

# Ashes over Pompeii: The Potter's Son

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## Introduction

This is a story of hands: hands plunged in river clay, hands nicked by kiln-bricks, hands that pass loaves at dawn and wagers at dusk, hands raised to household gods, and—on a single terrible day—hands lifted against the sky. Through those hands we meet a city that hums with the small noises of life: the clack of a potter's wheel, the slosh of dye in a fuller's vats, the trill of a street seller, the sudden hush before a gladiator's charge. Our guide is a craftsman coming of age, a potter's son who learns

to center the clay even as the ground beneath him is never as firm as he believes.

Pompeii in these pages is both intimate neighborhood and sprawling organism. It is a warren of workshops opening straight onto the street, a lattice of patronage and obligation that threads from grand townhouses to the humblest counter, and a choreography of daily rituals—sprinkling wine at the threshold shrine, scrawling a boast in charcoal on a wall, washing dust from the day at the baths. This is a city that eats and prays and bargains in public. You will walk with the boy along the Street of Abundance, slip past counters warm with stew, and duck into rooms where red walls are still damp from the brush.

The novel is fiction, but its textures are laid over a scaffold of what the earth has kept. Archaeology gifts us misfired pots tossed outside kilns, factory stamps pressed into amphorae, footprints of door hinges worn into stone thresholds, and the ghostly stains of wooden shelves long since vanished. It preserves loaves scored for breaking, graffiti that complain and flirt, and conduits and fountains that sipped water from distant hills. From these fragments we stitch together not simply the facts of ancient manufacture or trade, but the tempo of a neighborhood, the cadence of work and rest, the way a craftsman's pride might sit beside his debts.

I have taken liberties where the record is silent, as any storyteller must, yet those liberties are anchored in what scholars and excavators have learned since the city reemerged. The workshops you will peer into are assembled from real finds; the techniques of wedging clay, stacking a kiln, and marking a maker's name are drawn from tools and traces left behind. The client-patron calls at dawn, the modest banquets of the Augustales, the fullers' pungent trade, and the nightly buzz of the thermopolium are not invented from whole cloth but colored in from remnants and reports.

At the center of this tale is the craft itself—its patience and its heat. Pottery is an art of transformation, of trusting the kiln to give back what the hands have promised. In a place of tremors and rumor, the boy learns how to keep a vessel true, how to read a patron's mood, how to measure credit and kindness in the same breath. Clay remembers the touch that shaped it; so, too, does a city remember the habits that held it together.

I do not ask you to read with a scholar's caution, nor to accept every scene as documentary truth. Instead, I hope you will step into the workshop's doorway and lean your shoulder to the jamb like a neighbor, letting the ordinary enchantments of an ordinary day take hold. Smell the wet clay. Feel the kiln's heat on your cheek. Listen for the scratch of chalk as someone leaves a joke on the wall that will outlast its author by two millennia.

Inevitably, our path arcs toward the mountain. The boy has lived his whole life

beneath its green slopes, as steady and unremarkable as the sky. When the sign appears—a cloud like a stone pine—life does not halt all at once. Debts still need settling, and bread still wants baking. The city does not know its last morning until well into the day. In these final pages, where ash is not metaphor but matter, the rhythms of work and worship collide with something larger and more sudden than habit or hope can manage.

What remains after the last chapter is not only loss, though loss is here. It is also the strange, tender persistence of making: the way a stamped name on a pot travels further than the hand that pressed it, the way a threshold shrine keeps the outline of prayers in soot, the way an apprentice's mistakes bake into memory alongside his triumphs. Ash can swallow streets, but it can also hold them, keeping for us the press of fingertips in clay, a trace of laughter on a wall, and the shape of a life paused mid-breath. In following the potter's son, may you find not just a catastrophe survived in fragments, but a city alive in the making.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Shaping Beginnings**

The morning light in Pompeii never arrived with a shout; it crept over the rim of Vesuvius like a cautious creditor, first illuminating the tile roofs of the villas on the hill before sliding down into the narrow, dust-choked arteries of the Regio II. For Quintus, the day did not begin with the sun, but with the cold, damp scent of resting clay and the rhythmic thud of his father's heel against the stone kick-wheel. It was a sound that functioned as the heartbeat of the household—steady, unrelenting, and entirely indifferent to whether a sixteen-year-old boy wished to remain on his pallet for another hour.

