

Time Sailors
of
Pizzolungo

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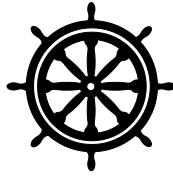
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Visit <http://www.timesailors.com> for more information about the authors and the book. (Beware of potential spoilers.)

*For all the adventurous kids who, like the Time Sailors of
Pizzolungo, yearn to explore the world.*

Time Sailors
of
Pizzolungo



—Chapter 1—

*A Father, a Son and an
Adventure Begun*

There are seafaring men. And there are glorious seafaring men. Men who have sailed the seven seas; men who have clipped through hazardous arctic passageways and treacherous tropical straits; men who have ridden waves as high as the heavens and battled all the elements Mother Nature could throw at them, and lived to tell the tale. To the people of the poor Sicilian village of Pizzolungo, Captain Guillermo Infante was a seafaring man. But to his son, Guillermo Jr., he was the most glorious sailor who ever lived.

Guillermo Jr. always kept count of the days until his father's famed cargo ship, the *Coraggio*, would arrive home from exotic places like the Gulf of Taranto and the Bay of Naples. Each summer young Guillermo would ask his father if he could accompany him on one of his voyages, assuring him he'd make a helpful deck hand. But each summer he received the same response: "You have the heart of a captain, but for now you're still too little. Maybe next summer."

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

Guillermo hoped above all hopes that this summer would be different. And as he would soon find out, this summer would be very different indeed.

There are seafarers like Captain Infante. And then there are seafarers like Captain Rumrino. Alfonso Rumrino was drunk at dinner and sometimes even more drunk at breakfast. Not long ago, just after his morning pastry and rum, he crashed right into the *Coraggio* while trying to dock his tugboat. When Captain Infante went down to the port later that day all he could see of his ship was the top of its mainmast and exhaust stack. He climbed aboard the sinking vessel just in time to salvage a framed picture of his family and his treasured admiral's compass which his father had given him. Moments later the ship slid fully beneath the harbor's surface, taking half the wooden dock with it. The *Coraggio* was no more.

Left with no other choice, the Captain was forced to fly to Rome, hat in hand, to plead with the men who held the *Coraggio's* insurance papers. The days passed as everyone back home anxiously awaited his news. And then finally one night, as the arms of his household clock stood upright, a noise stirred young Guillermo awake. At first he thought it was laughter. He wondered whether his father had returned home with a new ship. He slipped silently onto the floor so as not to awaken his little sister, Piccola, who slept in the next bed. If his father really had arrived, Piccola would surely siphon off the lion's share of his attention.

But as Guillermo tiptoed closer to his parents' bedroom he realized it wasn't laughter he was hearing. It was weeping. He poked his head into the room and saw his mother on her cell phone talking to his father, using a handkerchief to catch her tears. Down in the shadow of the corridor, he was just able to make out his father's faint words on the other end of the line. Although too young to understand terms like

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

‘insurance lapse’ and ‘missed premium payments,’ he could grasp the pain in his father’s voice as he spoke about how his days ahead would be spent on land rather than at sea. Young Guillermo knew that for a seafaring man a future on land would be a tragedy of immense proportions.

Just then Piccola crawled over to eavesdrop beside her brother, arriving in time to overhear the worst part of the story. With his business in ruins, their father would have no choice but to sell the family home and move everyone in with their cousins in Siracusa, all the way on the other side of Sicily.

Guillermo and Piccola crept back to their room, fighting back tears. It took until nearly dawn for their heartbeats to return to normal. But from that point on very little else would be normal.

Guillermo stared out of his bedroom window toward the dark sea below. His chest was tight as he struggled to swallow. He was tormented by the thought of leaving Pizzolungo. And while he loved the house in which he was born and the town where he grew up, they didn’t compare to the anguish of having to leave behind the most valuable thing of all—his friends.



