

Escape From Pompeii

Seemingly without a care in the world, Octavia ambled across the hectic market-square, her arm loosely linked with that of her dear friend, Titus. Exchanging anecdotes about their separate visits to Rome and chortling at their past indiscretions, the pair were utterly engrossed in their conversation and almost oblivious to the somewhat bustling ambience around them. Stall-keepers advertised their weird and wonderful wares and horses and carts jammed the dusty streets; on every corner, bartering and bargaining could be observed. A palpable energy hung in the air like an uplifting melody. Throwing caution to the wind, Octavia began to dance down the street to her own tune (she was fond of a spot of spontaneity), skipping and whirling with her raven black hair cascading out in waves behind her and her cheeks pinkening with the exertion. One-of-a kind, this Pompeiiian loved her fine city and she wasn't afraid to show it.

Moving through the city on autopilot, Octavia and Titus quickly found themselves at the mouth of the River Sarmus, overlooking the picturesque harbour. Feeling instantly at peace, there was a lull in their conversation as they admired the smattering of boats moored there and became momentarily transfixed by the crystal clear waves that were tickling the keels; the tranquillity washed over the pair as they observed. Beyond the massive city walls that had always provided them with such security, their eyes were drawn to the real showstopper – the gentle mountain that was one of Italy's finest naturally occurring landmarks. Vesuvius they called it and it was Pompeii's greatest protector: a gentle giant.

All at once, the people who had been milling about the harbour began to scurry away like excitable mice enticed by the smell of a pungent cheese. Octavia's eyes lit up as she realised that it was time for the entertainment in the market-square – a part of the day that she had relished for as long as she could remember. An amateur poet herself, she loved to drink in the words of the performing lyricists, in awe of their ability to paint pictures through verse. No words were needed as Titus knew her well enough to jump straight to his

feet and whisk her back to the heart of the action. Like excitable toddlers, they felt the ground beneath their feet tremor as they hurried off. Approaching the familiar forum, they heard the poem that they'd heard so many times before:

Trembling, rattling, rumbling,

The land beneath our feet is grumbling,

Tremors from the earth shake us to the core,

Great city walls stand tall no more,

Trembling, rattling, rumbling,

The land beneath our feet is grumbling.

Still reeling from the excitement of the poetry session, the next day Octavia and Titus hot-footed it to the amphitheatre to watch a comedic play which came highly recommended. Settling in their chosen spot – one of the best views in the house – they sat, completely engaged in the performance. Towards the end of the first act, the ground beneath them began to pulsate and it quickly became so intense that they couldn't ignore it any longer. Deep cavernous cracks appeared in the walls and ear-piercing shrieks filled the arena as sheer panic kicked in for the spectators.

“What is going on, Titus? Are we in danger?” Octavia asked as all her instincts told her to run, scarper far away from this place.

“I'm not sure but we really must stay calm,” he replied, ever the sensible one of the two. Just then, the upper seating toppled forward, tossing all the observers towards the floor like human dominoes. “Take cover!” screeched Titus and he reached over and yanked Octavia's wrist, pulling her towards him. Together they cowered on the floor before their off-the scale adrenaline levels reminded them that fighting this particular monster was not an option; they needed to skedaddle and fast.

“But Titus, I'm...please help me, I need...” Octavia didn't get to finish her sentence as she had to concentrate on dodging the stampede of petrified Pompeiians that was hurtling towards her at a rate of knots. Titus reassured

her that they would be fine if they stayed together; holding hands and lowering their heads, they ran for their lives.

Knowing that their only chance of survival was to flee the now God-forsaken Pompeii, the two friends fought their way through the crazy number of hysterical people that now littered every square centimetre of the city centre. Octavia – once mild mannered and courteous – became a headstrong warrior, hell-bent on making it to the harbour ahead of her fellow people; nothing else mattered except avoiding certain death. Maintaining a vice-like grip (leaving finger nail marks in Titus' hand), the pair remained united as one, each relying on the strength of the other in an unspoken agreement. Without warning, Octavia suddenly launched forward as Titus yanked her arm almost out of its socket – he had tripped. Yelling at her to keep running, he laid face-down, spread eagled on the cobblestones as herds of desperate citizens trampled on him, oblivious to his presence. By now, ash was coming down in torrents from a malevolent sky and the cacophony of rumblings shook Octavia to her very core. There was no time to lose. Could she leave her dear pal to be pulverized behind her?

Before Octavia had the chance to further ponder her next move, a huge unit of a man stormed through the crowd, renting the masses asunder. Afraid of what she was about to witness, she clenched her eyelids closed and frantically prayed. As she dared to peer out of just one eye, she was extraordinarily surprised to observe the man reaching down and scooping Titus up like he was a rag doll, as light as a feather. Once placed on his feet, Titus was ready to run again. Smiling weakly, he reached for Octavia's trembling hand. The race was on. To the harbour they charged with a fire in their belly that rivalled the inferno licking them from the sky, charring their skin. Upon arrival at the once tranquil scene, devastation surrounded them. Pushing and shoving their way to the front of the haphazard queue, the friends knew what they had to do. In total unison, they propelled themselves forward into the hull of a huge naval ship which was already spilling over with anguished escapees. They were on! Fireballs were splattering the surface of the water either side of them and their once protector continue to spit venomous drools of blazing hot liquid rock at them, coating the land as far as the eye could see. Wiping a single tear from her blackened cheek, Octavia wondered what they had done to deserve such

punishment. Hanging in the air was the pungent smell of death and many on the boat sported hacking coughs as lungs struggled to battle the smog filling the air. One thing was for sure, there would be no coming back from this.

Sailing hurriedly away from the harrowing scenes in their home city, Titus and Octavia clung to each other, clammy and quivering, hardly able to process the events of the day. Uncertain of the future, they both wept bitterly as Vesuvius became smaller and smaller on the horizon but they were under no illusion—they were still not out of jeopardy. Just at that moment, a gargantuan surge occurred, blasting them across the water forcibly. Looking back over a tensed shoulder, Octavia observed a river of molten rock and lava escaping like an outpouring of projectile vomit from the mouth of the mountain, carpeting Pompeii almost entirely and removing every detail of the character of the place that she loved so dearly. Every part of Octavia's psyche told her not to look. Turning away from the ruination, she clamped her eyes shut so tightly that her whole face creased and wrinkled and she prayed; she prayed like she had never prayed before.