The workshop of Lucius the Potter sat on a corner near the Nuceria Gate, a space where the private world of the family bled seamlessly into the public life of the street. To a passerby, it was a cavernous maw filled with the ghosts of future vessels: stacks of drying bowls, rows of narrow-necked oil jars, and the heavy, grit-flecked amphorae that would one day carry the sharp tang of garum to the tables of Rome. To Quintus, it was a landscape of chores. Before the first cart rumbled past the threshold, he was expected to have the floor swept of yesterday's dried slurry and the water troughs filled from the public fountain three doors down.

Lucius was a man whose skin seemed to have been fired in his own kiln. He was leather-tough and stained a permanent earthy ochre, his fingernails perpetually rimmed with the dark silt of the Sarno riverbed. He did not look up when Quintus entered the workspace, his hands occupied with "centering" a massive lump of greyish-brown paste. It was a violent sort of intimacy; Lucius leaned his entire weight into the

clay, his forearms bulging as he forced the wobbling mass into a perfect, obedient cylinder.

"The wheel doesn't wait for the sun, and the clay doesn't wait for your dreams, Quintus," Lucius said, his voice a gravelly baritone that mimicked the grinding of the stone pivot. "If we don't get the heavy ware finished before the heat peaks, the walls will slump like a drunkard outside a tavern. Check the drying racks. If the pinch-pots are leather-hard, move them to the inner courtyard. If they're cracking, tell me now so I can curse the air and be done with it."

Quintus moved with the practiced ease of someone who had navigated these shadows since he was tall enough to reach the wedging table. He touched the rims of the small, everyday drinking cups—the *pocula*—which were the bread and butter of their trade. They were humble things, meant for the rough hands of laborers and the greasy counters of the local thermopolia. A potter's life in Pompeii was not often spent crafting the fine, red-slipped Arretine ware that the wealthy flaunted; it was spent providing the city with the disposable tools of survival. If a cup broke during a tavern brawl or slipped from a slave's soapy hand, it was Lucius's workshop that provided the cheap replacement.

As the city outside began to wake, the silence of the workshop was punctured by the sounds of the neighborhood. Next door, the baker's donkeys began their circular trudge, the low rumble of the millstones vibrating through the shared wall. From the street, the sharp cries of a vegetable seller began to echo, hawking leeks and cabbage still wet with dew. The smell of the city was a thick, shifting soup: the sweetness of blooming jasmine from a hidden courtyard garden, the charcoal smoke of braziers being lit, and the omnipresent, salty sting of the sea breeze blowing in from the harbor.

Quintus hauled the heavy jars of water, his muscles burning. He watched his father work, fascinated despite his exhaustion. There was a moment on the wheel that always felt like magic, no matter how many times he witnessed it. Lucius would press his thumbs into the center of the spinning mass, and suddenly, a hollow would appear where there was once solid earth. With a slow, upwards pull, the walls of a vessel would rise like a living thing, stretching toward the rafters. It required a balance of immense strength and a touch as light as a feather's edge. If the pressure was uneven by a hair's breadth, the whole structure would shudder and collapse into a wet, ruined heap.

"You're watching again," Lucius remarked, though his eyes remained fixed on the spinning rim. "Watching is for those who buy the pots. Doing is for those who make them. Come here. The wedging table is full of air bubbles. If you leave a single pocket of breath in that clay, it will explode in the kiln like a Thracian's temper. Do you want to be the one to explain to the patron why his commission is in shards because you

were too lazy to use your palms?"

