

The boy and the old man arrived at the port at night.

There had been clouds in the sky but now the moon shone brightly and they stood in the shadow cast by a row of terraced cottages that lined a cobbled street, polished through the years by wheels and feet and the hooves of horses.

The boy held the old man's hand.

The air smelled of motor oil and charred timber. At the far end of the street, the quayside was lit by a bright white lamp that glared upon the skeleton of a single black crane, its hook hanging solemn above the cottage roofs, and above the crane loomed the tall ship, a string of yellow bulbs along the rails of its upper decks as though it might be Christmas and not a warm autumn night.

The boy sneezed loudly.

“Shhh, Malik,” hissed his grandfather.

Malik let go of his grandfather's hand and pinched his nose through the white cotton handkerchief that covered his face—his grandfather had tied it across his nose and mouth to protect him from smoke. Malik could have removed the cloth, since they were a long way from the fires, but he kept it, believing it made him look older. He held his breath so that he wouldn't

sneeze again. When he was certain, he took his hand away. “Sorry, Papa.”

Papa settled a hand on Malik’s shoulder. “No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bite.” He glanced back down the road behind them. “I’m still nervous. I’m sure there’s no one here, but we ought to be careful.”

“Careful as a cat,” said Malik.

“Fearful like a fox,” said Papa, and he adjusted the rucksack that he carried slung from a single shoulder.

Malik nodded. He felt sorry for the foxes—nobody ever had a good word to say about them. He saw Papa’s eyes flick to either end of the street and his stomach tensed as though he were about to be punched. These moments of uncertainty were the worst. He put a hand to the front of his trousers and held himself.

Papa looked down at him. “Do you need the toilet?” Malik shook his head. “Then don’t do that, eh? You’re too old for that.”

Malik put his hand in his trouser pocket. He shuffled on his feet, stepping from one side to the other so that the tops of his green rain boots flapped against his trousers. Papa’s eyes went up and down the row of cottages; he was checking for something.

Malik stopped shuffling and lifted himself on tip-toes so as to be closer to Papa’s ear. “Is that our ship?”

Papa pulled the collar of his thick winter coat away from the back of his neck. His brow was damp with sweat. "I expect it is," he said quietly. "I can't see the name, but it's the only ship here."

Malik looked again and he agreed. There were no other ships.

Papa put a hand to his short white beard and tugged at the hair, something he did when he was thinking. "We're too early. We can't go there yet. I think we must wait till the morning."

The muscles in Malik's stomach twisted—Papa would need to find them a place to stay again. Last night they had slept in the basement cellar of a burnt-out office block and there had been a dying dog. He followed Papa's eyes to the row of cottages, silhouetted in the bright light from the quay, the chimneys standing proud of the gray slate roofs. If they couldn't go to the ship, then perhaps they could spend the night in one of these. Malik hoped so. He imagined a chair to sit in. A basin for washing. His own bed.

"Will the ship leave tomorrow?"

Papa ignored the question and Malik felt guilty for having asked it, but he had other questions, all sorts of questions, and he couldn't help himself.