

# **The Scattered Ashes**

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## *79 AD, Pompeii, Italy*

The day the world ended began as if it were just another ordinary day. The merchant felt the familiar guilt grow with each clink of a coin into his hand. Thirteen real gold coins. Real! All for a worthless lump of metal he had flippantly called a gold necklace. He could almost feel the burning, cold gaze of his customer branding curses on his forehead: thief, liar, fraud! The words squeezed at his throat. As the customer dropped the last coin into his palm and snatched the necklace away, the merchant choked on the acid rising into his mouth, before turning it into a disguised cough, causing the thirteen coins to tumble to the dusty earth. Scrabbling like a rat, he fell to his knees and desperately clawed the gold back into his arms, cradling it and carefully depositing it all in his pocket. He thanked his customer with a forced smile and vanished into the building that lurked behind his market stall. Once he was inside, he reached for the bucket of murky water by the entranceway and rinsed his hands, face and hair, scrubbing with his tunic in an attempt to make himself clean again. How he hated lying, deceiving people! Each forgery he sold hung mockingly over him until he felt so weighed down, he might as well be made of stone. That was about to change, though. Delving into his pocket and gripping a coin, the merchant brought it up to his face and smelt it, smelt the pure metallic beauty of it. This was his opportunity to leave Pompeii and the meagre life he had made for himself. Thirteen gold coins could easily buy him passage on a boat, far away. No more guilt. No more blame. All he had to do was wait for sunset, when the boats left the harbour, and then he would be free.

The day the sky fell began with the promise of a good day. She rocked her baby brother in her arms, glancing down into those innocent, vulnerable eyes. Those crying eyes. The citizens of Pompeii passed by, avoiding the imploring stares of the homeless girl, as if not looking would make her nonexistent. Or perhaps they just didn't care. Sighing, the girl swaddled her brother with a ragged cloth, clutching him to her chest like she was the one he needed. But he needed a mother, a father, and a home. She had none of those things, unless the entrance to an abandoned brothel counted as a home. Still the hacking sobs sliced through the air and caused the blood to throb in her head; closing her eyes, she wished it all away. Then, she felt the burden of her brother disappear from her lap, lifted up into the heavens, and felt near silence press down on her ears,

only broken by an odd whimper and the scuffle of people as they walked past. Eyes snapping open, she squinted up at the towering figure of a man, haloed by the sun and his features in shadow. All she could see was the still bundle of her brother in the man's sure arms. He spoke to her, told her of large houses that echoed with footsteps; fires flickering in fireplaces; lavish banquets eaten in the moonlight; clothing laced with pearls and trimmed with gold; water that didn't require an arduous trek to the public fountain to sip; peace for her and a home for her brother, if she agreed to one small thing: to work for the man and serve him for as long as he wanted her to. Seeing her brother sleeping and hearing this story of a home where he would be happy, where he wouldn't depend on her, where he would not have to need anything ever again... The girl stood up slowly and followed the man as he started to stride away with the baby, scared that one slight tremble in the air around her would send this perfect future crashing back into her dreams.

The day fire melted the rain inevitably began like a bad day would. The magistrate's wife had predicted this yesterday; it was always the same pattern. A couple of good days where the world seemed close by and her mind was quiet, but then several days' worth of bad followed, when it was just her, the walls and the space in between, when she felt lost and begged the world to find her. Her mind was loud on those days, a tumult of voices battering her skull like she battered the door when they yelled at her. Now, on this very, very bad day, she was curled in the corner, knees shielding her face, trying to fight the darkness in her head. But no matter what she screamed at them, and despite her efforts to block out their savage snarls, the solidifying shadows would not stop, would not stop, would not stop. There's something wrong with you, they hissed, or the magistrate wouldn't lock you up with just the servants and the walls to talk to! You'll never be enough, never enough for the world outside to face you! There's something wrong with you! The magistrate's wife wanted to tear the taunts out and shred them. What was wrong with her? Why was there something wrong with her? And then, someone whispered to her, so quickly and urgently she could only manage to clutch the vague idea of what they told her and hold it to her heart. The magistrate. Her husband. He imprisoned her in this hell and kept the key, he was the one who forced up the walls between her and the world. He was her

salvation. With a glint in her hazy eyes, the woman grasped the handle of the knife on the top shelf of the bookcase, kept there for emergencies, and waited patiently for her husband to come home.

The day death was the judge began. That was the most important thing for the man; that he had this final day to live. He knew he was dying as he lay rigid on the low table that served as his deathbed. His breath rattled and splintered beneath the musty animal-skin blanket, which was swathed around him to keep the cold from penetrating his bones. Too late. The man's neighbours shuffled outside his room, muttering in hushed voices that sounded like a swarm of mosquitoes; he knew they were anxious to intrude in his private business. However, he had only allowed one visitor today who was now sat silently beside him, eyes solemn, snout bowed and tail still. This dog knew the man better than he knew himself, and had been his solace when his sister, his only living relative, had passed away. The least the man could do was speak with him one last time. Too exhausted to talk, he used the light in his dying eyes to express his gratitude and to wish the dog the best as could possibly be for such a kind soul in such a harsh world. The dog blinked back that he would miss the man, dipping his head and scoring his claws across the floor to show how sorry he was, for the man's sake, that he must die. The man exhaled abruptly through his worn nose in a half-laugh. Yes, he would miss some of the world: the golden glow cast on the Pompeiian streets as the sun rose; the delightfully dark fingers reaching out to claim the night at sunset; the songs the birds trilled as he harvested crops; the way light slunk through a summer-rich leaf to surprise him on the other side. And the dog who had been there for the man more than any human ever had. But a guarantee of life is also a guarantee of death; he knew he had to die. The dog placed a consoling paw on the blue-ribboned hand that lay on the stuttering chest, and the firelight eyes fluttered shut.

The day nature proved it could destroy the human rash that plagues it ended with ashes. While the citizens of Pompeii resumed their normal lives, the volcano that watched them was plotting their desolation. It was time. With a violent outburst, Mount Vesuvius exploded, spewing snow-coloured, smouldering rocks into the shattered blue of the sky, the boulders bursting clouds and magma seeping into the earth below. The city

suffocating in ash, stone rained down, while the volcano vomited hot, lethal gases peppered with specks of pulverized cinder, and sent its desecration surging into the streets beneath it. People shrieking, moaning, strangling, howling, swamped the air as it burned, those who still believed praying to the gods to stop this or to make it quick. The merchant, packing his few possessions for his journey, realising he was going somewhere else as he retched. The girl, shackled and chained, unable to escape the falling rocks. The magistrate's wife, not even given time to think as the heat melded her to the walls she never escaped. And finally, the man and the dog, by each other's sides while the ashes gushed into their bodies. Ash, ash, ash, layer after layer, smearing cobblestone roads and sanded buildings, covering corpses with its grey glory. And it was done. Humanity destroyed. All that was left were frozen statues, dead to the scattered ashes dancing over their bones.