Quintus took his place at the heavy stone table. Wedging was the most grueling part of the morning—repeatedly slamming the clay down, folding it, and driving the air out with the heels of his hands. It was a task that demanded a rhythmic, driving force. He worked the clay until his shoulders throbbed, imagining he was kneading bread for a giant. He looked at his own hands, still relatively smooth compared to his father's, though the callouses were beginning to form at the base of his fingers. He was in the transition between a boy who played in the dirt and a man who mastered it.

By mid-morning, the workshop's open front had become a stage. Neighbors paused to exchange news while Lucius worked. Old Marcus, a retired soldier with a limp that timed itself to the city's heartbeat, leaned against the doorpost. He spoke of the latest gossip from the Forum—rumors of a new magistrate's edict regarding the water pipes, and the latest betting odds for the upcoming games in the amphitheater. Quintus listened, soaking in the geography of the city through talk. He learned who was in debt, whose daughter was marrying a cloth-dyer from the next block, and which of the local bakeries was stretching their flour with chalk.

"The mountain looks moody today," Marcus noted, nodding toward the great green slope of Vesuvius that loomed over the northern horizon. "Too many clouds hugging the peak. My knee always aches when the air gets heavy like this. It's the gods breathing down our necks."

Lucius didn't look up. "The mountain has been there since the first stone of this city was laid, Marcus. It's the ground we should worry about. These little tremors we've had lately... they make the shelving rattle. I lost three good bowls to a shake last market day. If the earth wants to dance, I wish it would do it while I'm at the baths, not while I'm stacking a kiln."

Quintus glanced toward the mountain. To him, Vesuvius was a constant, a lush backdrop of vineyards and villas where the air was cooler and the grapes grew fat on the rich soil. It was hard to imagine it as anything other than a silent guardian. He turned back to his clay, the cool dampness of the earth pressing against his skin. He was beginning to understand that to be a potter was to be a servant of the elements. You took the earth, added water, used the motion of the wind to dry the form, and finally, surrendered it to the fire.

As the sun climbed higher, the heat in the workshop grew oppressive. The dust from the street drifted in, coating the wet pots in a fine grey veil that Quintus had to carefully brush away. Patronage in Pompeii was a delicate dance; already, a steward from one of the larger houses on the Via dell'Abbondanza had stopped by to check on an order of large storage jars for wine. Lucius had shifted his tone instantly, moving from the gruff commander of the workshop to the humble, skilled artisan, bowing his

head just enough to show respect without losing his dignity.

"The clay is fine-grained and well-tempered, sir," Lucius had promised, patting a drying amphora. "It will hold the vintage as securely as a vault. Your master will not find a better seal in all the Campania."

When the steward left, Lucius spat into the dust. "He knows nothing of clay. He only knows the price of the wine that goes inside. But that is the secret, Quintus. We provide the bones of the city. The wine, the oil, the grain—none of it stays put without us. A merchant might have all the gold in the world, but if he has no jar to hold his wealth, he has nothing but a puddle on the floor."

Quintus nodded, taking a small piece of excess clay and rolling it between his palms. While his father returned to the wheel, Quintus sat on a low stool and began to shape a small, crude figure—a votive offering in the shape of a dog, like the one that barked at the heels of the delivery carts. It wasn't a commissioned piece; it was a study in form. He pinched the ears and smoothed the tail, feeling the material yield to his will.

This was the beginning of his craft, not just the labor of hauling water or wedging air, but the moment where the mind dictated a shape and the hands found a way to manifest it. He was a potter's son, born into a world of grit and fire, learning to find his center while the bustling, noisy, beautiful city of Pompeii whirled around him like a wheel that never stopped turning. The clay in his hands was cold, but beneath it, he could feel the faint, lingering warmth of the sun-drenched earth from which it had been pulled. In this small workshop, under the shadow of the mountain, his life was taking its first, solid shape.

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