—Chapter 2—

A Captain and his Crew

The yard at Pizzolungo Elementary School brimmed with excitement. Balls were flying, ropes were swinging, and children were running about as if being chased by *L'Uomo Nero*, the Boogeyman himself. Normally at this time of day the students would have been immersed in multiplication tables and grammar exercises, but the teachers conceded it was too hot to be indoors and besides, the bell was about to announce the beginning of summer break. As any student—or teacher for that matter—will tell you, the formidable scent of an impending summer vacation interferes with the absorption of subjects like math and grammar.

Enzo Bonaventura and Luca Brizzi stuck their heads over the side of the tree house in the schoolyard. The three dilapidated boards were nailed between the lower branches of the courtyard's only tree. 'Tree shack' would have been a more fitting description, but that mattered not, since those finely assembled planks doubled as the 6th graders' sailing vessel.

Enzo scanned the horizon from the second plank. His long jaw protruded even more than usual. "*Attenzione!* We've got

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

company,” he shouted with alarm. “Pirates, and plenty of them!”

Luca maneuvered up to the third plank, his swift movements belying his stocky frame. He peered down into the sandbox where Tony Benetto’s chopstick arms were sending shovel after shovel of sand onto the nearby grass. “Leave the treasure Tony, grab the guns. They’re coming up on our starboard side. If we flank them from the rear and fire the cannons when their backs are turned, we might be able to hit both ships with one shot.” He leaned back against the branch, proud of the military stratagem he’d just laid out.

“But I haven’t found the gold yet. According to my map,” Tony glanced down at the map on his iPad screen, “it should be right beneath us.”

“Then keep digging sailor, but hasten your search. The captain wants all hands on deck.” Luca then turned to Mario Bintelli, who was milling about under the tree feasting on a box of butter cookies. “Get the weapons Mario! Be useful for once!”

Mario reluctantly scrambled off into the bushes, crumbs spit firing out of his mouth like a Tommy gun as he huffed and puffed in search of some long sticks for the crew to use as guns. His belly held enough reserve space for a pound or two of linguini per day, and he made sure to always keep it fueled—even if its size interfered with his ability to effectively combat pirates. He bundled up a handful of ‘stick guns’ and headed back to the tree house just as Guillermo, the ship’s captain, returned to duty from the school bathroom. Taking his place at the helm, Guillermo had all the presence and fortitude one would expect from the son of a real captain. His wise brown eyes, mopy hair and thoughtful expression conferred on him an air of gravitas far beyond his twelve years.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

As Mario began distributing the sticks, a tiny yellow buttercup growing at his feet beckoned and distracted him from his duties. He picked the delicate flower and nudged it behind his ear for safe keeping. Guillermo rolled his eyes, knowing exactly where the flower was heading.

Guillermo climbed to the top of the tree house and projected his voice, "Sailors, the pirates are closing in on us. Hoist the Genoa sail and start the bombardment."

Enzo and Luca began launching the mud cannonballs they'd prepared, flinging them off the tree house in all directions. Meanwhile Tony continued to dig furiously in the sand, which ultimately generated a stern warning from Signore Malesco, Pizzolungo's most feared (and only) gym teacher.

As the boys battled their pirate adversaries Mario furtively crossed the yard to where the 5th graders were playing. Piccola stood off to the side of the others filling out the answers to the Pizzolungo Post's daily word jumble and observing the pirate game from the corner of her eye. Mario handed her the flower, "I picked this for you." He tried to get as close to her as possible, hoping to touch her lacy brown hair and smell her soft skin, but his belly kept him at a generous distance.

"And why should I care?" she asked, her thin rosy cheeks getting a shade rosier.

"Well, I thought that maybe tomorrow you could come over and I could cook you my famous spaghetti carbonara."

"Maybe. I might burn ants with a magnifying glass tomorrow." She tossed her hair over her shoulder and went back to her word puzzle. Her mood had been sour all day, due to her midnight eavesdropping.

"I want all hands on deck!" the captain shouted from afar.

"Get a move on, Six-to-Four," Luca shouted to Mario, who winced at the nickname and grabbed Piccola's hand.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

“Come with us, you can help us outwit these pirates, and the sooner the better, I’m starving.”

Piccola sensed an opportunity to get in on the game. The two ran full tilt toward the tree house. Mario lumbered up the lower branch with Piccola in tow. But Luca put his hand out to block her, “Sorry, captain’s orders.”

