

## Trapped

To the outside world, I had the perfect life.

Everyone of those pathetic villagers said it, with that slack, envious softness people use when they don't think too deeply about what they are saying. Perfect. Blessed. As if repetition could make it real. As if saying it often enough would convince me and spare their pathetic lives.

It was 79 AD, and I lived in the lush foothills of the mountain, where the earth was rich and black and eager to be worked. The land gave freely, almost obscenely so, and the people well they took without ever once considering why.

Or village was beautiful, wildflowers crowded the paths. Choking me with the air with sweetness until it made my head hurt. Goats and cows filled the fields beyond the village, endlessly chewing, endlessly staring, endlessly stupid. I often thought the animals and the villagers were very similar like that.

Above us all, the mountain towered down, gods sat watching and waiting for the perfect opportunity to come down, grab me and bring me to their world where I belonged.

I felt them all watching me even when my back was turned. It always started as a pressure behind my eyes, then my skin began to hum. That's how I knew I was wasted down here. It must be penance for something. Probably jealousy over my good looks a curse I would bear.

The elders called the mountain a protector, a sleeping god. I found that the funniest thing. It was never asleep. I knew that. I had always known that. Some of us are simply more attuned to the land of the gods than others.

My earthly family baked bread. Always had. Generations of them, with bent backs and covered head to toe in flour, they were actually proud of their small, essential place in the world. My father and sister rose before dawn, tended ovens like shrines, and died having never left the shadow of the mountain.

They called this a good life.

I called it boring, a complete and utter waste of time.

But until I could ascend I was stuck here every morning, my hands moving through the motions automatically. Knead. Fold. Shape. My body worked while my mind tried in vain to amuse me and relieve the boredom that

was the Bain of my existence. The smell of yeast and heat seeped into to my skin until it felt like I was being buried alive in it. Customers smiled at me as if I were one of them. They never suspected how much better I was.

I smiled back. Of course I did. I was better than any of them.

The boredom I felt though was not endless. It was infuriating. It rattled inside my skull, demanding release. As I kneaded dough, I imagined kneading the flesh of the fat lady with a grater. It would be easy, the same pressure, the same rhythm. So easy. But my mind quickly moved onto the picture-perfect roofs igniting, the straw going up like the dried grass, people screaming and scattering in useless devotion to their equally useless homes. Sometimes I imagined killing the neighbour's dog simply because its loyalty bugged me. It loved my neighbour without question. I couldn't understand why, he wasn't anything special.

Still, I smiled, always smiling.

Smiling is a valuable skill and I was getting very good at it.

Every morning, before the ovens were fully lit, I prayed. Not meekly — never meekly. I spoke to the gods as one of them. I reminded them of my devotion. Of my sacrifices. Of my patience.

“I am wasted here,” I told them. “You know it. You must when will you come for me?”

I begged for interruption. For spectacle. For something worthy of my attention. I used to ask for a man — handsome, dangerous, rich enough to carry me away. But recently, I realised how small that was. Why should I be rescued by another mortal? Why should I belong to a lesser being?

I wanted a god to notice, to yearn, to need to obsess over me. Had I not earned that much?

Every week I had sacrificed sheep, watched their blood soak into the earth. I loved the way the ground sucked it all in so quickly. Once, I sacrificed a dog. I told myself it was a test of faith. The truth was simpler: I wanted to see if I could. And yes I could quite easily.

I left offerings at shrines. I knelt. I sang. I even attempted to redeem the women who sold themselves near the docks, though I found them tedious and

vulgar. One laughed at me and said the gods preferred blood to virtue.

I hated her.

But the thought lingered would her blood work or did it have to be blood from a righteous person. Maybe next time.

Nothing ever happened. Not one single thing that made my heart flutter. Until the child came running into the bakery choking.

She was small, barely waist height, her life was already slipping through her fingers. The panic was delicious. The crowd rushed, useless and loud. And then a blinding light. Juno stepped through them, glowing white, immaculate, unreal.

Finally a god had come.

Not because of prayer. Not because of worship.

Because of trouble.

I understood instantly.

That night, I lay awake, my heart racing, thoughts spiralling so fast they blurred. The mountain breathing in the dark. I counted each breath like the promise it was made specifically to me.

The next morning, I began skipping with giddy precision to the bakery. I waved at the fishermen, those half-dead men who stank of failure and rot. I spun in the sunlight, laughing too loudly, skin buzzing as though electrified.

“Free bread today,” I announced. “Come after sunrise, tell everyone.”

They cheered like baby animals being fed by hand.

I ground the hemlock myself. Slowly. Lovingly. I mixed it into the dough with reverence. This was not murder. This was offering. This was a new experiment. The loaves emerged perfect, golden, irresistible. My hope hidden inside beauty — how very divine.

The villagers ate eagerly.

By midday, I was vibrating with anticipation.

Mr Jones fell first.

He clutched his throat, confusion flickering across his ruined face before his body betrayed him entirely. The crack of his skull against stone was deeply satisfying. Then another fell. Then another. Panic spread. Convulsions. Foam. Blood.

I laughed.

I couldn't stop.

Then finally the mountain answered.

Not all at once. Not violently at first. It began with a low, a slow rolling sound that vibrated through the stone beneath my feet, a deep, ancient murmur that set my body on alert, this was it, this was my moment to shine.

The ground quivered as though something vast had shifted in its sleep. The sky dimmed, with anticipation.

I laughed — a breathless, delighted sound I had never heard come from myself before.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I knew it.”

The villagers screamed. They always screamed. Panic tore through them as bodies convulsed and fell, as

prayers were shouted into a sky that no one would hear. I barely noticed. They were always just background noise, the dull percussion beneath a far greater music.

The mountain was waking.

Ash began to fall in slow, lazy flakes, soft as blessing, settling into my hair and across my shoulders. The air thickened, warm and intimate, as though the world itself had leaned close to whisper in my ear. I lifted my arms, spinning in place, letting it coat me.

“I understand,” I said aloud, my voice trembling with giddy certainty. “I always have.”

The ground lurched, violent enough to knock others flat, but I stayed standing. I would stay standing. Stones cracked. Roofs collapsed. Fire bloomed in the distance, brilliant and beautiful, devouring the unworthy. The roar deepened, no longer a sound but a presence, filling my chest until I could barely breathe.

And still joy bubbled up inside me.

I searched the darkened sky, eyes burning, heart racing, certain of what would come next. They would descend in a flash of fire and light, hands outstretched, faces

radiant with recognition. They would call my name. They would say yes, at last, yes, you are correct, you were always correct.

Heat washed over me, searing and intimate, not painful — purifying. My skin blistered, but I welcomed it. What was flesh, after all, but something to be shed?

“I gave you everything,” I said, laughing again as the ground split open nearby. “And you heard me.”

The mountain roared fully now, a sound so vast it swallowed all others. Fire rained from the sky. Ash filled my mouth, my lungs, my eyes. I inhaled deeply, as though breathing in my new divinity itself.

They were coming.

I knew it with absolute certainty. I felt it in every burning nerve, every ecstatic heartbeat. The timing was perfect. It had always been perfect. I had only needed to be bold enough to act.

As the world dissolved into fire and darkness, I threw my arms wide and waited, smiling, trembling with triumph.

Chosen.

Right.

Beloved.

The mountain rose to meet me.

Praise Mr Vesuvius.