CLOUDED WITH ASH

BY

KYMARA RUNCHEL-FITZSUMMONS
I ran through the streets as fast as I could, my brother, Felix, hot on my tail. I lifted my tunic up to my knees, allowing my legs more room to move. As my brother and I grew older, it became less and less acceptable to chase each other through the streets of Pompeii, but nothing stopped us. The feel of the air rushing past our ears and whipping our clothes about our bodies. The feeling of freedom in being away from our small home.

I glanced behind me and let out a small yelp as I saw Felix reach out in an attempt to catch me. I increased my speed and headed for the Square directly ahead, busy at this time of day with many people bustling around. The perfect place to lose Felix. I rushed into the crowd, muttering quick apologies as I pushed past men and women of all ages. Glancing behind once more, I saw Felix ten metres away, slowed by the large number of people in the Square. He was bigger than me so it was harder for him to push past the shoppers.

I grinned in satisfaction and slipped into a narrow alley, sitting in the shadows, watching in amusement as my brother tried to find me again. From where I sat, I saw Felix scowl in annoyance. This meant I had won. I smiled to myself.

“Aeliana! Where are you?” I heard Felix call out across the Square, ignoring the people eyeing him. “I know you’re watching me. Just come out of hiding!” I stepped out of my hiding spot and walked over to him, giggling. “How’d you know I was watching you?” I asked as I reached him.

“I know you too well, that’s why,” he laughed, “Come on. Let’s start heading home for dinner. Mother will be serving it soon.” He put his arm around my shoulders, leading the way back home.

I went to follow Felix into the house but our horse seemed unsettled so stopped to settle him. We sat with our aging mother and ate our stew whilst telling her what mischief we had got up to today. After we had eaten and helped clear away, Felix and I crawled up onto the flat roof to watch the sun set.

“Explain to me again why we sit here and watch the sun set every night? It’s always going to be the same,” Felix said mindlessly as he stared at the setting sun.

“Because it’s pretty. No matter how many times you watch it, it will always be pretty,” I replied. We sat in silence for a while just sitting and listening to the sounds of the evening; the sounds of restless animals in amongst the constant murmur of the people of Pompeii as they settled for the night.

As the sky began to darken and the stars began to appear, I lay back sighing, looking at the twinkling dots in wonder. Next to me, I noticed Felix doing the same. We watched the blue become purple, and waited for the sky to turn black and the stars to litter the heavens.

The silence was soon broken by what sounded like thunder ripping through the air. Then the earth beneath the house rumbled and the roof shook slightly. I sat up in shock and looked for the source of the immense sound. I caught sight of Mount Vesuvius, a massive column of thick black ash spewing from the crater of the volcano, erupting high into the sky.
Felix and I glanced at each other in panic, jumped up and scrambled down the ladder to find our mother.

“What’s going on?” Mother asked us in confusion. We dragged her outside to show her what was happening to the volcano. Many of our neighbours had gathered in the street outside, gazing in disbelief at their usually quiet mountain.

As we stood there, ash began to fall like rain, drifting slowly towards the rock beneath our feet and landing gently in our hair.

The longer we stood there and watched, the heavier the ash fell. Soon many people were coughing because of it and I found that I was having trouble breathing too.

“Felix! Aeliana! Go inside! Pack a satchel with supplies. Quickly!” Mother commanded us, her eyes never leaving the column of ash that filled the darkening sky. Felix grasped the emergency of the situation and rushed inside to gather the things we needed.

“Mother, what’s going on?” I asked in a worried voice. I never got an answer. Many people had begun to panic, running about and gathering their belongings and treasures. Felix rushed back outside with a satchel slung across his shoulders. Mother embraced us. It felt like she would never let us go. When she did, she looked deep into Felix’s eyes. “Felix, look after your sister. Please keep her and yourself safe!” her voice filled with emotion, tears welling in her eyes. Felix said nothing. When I looked at him, I saw tears ready to spill from his eyes as well. This made me feel like crying too. “Felix and Aeliana, no matter what happens, I will always love you. Promise me you will stay safe.

“But mother what about you? Why can’t you come with us?” I asked quietly.

“Aeliana, I will try but I can’t make any promises. You will move more quickly by yourselves,” she sighed, pulling us into another hug.

“Go,” she whispered to us, “Get on the horse. Keep riding until you are safe. Don’t come back.” She let go and pushed us towards the horse. Felix jumped on, adjusted the bag and hoisted me up to sit behind him. I grab mother’s hand, not wanting to leave her. She squeezed my hand tightly as a tear slid down her cheek. “Go,” she said. “I love you both.” Felix sent the horse into a trot, heading towards the main road. I turned around. There stood my mother, black ash swirling around her, tears running down her cheeks. We turned the corner and I lost sight of her. I cried into Felix’s back and for the first time in my life I saw my big brother cry.

And so we began riding to safety through the clouds of falling ash.