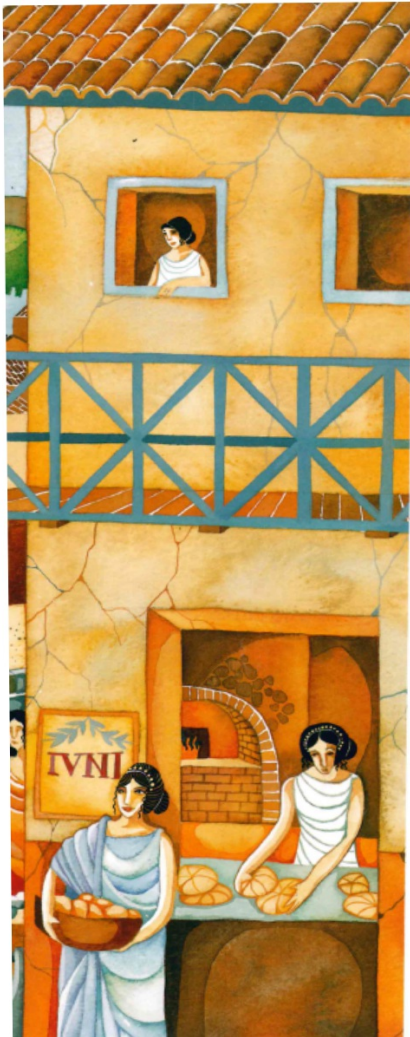




ESCAPE FROM
POMPEII

CHRISTINA BALIT

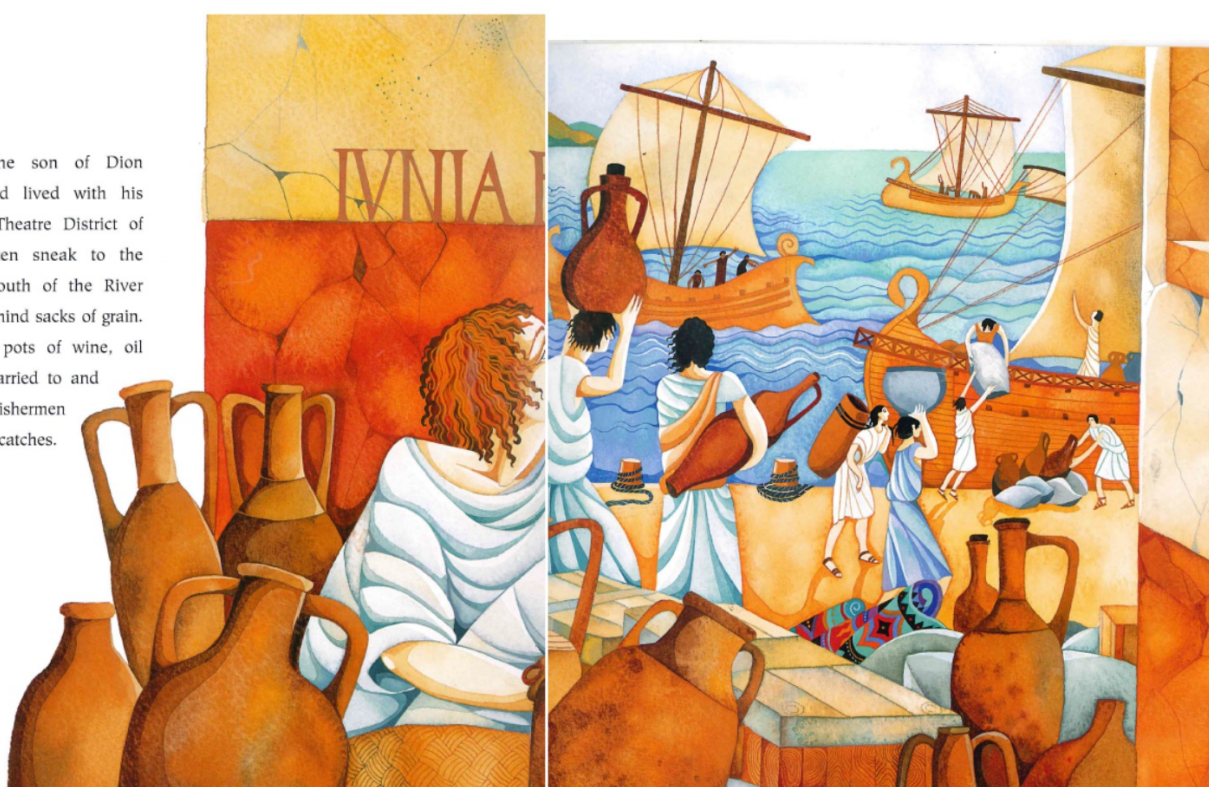


On a hillside overlooking the sparkling bay of Naples, the Roman city of Pompeii glimmered in the sunlight.

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 anyone 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 Theatre District of Pompeii. He'd often sneak to the harbour 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 watch the politicians make their speeches, the stall-holders argue, and listen to the poets sing.

His favourite song was:

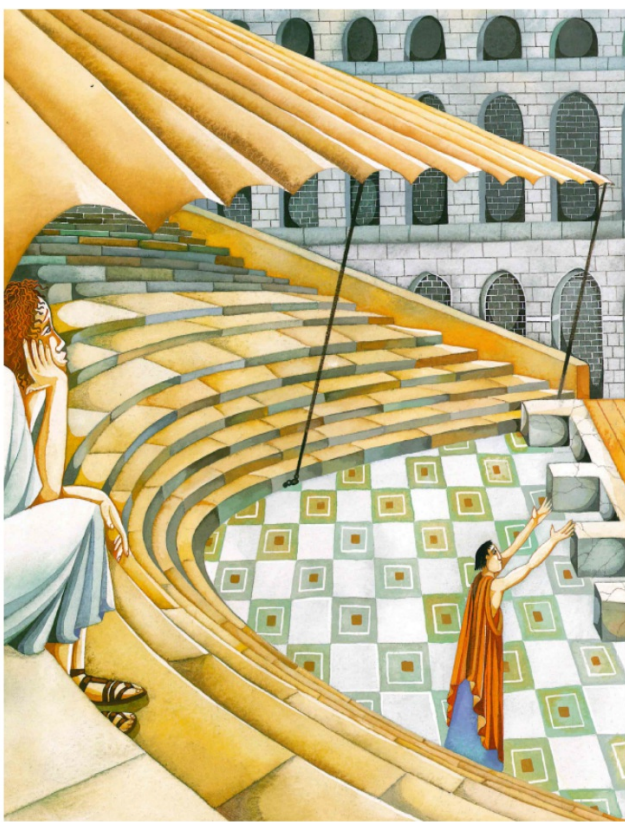
“Rumble down, tumble down,
great city walls,
Feel the ground grumble,
the citizens stumble
When the earth shakes, and
rumble down, tumble down.”

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 yet been fully repaired. But nobody took tremors seriously any more.

On other mornings, 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 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 squat by the fountain playing knucklebones, or chase dogs down the street.





One hot August day, Dion took Tranio through a shady passage into one of Pompeii's two theatres 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."

To begin with, Tranio enjoyed watching the sword fights and strutting clowns. The masked actors playing thieves and devils and the leaping acrobats quite took his breath away. But eventually his attention began to wander ...

Then something happened ...
The stone steps creaked, the flaps began to rattle and the building quivered. Props fell to the stage and scenery split. Tranio's father froze to the spot. Everyone fell silent.

But one by one the actors began to relax. "Rumble down, tumble down, here we go again!" they chanted.

"Nothing to fear, everybody!" called Tranio's father. "Back to rehearsal, please." The actors fastened their masks and carried on as if nothing had happened.

But Tranio wriggled through the awning and ran away down the street.