“Then I demand to speak to the captain.”

“Can’t you see he’s busy fighting pirates right now? We’re at war!”

Piccola pushed past Luca to get next to her brother as gravity worked its magic on Mario and returned him to the ground with a thump.

“Guillermo!” Piccola shrieked.

The captain turned around after having given the order to fire the cannons. “Hey, you can’t be up here. You’re too little.”

“You always say that. I can help you beat these pirates. I’ve been contriving a five-pronged strategy to mitigate the pirates’ firepower and capitalize on your ship’s agility in shallow waters.”

“We’re doing just fine on our own,” Guillermo scowled, pretending he knew what the words ‘contriving’, ‘mitigate’, and ‘agility’ meant.

The captain turned to Tony—who had finally located the coins he’d buried before school—and motioned for him to get back to navigation, his preferred trade. “How are the maps coming along?”

Tony wiped off his sandy hands and zoomed in on their current location. “I have them here.” He placed the tablet beneath the tree as the crew descended from the branches and gathered around. “Judging from the coordinates I’d say the current carried us north, so we should head—”

“If you don’t let me play I shall tell mama,” Piccola interrupted.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

“Urgh! Mama can’t do anything. In a few minutes that school bell is going to ring and we are going to be 7th graders. Adults. And you will only be a 6th grader. Now leave us be, we are in the middle of a battle!”

“Maybe we can let her play just this once?” Mario cautiously suggested.

“Fine, then I’ll tell papa when he gets home,” Piccola threatened.

This stopped Guillermo cold. In all the commotion of the pirate game he had forgotten about his father’s plight and what now lay ahead for his family. But this was the last day of school, normally the best day of the year, so he tried not to burden anyone—especially himself—with the grim news.

Just then the school bell echoed across the yard, followed by an eruption of jubilant cheers from the children.

“Until the next adventure,” Luca proclaimed.

“Until the next adventure,” Guillermo agreed as the playground emptied.

“Hey, can anyone help me get all this sand back in the box?” Tony pleaded.

Nobody paid attention.

“Guess that’s a ‘no’ then,” he continued as he started shoveling the sand back in.

“Who wants to stay over at my house tonight?” Guillermo asked. “My mother will cook us dinner.”

Enzo flashed a thumbs-up sign, “That’s a big affirmative, captain.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ve been meaning to give her a few pointers on her *Rollatini di Melanzane*,” Mario said, referring to her signature dish.

“We can camp out at Mariner’s Fort, one last time...” Guillermo let slip, biting his tongue.

“Why? What’s happening to the island?” Luca asked.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

“Nothing, I meant one last time while we’re... still 6th graders.”

The sailors made their way toward the school exit and three months of summer freedom. It took them five minutes—ten in the case of Mario—to pedal down the path leading toward the harbor and the Infante household, where they let their bikes fall into a heap in the middle of the driveway.

Signora Infante wasn’t in a boisterous mood, given the call she’d received in the middle of the night, but she knew better than to spoil the first day of summer for her troop of hungry tree-house sailors. “Happy summer everybody. Who’s hungry?”

“Can the crew sleep over tonight?” Guillermo asked.

“I don’t see why not, as long as it’s OK with everyone’s parents.”

“It is,” everyone said at the same time.

“Did you all leave your bicycles in the middle of the driveway again? How many times—”

“Can we stay out at Mariner’s Fort?” Guillermo interrupted.

“If you promise to get some sleep and not stay up all night yelling like a bunch of swashbucklers, then you may. But make sure you’re back early. They say a storm might blow through.”

“Guillermo wouldn’t let me play Captains and Pirates with everyone at school today,” Piccola complained.

“Guillermo?” Signora Infante’s thick eyebrows rose ever so slightly as she looked down on her son.

“She’s too little, mama.”

Signora Infante kissed her daughter’s head and smiled. “Well, you *are* little. You’re my little *Marzipan*.”

“Mama!” Piccola protested.

“Told you,” Guillermo said.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

“You can play with them tonight,” Signora Infante said.

