Background: In the middle of the 14th century, a plague killed millions of people in Asia, Europe, and North Africa. The plague most likely came from Central Asia, where it traveled swiftly along the trade routes heading west. Fleas carried the plague and moved from place to place on rats.

The plague quickly reached the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Merchant ships spread the disease even farther, first to Italy and then to the rest of Europe. As you read the following story, imagine that it is 1348 and that you are living in a plague-infested European city.

A pomander held spices and incense. People believed that they could protect themselves from the plague by holding the pomander to the nose and breathing in the mixture.
The year 1348 has been filled with misery for everyone I know. Just last week, my best friend Claire’s aunt died. It was hard for me to listen to her description of her aunt’s death. Claire said her aunt’s armpits had suddenly swelled up. She said they were truly awful to look at—that some of her swellings were as big as apples. After that, black and blue splotches appeared on her arms and legs. They called for a doctor, but he said he could do nothing. Claire’s aunt was dead within three days. I hate to say it, but her death was hardly unusual. It seems like the plague has killed half the people in my town.

My parents have done their best to lend a hand to Claire’s family. They help look after the children and see to the cooking and cleaning. They also made arrangements for the funeral. It was difficult to find people willing to take part, but a few close friends did come. I suppose we were lucky that anyone at all came. Nowadays, many of the dead have neither family nor friends to see to their burial. They die alone in their houses, and only the smell of their decaying bodies tells neighbors of their passing. In Siena, where we live, townspeople have begun digging large ditches where the corpses of such people are hastily buried.

My Siena was once an orderly and beautiful city. But the plague has killed many of the town’s authorities, and many others have fled. My father has taken steps to protect us from the plague. He nailed thick boards over our windows. He also forbade us to bathe. He says that if our pores are clogged, the disease might have more trouble getting into our bodies. My parents have talked about leaving the city. But they decided, for now anyway, that we should stay and help Claire’s family.

What do you think will happen to your community because of the plague?

1. **READING: Cause-and-Effect** Understanding effects is an important part of historical study. With a partner, discuss the effects of the plague as described in this story.

2. **WRITING: Narration** If a plague hit your town today, would you stay to help people or would you leave? Write a personal letter to a friend that explains your decision.