Tito and his dog Bimbo lived (if you could call it living) under the wall where it joined the inner gate. They really didn’t live there; they just slept there. They lived anywhere. Pompeii was one of the gayest of the old Latin towns, but although Tito was never an unhappy boy, he was not exactly a merry one. The streets were always lively with shining chariots and bright red trappings; the open-air theaters rocked with laughing crowds; sham battles and athletic sports were free for the asking in the great stadium. Once a year the Caesar visited the pleasure city, and the fireworks lasted for days; the sacrifices in the forum were better than a show. But Tito saw none of these things. He was blind—had been blind from birth. He was known to everyone in the poorer quarters. But no one could say how old he was, no one remembered his parents, no one could tell where he came from. Bimbo was another mystery. As long as people could remember seeing Tito—about twelve or thirteen years—they had seen Bimbo. Bimbo had never left his side. He was not only dog but nurse, pillow, playmate, mother, and father to Tito.

This passage introduces the story’s setting and its main characters, Tito and Bimbo.

• Who are Tito and Bimbo? How would you describe their relationship?
• Where do Tito and Bimbo live?
• What have you learned about life in ancient Pompeii?
“I tell you,” rumbled a voice which Tito recognized as bath master Rufus’s, “there won’t be another earthquake in my lifetime or yours. There may be a tremble or two, but earthquakes, like lightnings, never strike twice in the same place.”

“Do they not?” asked a thin voice Tito had never heard. It had a high, sharp ring to it, and Tito knew it as the accent of a stranger. “How about the two towns of Sicily that have been ruined three times within fifteen years by the eruptions of Mount Etna? And were they not warned? And does that column of smoke above Vesuvius mean nothing?”

“That?” Tito could hear the grunt with which one question answered another. “That’s always there. We use it for our weather guide. When the smoke stands up straight, we know we’ll have fair weather; when it flattens out, it’s sure to be foggy; when it drifts to the east—”

“Yes, yes,” cut in the edged voice. “I’ve heard about your mountain barometer. But the column of smoke seems hundreds of feet higher than usual, and it’s thickening and spreading like a shadowy tree. They say in Naples—”

“Oh, Naples!” Tito knew this voice by the little squeak that went with it. It was Attilio, the cameo cutter. “They talk while we suffer. Little help we got from them last time. Naples commits the crimes, and Pompeii pays the price. It’s become a proverb with us. Let them mind their own business.”

“Yes,” grumbled Rufus, “and others, too.”

“Very well, my confident friends,” responded the thin voice, which now sounded curiously flat. “We also have a proverb—and it is this: Those who will not listen to men must be taught by the gods. I say no more. But I leave a last warning. Remember the holy ones. Look to your temples. And when the smoke tree above Vesuvius grows to the shape of an umbrella pine, look to your lives.”
This passage builds tension with a stranger’s ominous warning about Mount Vesuvius.

• Why does Rufus believe there will not be another earthquake in Pompeii??
• What does the stranger say about “the two towns of Sicily” (line 124)?
• How has the column of smoke above Mount Vesuvius changed recently?
• What is the stranger’s warning?
The Dog of Pompeii
Louis Untermeyer

Targeted Passage #3 – lines 184-206

He woke early. Or, rather, he was pulled awake. Bimbo was doing the pulling. The dog had dragged Tito to his feet and was urging the boy along. Somewhere. Where, Tito did not know. His feet stumbled uncertainly; he was still half asleep. For a while he noticed nothing except the fact that it was hard to breathe. The air was hot. And heavy. So heavy that he could taste it. The air, it seemed, had turned to powder, a warm powder that stung his nostrils and burned his sightless eyes.

Then he began to hear sounds. Peculiar sounds. Like animals under the earth. Hissings and groanings and muffled cries that a dying creature might make dislodging the stones of his underground cave. There was no doubt of it now. The noises came from underneath. He not only heard them—he could feel them. The earth twitched; the twitching changed to an uneven shrugging of the soil. Then, as Bimbo half pulled, half coaxed him across, the ground jerked away from his feet and he was thrown against a stone fountain.