“Whaaat?!” Guillermo bellowed.

“I second that idea,” Mario interjected, filled with hope.

“Mama!” Guillermo implored to no avail. Piccola flashed him a big grin.

“Now, come on in sailors, I hope you like aubergine, I’m making *Rollatini di Melanzane*.”

“Signora Infante, as it happens, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about your *Rollatini*...” Mario followed her into the kitchen.

“Come men, let’s go outside,” Guillermo said as he headed to the closet to grab a pile of towels.

Enzo, Luca and Tony flew out the door. In the living room Guillermo stopped briefly to gaze at his father’s favorite painting, a portrait of his distant relative, Lorenzo. To his father, Lorenzo exemplified courage and bravery. When Guillermo had trouble sleeping at night he would listen to the waves crash against the stone wall below his bedroom window and imagine himself in the cabin of a great ship, sailing the open seas with the intrepid Lorenzo Infante. His father had told him how Lorenzo had brought honor to his country and while he had died young, he had lived more than most people twice his age. Guillermo hoped he could muster such courage when the time came to leave behind all he knew.

From down on the beach, Guillermo could hear his friends calling for him. He grabbed the towels but with one foot already out the door, something curious caught his eye: an old-fashioned crate roughly twice the size of a shoebox was sitting in the hallway. He’d never seen such a package before, and certainly not in his own home. He leaned in for a better look. The box was tied up with the kind of coarse rope you’d find on a ship, and wax was melted over the knot. He was

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

about to investigate it further when he heard Enzo scream, “Captain, man overboard!”

Guillermo pushed the crate into the corner and ran down to the beach, hurtling his wooden dinghy before cannonballing into the water off the pier. Mario had also heard Enzo’s call, although it took him somewhat longer to stagger down from the kitchen. His belly flop displaced enough of the Mediterranean to irrigate a small farm and to completely drench Luca, who had stayed on the pier.

“Hey Guillermo,” Luca asked once the boys regrouped on the beach, “when is your father returning from Rome? He promised to bring me a legionnaire’s sword.”

“He’s bringing Roman breadsticks with sesame seeds for me,” Mario added with a greedy grin.

Guillermo gazed down at the water. The sun’s rays glared off the golden anchor on his captain’s ring, which his father had given him for his last birthday. Despite the warm breeze Guillermo had goose bumps. “He’ll be back any day now,” he responded softly. “But without a new ship. And probably without your swords or breadsticks either.”

“What do you mean?” everyone asked.

Guillermo could no longer contain what he’d overheard the night before. He took a deep breath and explained how his family would have to move in with relatives all the way across the island in Siracusa.

Mario seemed genuinely concerned. “So... no breadsticks?”

“Simmer down jelly-belly, this is serious,” Luca snapped. Mario eyed Luca, “Look who’s talking.”

Enzo slouched down and rested his head in his palm, “This is not good.”

“Who will steer the ship?” Tony wondered aloud.

The boys fell silent, knowing that Tony’s question held more weight than just captaining a make-believe boat.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

Guillermo felt his eyes moistening and realized a tear might not be far behind. He quickly turned away and began trudging up to the house. Inside his mother and sister were in the kitchen.

“Not with your wet feet you don’t,” Signora Infante called out, intuitively knowing from two rooms over that he’d forgotten to dry off properly.

Guillermo perfunctorily ran his feet over the rug and headed toward the kitchen. But en route the mysterious package caught his eye again. This time his curiosity pushed him relentlessly toward the box. When he flipped it over his spine straightened and his eyebrows furrowed. In bold red letters the name ‘Guillermo Infante’ was printed across the crate.

“Mama? Who is this package from?”

“It’s the strangest thing,” she yelled back from the kitchen, “It was sitting at the front door when I came home today. No return address, no postage, no note. Nothing.”

Guillermo grabbed the crate and rushed off to his room, his imagination racing and his curiosity burning. “Is it for me or papa?” he asked without bothering to wait for an answer. He scraped the wax away and untied the ropes securing the crate. The inside of the box was marked with an inscription: ‘*Caute: navis crescit en aqua*’, and it contained an exquisite model warship. He carefully extracted the ship, paying no attention to the two velvet pouches also housed inside, or to the mysterious inscription.

