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On a hillside overlooking the sparkling Bay of Naples, the Roman city of Pompeii glimmered in the sunlight.

From his window, young Tranio listened to the noise humming from bars, taverns, and shops around him, and to the busy tradesmen haggling in the streets below. Beyond the massive city walls he could see Pompeii's greatest protector looming in the distance. They called it Vesuvius, the Gentle Mountain.

Could anyplace feel safer than here, Tranio wondered? Was anything more beautiful?

Tranio was the son of Dion the actor and lived with his parents near the Theater District of Pompeii. He'd often sneak to the harbor at the mouth of the River Sarnus and hide behind sacks of grain. There he'd watch pots of wine, oil, and spices being carried to and from the ships, or fishermen unloading their rich catches.



Sometimes Tranio went to the forum to listen to the politicians make their speeches, the shopkeepers argue, and the poets sing.

His favorite song was:

Rumble down, tumble down,  
great city walls,  
Feel the ground grumble,  
the citizens stumble  
When the earth shakes, and  
rumble down, tumble down.

Everyone would join in, laughing as they remembered the earthquake tremors. A few years before Tranio was born, there had been a big earthquake in Pompeii, and parts of the town had still not been fully repaired. But nobody took tremors seriously anymore.

On other days, Tranio would shout up to Livia, the baker's daughter, who lived across the street, "Liv! Stop curling your hair and come and play jacks! I've got a bag of bones from my mother's kitchen! They're just the right size!"

Livia spent most of her time learning to weave and cook, but during the hot afternoons she and Tranio would sit by the fountain and play knucklebones, or chase dogs down the street.

One hot August day, Dion took Tranio through a shady passage into one of Pompeii's two theaters on the edge of the city, where a pantomime was being rehearsed.

"Sit on the steps, son, and learn!" said Dion. "We'll be using you in small parts soon."