The water—hot water—splashing in his face revived him. He got to his feet, Bimbo steadying him, helping him on again. The noises grew louder; they came closer. The cries were even more animal-like than before, but now they came from human throats. A few people, quicker of foot and more hurried by fear, began to rush by. A family or two—then a section—then, it seemed, an army broken out of bounds. Tito, bewildered though he was, could recognize Rufus as he bellowed past him, like a water buffalo gone mad. Time was lost in a nightmare.

This passage describes the chaos that engulfs Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupts.

- What does Tito feel and hear in this part of the story?
- What is causing the earth to make strange noises and to move under Tito’s feet?
- How do other people react to these events?
- Why is Bimbo pulling on Tito?
The Dog of Pompeii
Louis Untermeyer

Targeted Passage #4 – lines 238-261

New dangers threatened. All Pompeii seemed to be thronging toward the marine gate; and, squeezing among the crowds, there was the chance of being trampled to death. But the chance had to be taken. It was growing harder and harder to breathe. What air there was choked him. It was all dust now—dust and pebbles, pebbles as large as beans. They fell on his head, his hands—pumice stones from the black heart of Vesuvius. The mountain was turning itself inside out. Tito remembered a phrase that the stranger had said in the forum two days ago: “Those who will not listen to men must be taught by the gods.” The people of Pompeii had refused to heed the warnings; they were being taught now—if it was not too late.

Suddenly it seemed too late for Tito. The red hot ashes blistered his skin; the stinging vapors tore his throat. He could not go on. He staggered toward a small tree at the side of the road and fell. In a moment Bimbo was beside him. He coaxed. But there was no answer. He licked Tito’s hands, his feet, his face. The boy did not stir. Then Bimbo did the last thing he could—the last thing he wanted to do. He bit his comrade, bit him deep in the arm. With a cry of pain, Tito jumped to his feet, Bimbo after him. Tito was in despair, but Bimbo was determined. He drove the boy on, snapping at his heels, worrying his way through the crowd; barking, baring his teeth, heedless of kicks or falling stones. Sick with hunger, half dead with fear and sulphur fumes, Tito pounded on, pursued by Bimbo. How long he never knew. At last he staggered through the marine gate and felt soft sand under him. Then Tito fainted. . . .

This passage is the climax of the story: Bimbo must bite Tito as a last resort to try to save him.

- Where are the people of Pompeii going?
- Why is it growing harder to breathe?
- Why does Tito feel that it is “too late” for him?
- How does Bimbo keep Tito moving?
Eighteen hundred years passed. Scientists were restoring the ancient city; excavators were working their way through the stones and trash that had buried the entire town. Much had already been brought to light—statues, bronze instruments, bright mosaics, household articles; even delicate paintings had been preserved by the fall of ashes that had taken over two thousand lives. Columns were dug up, and the forum was beginning to emerge.

It was at a place where the ruins lay deepest that the director paused. “Come here,” he called to his assistant. “I think we’ve discovered the remains of a building in good shape. Here are four huge millstones that were most likely turned by slaves or mules—and here is a whole wall standing with shelves inside it. Why! It must have been a bakery. And here’s a curious thing. What do you think I found under this heap where the ashes were thickest? The skeleton of a dog!”

“Amazing!” gasped his assistant. “You’d think a dog would have had sense enough to run away at the time. And what is that flat thing he’s holding between his teeth? It can’t be a stone.”

“No. It must have come from this bakery. You know it looks to me like some sort of cake hardened with the years. And, bless me, if those little black pebbles aren’t raisins. A raisin cake almost two thousand years old! I wonder what made him want it at such a moment.”

“I wonder,” murmured the assistant.

This passage concludes the story: readers learn what actually happened to Bimbo.

- When does this scene take place?
- What are the scientists doing?
- What is the dog holding in his mouth?
- If this dog is Bimbo, what did he risk for Tito? What theme does this suggest about friendship, love, and risk?