The ship had three lofty sail masts, a protruding bowsprit, a polished gun deck, an eight-pronged wooden steering wheel, and dozens of miniature cannons. Inside the ship were rows of corridors, kitchens and storage rooms. Its beauty and craftsmanship were far superior to any model ship he’d ever laid his eyes on.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

Guillermo turned the ship around to examine the stern. The letters comprising the vessel's name were too small to make out. Nor could he recognize its minuscule red and white flag. He flipped it over to inspect the hull. There, engraved in the wood and big enough to read, was the same bizarre phrase: '*Caute: navis crescit en aqua*'.

Over in the kitchen, Piccola was helping her mother with the dinner preparations. "I hope Papa comes home soon," she said, probing for a reaction regarding the call she'd overheard the previous night.

"He'll be home soon *bella*. And there will be things to talk about..."

"What do you mean?"

"All in good time *bella*."

While watching her mother take the *Rollatinis* out of the oven Piccola decided to try another angle. "I laid out the chess board just the way Papa and I left it before he went on his trip. Do you think he'll want to finish the game when he gets home?"

"I think he'll probably be tired from the journey," she said, looking more than a little exhausted herself.

"But if he doesn't play as soon as he gets home, Guillermo will change all the pieces around and I'll lose. I hate it when he changes the board. Last time it almost worked!"

Signora Infante reached over and put her hands on Piccola's gumdrop cheeks. "Sometimes change is good, *bella*. Sometimes facing a new challenge helps you grow. You'll see."

"But I don't want anything to change, mama. I want everything to stay as it is," she huffed as she threw the warm oven mitts onto the floor and folded her arms. On a normal day this little tantrum might have earned Piccola a one-way

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

ticket to her room, but this wasn't a normal day and both she and her mother knew it.

Running back outside to share his discovery, Guillermo nearly collided with his mother who had just delivered a tray of steaming hot *Melanzane* to his friends. He hid the vessel from her view at the last moment, still unsure if the mysterious package had been intended for him or his father. Once she retired to the kitchen Guillermo slipped the ship out from underneath his towel.

"Wow! A pirate ship," Enzo exclaimed.

"No, it's some sort of galleon," Luca said. "A first-rate galleon, I think. It looks like the type of ship that Britain's Admiral Nelson captained against France during the Napoleonic Wars."

"It's incredible how you know stuff like that," Tony said to Luca.

Mario spoke with a mouthful of cheese, "He doesn't. He makes it up."

"I guess I'm just a military buff," Luca replied.

"One day you'll be a soldier in the *Alpini Corps* just like your brother, right Luca?" Guillermo patted him on the shoulder.

"Yes captain," Luca replied in a rigid, militaristic voice.

"Where did you get the ship?" Enzo asked.

"Someone left it for... me... I think..."

Mario had paid little attention to the excitement generated by the model ship, but Piccola coming down the path to their table did pique his interest. His smile was hard to recognize beneath the spoonful of sauce dripping off his face.

Piccola reached the table with the black velvet pouches in her hand. She pointed to the model ship, "Can I see it?"

"Sure," Mario said eagerly, as if it were his.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

“No way. You’re too little and you could break it,” Guillermo countered.

“I will not!”

“Let’s see if it floats,” Luca suggested.

“I’d be careful if you want to put it in the water,” Piccola warned.

“Why?” Guillermo asked.

She put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows as if to say something the boys should have already figured out for themselves, “*Caute: navis crescit en aqua.*”

“What does that mean?” Tony asked.

Guillermo glared at his sister, “It means stay away from my side of the room.”

“It’s Latin. It means ‘Caution: ship grows in water.’”

Nobody was sure whether to be more impressed by Piccola’s grasp of a nearly extinct language or by the fact that they might have a growing ship in their possession. Guillermo led the sprint back down to the water. Even Mario mobilized for the spectacle of a growing ship.

“Wait for me,” Piccola yelled, trying to keep up.

