All she could comprehend were the rats, the rats spreading the disease throughout the city as they feasted on the bodies, the bodies that littered around the wall, the wall that was supposed to keep out everything.

*We are all as good as dead.*

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*{In 1346, the Mongols besieged the trading city of Caffa. When the Bubonic Plague struck the attackers, they launched the corpses of their fallen soldiers over the wall to destroy the city from the inside. This marked the beginning of the Black Death in Europe, and the end for the Italians of Caffa.}*

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