

Amidst the Ash

Aeliana waited in the shadow of a magnificent lemon tree. The air here was icy compared to the scorching heat of the gardens and the air smelt crisper but not without a lingering trace of sulphur. She flexed her aching biceps and rolled her shoulders; a rush of relief flooded her as a disk in her brittle spine clicked into place. A pompous man who worked for her Master appeared in the elaborate north entrance to the orchard and scanned the trees with an uneasy expression lining his grotesque face. Aeliana trembled under the cover of the tree, obscured by its branches offering her a protective embrace. She made a silent prayer to Apollo that the dazzling sun disguise her battered feet peeping out from underneath the ovular leaves. Her heart pounded harder than a Tympanum during *thiasus*. Then, as if Apollo had answered her prayer, the man finished his stalking lap of the orchard and left.

The slave sat on the cobbled stone patio like an exquisite marble statue, framed like an enchanting oil-painting. Yet no one noticed the thin tail of smoke rise from the cracks in the magma like the tail of a demon slipping into the gates of the Underworld.

A yell. A scream. A galloping of hooves. Aeliana bolted to her feet, suddenly alert. A frantic messenger stumbled into the orchard. Upon instinct and due to much rehearsal, Aeliana immediately busied herself with polishing the pristine lemons hanging from the tree behind her. The messenger wheezed, desperately trying to snatch a breath. He must have been almost-blind as he dropped to his knees in front of her, weeping and muttering "*meu domina*". "There's a- a message from Pompeii" he gasped, "the gods are punishing us. But this time it is different. Worse. This time it's the mountain".

The serene city of Herculaneum exploded in a whirlwind of panic. Shouts, cries, shrieks, followed by the thunder of myriad feet hurtling into the streets; as men, woman and children alike cascaded down the sloping hillside and onto the beach below. A piercing scream blared from her Master's villa and spurred Aeliana into action. *If I get to the beach I can board a boat away from here*. The possibility of freedom echoed behind that thought but the scream still reverberated through Aeliana's skull and a feeling of dread clawed at her heart as to who it might have echoed from, so she decided: *Not without my Mother*. She took off through the orchard as the grassy earth began to tremble beneath her feet, soaring past the elaborate gates and into the beautiful red-brick villa. Suddenly forgetting the strict rules that came with her position as a slave, Aeliana called out into the hectic atrium. "Mother? Mother!", fighting her way through the churning flock of slaves. Aeliana searched every room, nook, cranny and cupboard that could possibly be hiding the gentle woman that had loved and cared for her for fourteen years. A beautiful woman with kind blue eyes, hoary hair and a skeletal frame staggered into view and stabilized herself on a Grecian pithos. Aeliana embraced her emaciated body. Now filled with relief and a newfound determination, Aeliana slung her mother's arm over her shoulders and set off down the hillside.

They sprinted, they stumbled, they dodged bodies and carts and flying objects. But they moved together with a steady rhythm propelling them towards the beaches where they could snare a boat and leave Herculaneum until the storm, or whatever it was, had passed. The cobblestones faded to sand and yet they did not linger for even a second. Blinking sand from her eyes and shrugging off the gnarled hands of desperate beggars, Aeliana stumbled to a halt as her raw feet sunk into the sodden shore. A large rowing boat overloaded with hunched bodies was being skilfully pushed into the deep sea by a young man with sand plastered up his legs. "Sir! Excuse me sir! Is there any room on your boat?", she begged, horrified by how

helpless she sounded. He replied in a strong Cumaen accent, "I'm so sorry, but if I let one more soul on this *navis*, she won't make the trip", he continued to push the boat out. She made one last desperate attempt; "but my mother! She doesn't weigh much!", he looked unconvinced, "and she can treat the wounds of any injured". He sighed, "I suppose we can make an exception". Before he could change his mind, she launched into one last fervent hug.

For herself, she searched and searched, she tried calling in favours from once-friends but in every direction boats were filling and leaving, filling and leaving. The town was running out of boats and she was running out of time.

People around them were crying out, "the boats are gone! We're all doomed". An elderly woman collapsed from exhaustion. A young woman cradled her swollen belly, tears silently streaming down her face. Aeliana held onto the last shred of energy she could summon, plucked up a single feather of courage and called out to everyone and anyone who would listen: "we can still survive this! Have faith in the gods!". Hundreds of faces turned in her direction: displaying gratitude, others scolding, other pitiful. But she didn't want their pity so she stoically continued: "there are four boat houses just up the coast, we can shelter from the storm there!" The thought had come spontaneously but as soon as she announced, self-doubt crept in...the boat houses were not very spacious so how would everyone fit inside? Not to mention, she had no idea whether they were locked, or full of stinking fish. Yet, people had started nodding, legs started moving.

She took off for what seemed like the thousandth time that day, running in the centre of the crowd. Those at the front piled into the first boat house and Aeliana breathed a sigh of relief that her random spark of hope was not fictitious. The first heavy oak door groaned shut and soon thereafter the second followed. Aeliana found herself being ushered into the third boat house. A few faces turned to her with a look that asked for confirmation that everything was going to be okay, but the most she could muster was a nod and a forced smile - anything else and she knew she would burst into tears. The fourth and final door slammed with a heavy bump and silence fell like a lead blanket over them.

Aeliana felt the discomfort of sitting on the heated ground, waiting. Sweat poured down her back, and she felt other women pressed against her shaking, waiting. Waiting for freedom or waiting for death, she didn't know. People around them listened to the demolition of their homes, waiting. Some peered through cracks in the rotting wood, others rocked back and forth with their eyes tightly shut, all waiting. But the mountain didn't wait. The total annihilation of Pompeii wasn't enough for Vesuvius, for Vulcan. No, it greedily desired the paradise of Herculaneum. So the mountain didn't wait, it devoured.

Scorching gas, scalding ash, fragments of piping hot rock sharp as knives. The city gave way under the pyroclastic surge that stampeded down from the mountain with the promise of sudden death in its blistering jaws. No oracle had predicted its arrival, the numbness it would bring. Aeliana didn't feel anything, and then Pain. Pain on her flesh, pain in her bones, pain in her blood, pain in her brain. And yet, it happened so fast she didn't even have time to scream.

Through the anguish, Aeliana remembered her mother's words when she'd asked about dying: "Pluto will guide you, my dear, he will bring you to his kingdom under the earth where you will exist for eternity".

Aeliana's experience was quite different. It felt like a breath of fresh air or a cold cup of *posca* after a day working in the sun. It seemed, in that moment, that Aeliana's life was like a candle. The flame would melt the wax over time and at the end of her turn on earth, the wick would burn out. It felt as though the flame had been snuffed, quick and simple, yet there was still much wax to be melted. Where was the skeletal entity in a black toga to take her hand and boat to ferry her across the obsidian river? For her, there was only eternal darkness. Aeliana reached into the abyss for her mother, she hoped she would not be able to find her, that her mother's soul had not yet found its way to this place. Something grazed her shoulder, it wasn't a body or a breath, but a presence, and Aeliana knew she was here. Their souls embraced and Aeliana was free.

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