

Then they were in the taxi and driving through the neglected, garbage-strewn streets of new Pompeii with its dilapidated shops and cheap high-rise apartment buildings.

“Gee, I don’t know which is the bigger ruin,” observed John. “Roman Pompeii or the new one.”

“This is a very poor part of Italy,” said Nimrod. “There’s not much money here for anything in the way of public services. And of course, the houses are the cheapest in Italy.”

“Why’s that?” asked Philippa.

“Would you buy a house on the slopes of an active volcano?”

“Hmm,” said Philippa. “Perhaps not.”

In spite of this, the taxi driver, Carmine, was a happy sort and sang a song all the way up the slopes of the volcano, through a beautiful, sweet-smelling forest, to the upper parking area, where they were met by a contingent of excitable Italian police — the carabinieri — who demanded of the taxi driver and then Nimrod why they and the children had come to what was now a dangerous and restricted area.

Speaking perfect Italian, with a strong Neapolitan accent, Nimrod explained that he was an important volcanologist, a *professore*, and that he had arrived on Vesuvius to lend assistance to the famous Arlecchino; and that since he had brought his own niece and nephew with him they could all rest assured that things were not nearly as bad as they might otherwise have supposed.

After ten or fifteen minutes of lively conversation — which Nimrod had simultaneously translated for the benefit of the twins — the carabinieri allowed the three djinn to

complete their journey and to ascend the remaining twenty-seven hundred feet of the volcano to the summit on foot.

The trail led up a dusty, steep, winding path that was covered with volcanic rock and pebbles.

“Why did you call Professor Sturloson, Arlecchino?” Philippa asked Nimrod. “That was the word, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” admitted Nimrod. “Everyone in this part of the world calls him that. It’s his local nickname. I must say the Italians can be a little cruel like that. But I don’t think it bothers him. The name, that is.”

“What’s it mean?” asked John.

“‘Harlequin,’” said Nimrod.

“Why do they call him that?”

Nimrod pulled a face. “Perhaps I should explain one or two things about the professor before you meet him and embarrass us both by staring at Snorri. That’s his real, Icelandic name by the way: Snorri Sturloson. But you should call him Professor. Unless he invites you to call him something else. But never Arlecchino. That would be too impertinent.”

Nimrod stopped for a moment to catch his breath, admire the view of the Bay of Naples, and to finish his explanation.

“Has either of you ever heard of Montserrat?”

“It’s the surname of a famous writer,” said Philippa. “And it’s also the name of an island in the Caribbean. Next door to Antigua.”

Nimrod was impressed. “An island in the Caribbean with a volcano. The Soufrière Hills volcano. The Soufrière

Hills eruption, which began on July eighteenth, 1995, was the first in more than two hundred years. An even larger eruption occurred two years later, which caused the deaths of nineteen people. The professor, who was monitoring seismic activity with his wife, Björk, was hit by the pyroclastic flow and horribly burnt. One complete side of his face was burnt to a crisp. Which is why he wears the Harlequin mask. And why his wife left him, apparently: because she couldn't bear to look at him."

"Sounds a bit like the guy in *The Phantom of the Opera*," observed John.

"Yes," agreed Nimrod. "In a way. Except that the professor doesn't hide himself away. He may have been horribly disfigured but he's no recluse. His work is too important for him to stay out of the public eye."

"So, this could be dangerous, after all," said John. "This little excursion of ours. I mean, if the professor got it badly wrong once, then he could get it badly wrong again. And so indeed could you. For all we know, this whole mountain could be about to go bang. And then djinn or not, we'll be history."

Nimrod shook his head. "Really, John, there's nothing to worry about. But if you're worried, you can go back down to the car park and wait for us in the taxi."

Philippa took off her glasses and started to polish the lenses, which was always a sign that she was feeling nervous.

"Good idea," said Philippa. "Maybe it's better if you do wait for us down there. But it's all right to be scared, you know. Nothing to be ashamed of, bro." She smiled a sarcastic smile

that helped to conceal her own fears. "I might be scared myself if I bothered to stop and really think about it."

"Who said I was scared?" said John. Hoisting his backpack on his shoulder he started up the path again, overtaking Nimrod and leading the way up the rocky path. "All I said was, it could be dangerous. And it is. But I don't mind a bit of danger. Never did."

"By the way," said Philippa. "Does the professor know that you're a djinn?"

"No," said Nimrod. "He thinks of me as gifted in the field of volcanology. But nothing more."

Above the cloud line, they reached the top of the cone and stared down into the depth of what looked like a huge quarry: Most of this resembled a large dust bowl, but from a glowing hole at the foot of one of the sheer walls on the opposite side of the crater was emerging an enormous plume of gray smoke, like the biggest cypress tree anyone had ever seen. John looked up its vertiginous height and thought of "Jack and the Beanstalk" and half expected to see a boy climbing down from an unseen castle several miles above his head, with a goose under his arm.

"Holy smoke," he exclaimed. "That is just amazing. Amazing."

Philippa was experiencing the same sensation as her brother. The idea of the ash plume and its little glowing origin was utterly fascinating to her and reminded Philippa of the time, soon after she and John had lost their wisdom teeth, when the trail of smoke from Mrs. Trump's cigarette had held such a strong fascination for her.

“Isn’t it just the most extraordinary thing you have ever seen?” said Nimrod.

“Yes,” agreed Philippa unhesitatingly. “It is.”

“I think it’s the rising column of smoke and ash that exerts such a strong effect on all djinn,” said Nimrod. “It touches something deep and primordial within us that no mundane being could ever hope to understand. That’s why I wanted to bring you two up here. So that you might understand exactly why it is that volcanoes are so special to our kind. And why it is that the destiny of our djinn tribe, the Marid, has always been inextricably linked to volcanoes.

“For it is written that when a sea of cloud arises from the bowels of the earth to turn the lungs of men to stone and the wheat in the fields to ash, then the Marid shall save the world from inflammable darkness.”