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The Disaster

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The date is 24th of August, AD 79 in Pompeii. Quintus is the son of Lucius Caecilius Lucundus (referred to as Caecilius), a Roman Banker.

Quintus then continued past the overgrown bush, into the pale, porcelain coloured kitchen before sitting down on a comfortable bed and eating. Once he had finished the multitude of sweet buns, dates and honey, he licked his fingers to remove the extra honey left on them and turned to his wife. "Darling," he said, "Today I am meeting with Alexander the merchant about our future dealings in his Egyptian gold. I like it very much and am keen for it to be stocked in our shop." He took a small sip of wine before continuing. As he put the goblet down, he noticed the ripples lasting far longer than they normally would, but he thought nothing of it and assumed he had been a bit heavy handed whilst putting it back down. "I shall sell it to the other fine citizens of Rome and shall make a nice profit. Make sure lunch is ready upon my retur-." Suddenly the earth began to shake. At first only a low rumbling could be heard, but then all the goblets on the table fell over and the guard dog Cerberus began to bark loudly near the front entrance. Quintus ran to the courtyard to see what was going on. The earth was trembling. He could still walk easily but some of the expensive amphoras and sculptures began to fall over. The one of Apollo came down first, squashing Cerberus but he scampered out of the way just in time. Then the lararium, the shrine of the household gods started quaking and distancing itself from the wall before it too fell face first onto the stone floor.

Quintus's pregnant wife waddled out of the Kitchen and leaned on the wall for support while making her way to the front door. "Everyone is staying inside Quintus. Some may not remember what happened years ago. We must leave. We cannot risk the baby."

"Yes, Cecilia we will leave. Tell the slaves to pack food, wine and clothes. We must have enough." Quintus then rushed to his study, he had to save all his contracts, deals, and signatures. He had to have his life ready to come back to when the earthquakes stopped. His family depended on him. He opened, the metal safe box in the corner of the shady room. He dug through and after a few minutes found his wax tablet informing him of all his dealings with the merchants. He packed those and came across an older looking one, not in his handwriting. The dust was thick on it and as he blew it off, he recognised it. It was the tablet that detailed his father's dealings with Barbillus, the previous merchant. These were from 17 years ago, before the earthquakes hit for the first time, before his father went into the temple and tried to pray for his family's safety, before the roof came crumbling down and before his father was crush- No. Back to the here and the now. He couldn't let that happen to Cecilia and their child. They had to get out of the city.

The cart was loaded up outside. The few sacks of clothes, food and the amphora of wine wrapped in goat skin, so it didn't get broken. His wife was waiting for him. Octavius sat at the reins to the horses. He stepped on and they were off. Winding their way through the packed clay and concrete houses, the sun beating down on them. Suddenly, a loud boom was heard. Quintus looked back and he saw the mountain - the one with his vineyards on - had blasted a small cloud of ash dust and smoke into the air. It was only small, but the wind would bring it right over Pompeii. The gods were angry, angry, but Quintus didn't know what was

going on. He had given them offerings and prayed to them, but nothing was working. Clemens steered them towards the harbour and his wife shouted, "There's Alexander. He always gives you best deals, we must help him to escape as well. We must warn him about these earthquakes."

"I have something else in mind," replied Quintus, "Octavius bring us to the water's edge."

"But master, we do not own a boat, which will waste time. We must leave."

"Do not question me Octavius, we will escape."

They rode down the cobbled paths, through the wooden harbour gates and arrived on the sandy beach. When Quintus stepped onto the sand, he noticed it was darker than usual, the ash was falling covering everything. It would choke them if they didn't depart soon. He walked towards his ever-travelling friend, Alexander. He was a tall, dark man with long black hair and a gruff face. He wore a leather tunic and sandals and was sitting on the side of his boat about 2 metres from the beach, snacking on some bread as if it were a nice sunny day. By now, the ash was forming a huge cloud that was being blown towards Pompeii by the wind. Octavius was helping Cecilia down from the cart as Quintus approached Alexander.

"Alexander,"

"Quintus! It's so good to see you! I have many new things that I reserved just for you--"

"Not now Alexander. We need to leave."

"What? Nonsense, it's just a few earth tremors. Someone forgot to leave Apollo an offering!" Alexander laughed and nearly fell off the side of his boat. His slaves sat by their huge oars, all facing Alexander at the front. The boat was entirely wooden apart from a metal Corvus that stood menacingly large and sharp at the opposite end of the boat. It was clear that Alexander had stolen this boat (or won it gambling) as the boat was from the navy.

"You don't understand. These earthquakes are not like last time. They are more violent and unpredictable. I'm worried that something bad will happen - worse than last time."

"That was only a temple that fell last time. Rela--"

"It wasn't just a temple," shouted Quintus, "my father went there to pray, for me and my mother. We waited for him to return, he didn't. The next day we went to the temple, to ask the gods if he was safe." He paused. "And there he lay. Under one of the stone pillars. He was dead, I can't let that happen to Cecilia... or our child."

Alexander was silent. He looked at Quintus, then at Cecilia as she cautiously made her way to the two of them guided by Octavius. "Very well," he replied, "gather your belongings. The horses cannot come with us. We will go to Surrentuem. Hurry Octavius." Soon all their possessions were loaded on board and the four of them, rowed to safety by Alexander's muscular army of 20 slaves, were heading across the bay of Naples, to Surrentuem. Alexander said he knew someone who owned an inn and had a place for them to stay the night. Quintus was starting to feel a little sea-sick, so he faced the side of the boat and proceeded to regurgitate this morning's breakfast.

"Where I come from," said Alexander, "it's called feeding the fish!"

Quintus was exhausted after the stressful day, so was Cecilia, Octavius was still happily talking to Alexander about the sleeping arrangements. Cecilia was dozing next to the side of the boat as what was left of the sunshine beamed down on her, turning her hair from a light brown to a shining gold. Suddenly another boom filled their ears and rocks were blown up into the sky. Quintus looked back to see a snake of smoke,

hiding its lava venom, descending the mountain to the nearby town of Herculaneum. It was half-way there, then three-quarters of the way there and then suddenly the whole town was eaten by the serpent born of fire. All Quintus could do was watch as the town was completely engulfed in flames and then by smoke and ash. No one could survive that; he thought.

Then, Cecilia turned and shouted out in pain. "What?" Quintus replied as Cecilia held her stomach in pain, Octavius came scrambling over bags of clothes and rower's legs.

"I think, I think the baby's coming!"

"What!" Quintus shouted in surprise. He had gone a little pale, either from his previous sickness or from the shocking news. He knew that the baby would come soon, but not now. Cecilia lay back holding her stomach in pain, breathing heavily and holding Octavius's hand. All the rower's turned and looked at the scene. Alexander remained at the stern of the boat. "Keep rowing! We must escape!" He was right, the ash was catching up with them, Quintus had seen a few flecks of it on the sea's surface and on his shoulder.

"It's ok honey, breathe."

"I am!" Cecilia yelled. Quintus could not watch. He had turned to watch the fiery hell being unleashed on the coast. Pompeii was barely visible but as he looked to his left Surrentuem was growing ever closer, rhythmically. Closer, stop, closer, stop, closer, stop-his thoughts were interrupted.

Cecilia's heavy breathing had stopped and had been replaced by a crying sound. Quintus leaned over to his right and saw his wife, crying happy tears holding a bundle of blue cloth. As he leant over, Quintus saw through glassy eyes a pair returning his gaze as they were being rowed to the safe beaches of Surrentuem.