“How big do you think it’ll get?” Tony asked. “A few inches larger? Or like the size of a dog?”

“Maybe it’ll grow to be the size of an inflatable pool raft,” Enzo suggested.

“Wait,” Tony pulled a waterproof case over his iPad. “Just in case there’s a splash.”

“If it gets to be the size of a raft we can use *it* instead of the dinghy to get to Mariner’s Fort,” Luca said.

“Maybe it gets even bigger, like the size of a real ship,” Guillermo suggested as he scurried out to the edge of the sea. “Maybe even big enough to replace my father’s ship and then we won’t have to move.”

Piccola grew more excited and hopeful with every word from Guillermo’s mouth.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

Before releasing the ship into the water, Guillermo gave it a final dash of preparation by unfurling its sails and untying its tiny rudder. The sun was slowly trending toward the western sky but it delivered plenty of light for the moment of truth. The crew brimmed with expectation as Guillermo placed it in the water. Everyone's bulging pupils zeroed in on the ship. But nothing happened. Nothing at all.

"It's not working," Mario observed.

"I'm getting that," Tony said.

"Sorry Guillermo," Luca offered.

"It was foolish of me to think that this could work," Guillermo lamented as he picked up the ship.

"It's OK, Guillermo. We'll think of something. You're not going to have to move." Luca put his arm around Guillermo's shoulder.

"Let's just get going," Tony suggested. "I'll get the dinghy and our clothes."

Mario ran back up to the table to collect the plate of food as Piccola jostled the model ship from her brother's hands. "Let me try to figure out how to make it grow," she begged.

"Fine, but be careful with it," Guillermo warned with a tone of resignation. "It's pretty amazing even if it doesn't grow like it's supposed to."

Piccola grabbed the ship and rotated it above her head to view it from all angles. Then she put it back down in the water and shifted her attention to the velvet pouches she'd brought out from the house.

As always, Luca made sure to avoid contact with the water as he boarded the dinghy. Tony, Mario, Enzo and Guillermo piled in and used a wooden oar to push back from the shore.

"Piccola, aren't you coming?" Mario called out, inviting a harsh look from Guillermo.

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

Realizing she was about to be left behind she scooped up the model ship and darted for the dinghy. Guillermo gritted his teeth as Mario and Luca helped her aboard. Just then Signora Infante came out from the house and offered the group a satisfied and warm smile as she watched Piccola getting onto the dinghy. Everyone waved goodbye to her.

Before the long hand of Guillermo's watch had clicked ten notches forward, the crew pulled the dinghy up onto the beach at Mariner's Fort. The island was small enough to hike across—north to south or east to west—in less than 152 seconds (Tony had timed it on his iPad). On the far side was an ailing wooden shack that a fisherman was said to have built a half century ago to shield himself from the elements. That's where the group always slept when they stayed overnight. Guillermo had discovered it with his father when he was younger and had immediately noted its strategic potential, which inspired him to name the whole island Mariner's Fort. Surely the person who'd originally built the shack would be impressed to learn that his ramshackle creation now served as a proud fort of any kind.

While the boys went about their usual routine of collecting twigs and driftwood for the evening fire, Piccola scampered off to a nearby rock to further assess the model ship and the velvet pouches dangling from her hand.

Luca put his arm around his best friend, "Hey, my brother is going to be in the *Corps* for another two years. I can ask my parents if you can take his bedroom, whenever he's not visiting."

Enzo also turned to the captain, his chin intruding on Guillermo's personal space. "Maybe you can live with me. My sister is getting married in the fall and when she leaves her room will be empty."

"Thanks mates," Guillermo said, his voice conveying the unlikelihood of such a scenario actually working out. "But I

Time Sailors of Pizzolungo

don't think there's any way my family would leave me behind."

"I wish we *could* leave you behind," Piccola's voice piped up as she approached the group with a grin almost as wide as the model ship in her hands. "But maybe we won't have to move after all."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Guillermo prodded.

"*Quam mihi nota evolvant,*" she said with fire in her eyes.

The gang looked at her expressionless.

Piccola shook her head, "I think I figured out how to make it grow."