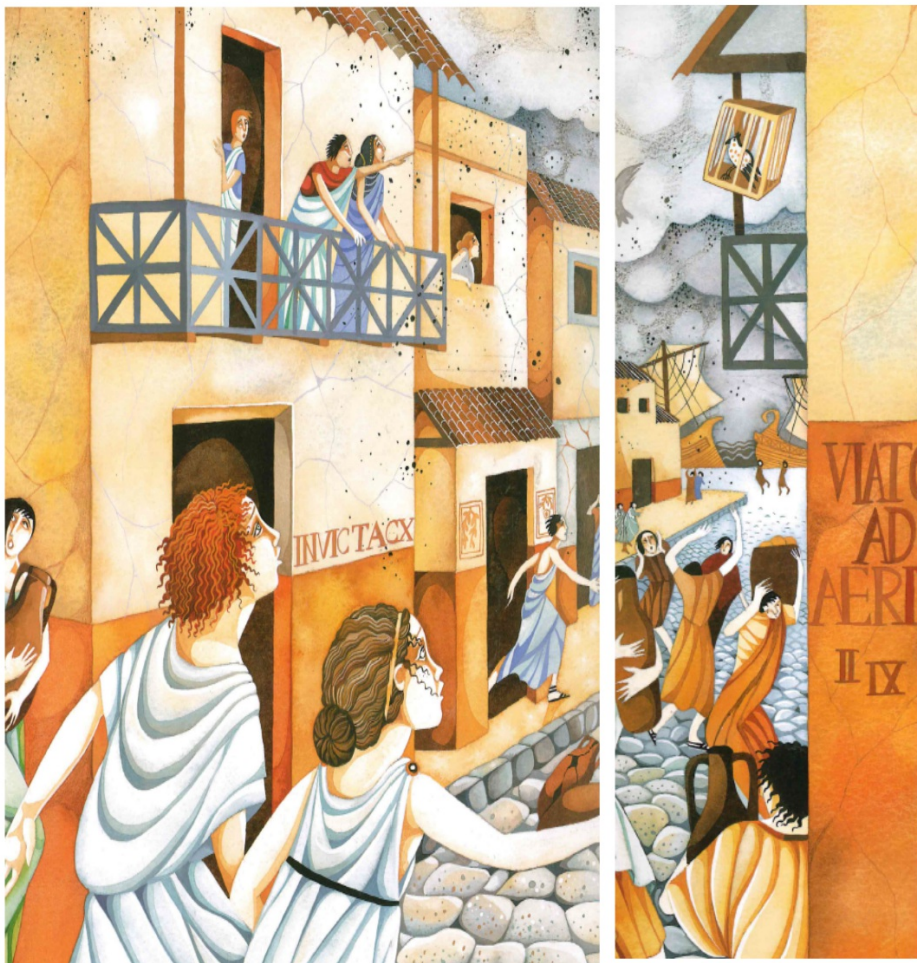


He ran as fast as he could to Livia's house. Everyone was shouting, arguing, carrying belongings outside to safety.

"Livia!" he called. "Liv, where are you?" The bakery kitchen was empty. Loaves lay scattered on the floor, the oven blazed and the small donkey turning the corn mill brayed and jumped nervously against its chain.

"Tranio!" Livia leapt down the stairs. "Father's chasing our goat through the market! The poor old thing bolted when the ground began to grumble. You'd have died laughing. Come on!"

Flushed and excited, the two children ran off hand in hand into the dusty streets.



But as they ran, the sky began to darken and a thick cloud drifted slowly overhead.

Livia turned to Tranio. "Why are the seagulls flying towards the woods? They're going the wrong way."

A small bird hanging in a cage chirped frantically, trapped behind its bars, as the air began to fill with ash.

Livia coughed. "Tranio ... perhaps we should go back." Tranio grabbed her hand. "We can't go back. The dust is too thick. Quick – the harbour! Run! Just run!"

Boats were bobbing on the choppy water as men began to untie the moorings and ropes. No one noticed two small children climb up the narrow plank of a small Greek cargo ship and hide beneath a pile of coloured rugs. Dusty and tired in their hiding-place, they soon fell asleep.