

# *Ash*

By Lauren Daumler

Mama always said I was special. She loves to tell the story of my birth. How, just as I came into the world, the ground trembled violently. When I once voiced my concern, Mama only assured me it was because the gods were celebrating that day.

But it was unnerving when the earth started shaking yesterday, the twenty-third day in the month of Caesar Augustus, my seventeenth birthday. The tremor woke me, and such disturbances continued through the course of the day. The people in town made a point of ignoring it. I asked Professor Venerius what he thought, but he only shook his head and told me there was nothing to fear. The city of Pompeii had been undisturbed and peaceful for a century; what reason had the gods to be angry?

I was not convinced, and went to bed early with an ill stomach, the festivities for my birthday cut short. My mind did not rest that night...

I am lying in my bed now. The fiery fingers of orange and pink that are reaching through the indigo sky remind me of the dream. I shut my eyes, but I can still hear the echoing screams. I lie in bed for hours, battling with my mind. It is only when I convince myself I have won, when the sun is higher in the sky, that I go downstairs.

“Cornelia,” Mama says, looking concerned, “What’s the matter?”

I realize I must be pale, sweaty. “Nothing,” I reply. Just then, the earth trembles.

“The gods are angry,” Mama comments offhandedly.

“No, the earth is angry.” I clap my hand to my mouth. The words slip from me before I know what they are. Fortunately, she takes no notice.

I look out the window and see the bustle of frenzied market-goers passing through. I see the sweat on their necks and realize it must already be well into the day. How long was I lying in bed?

“Mama...” I begin, but I trail off. How can I tell her of the horrible feeling in my gut? How can I make her understand this uncanny sense of doom I am feeling? I want to talk about the nightmare, to warn her to run. But run from what? Nothing is wrong...

“What is it, child?” She asks.

But the word “nothing” never escapes my lips. For at that moment, the sky goes dark. The earth shakes with such a force that I am knocked to the floor. I stumble

outside to see what is going on. When I do, my heart stops. A great column of smoke and roaring, liquid fire, rears into the sky, identical to that in my dream.

Why did I not speak sooner?

I do the only thing I can now; the only thing that my panicked body can manage, the last possible action against this evil that I somehow knew was to come – knew and did nothing.

I scream.

But the sound is lost in a handful of hot ash.