

Continued from yesterday...

had come stomping through Pompeii. Marcus had better get back to his master's villa soon, or he'd be greeted with a beating.

He was turning to leave when he noticed an old woman sitting in the street, dazed. The shaking must have knocked her down. Passersby stepped around her as if she were a heap of trash. Marcus ignored the woman; there were beggars everywhere, after all.

But she looked so miserable.

With a sigh, he once again dropped the laundry sack. He went to the woman, crouching down next to her. She was a beggar, it seemed, her tunic stained and tattered, her bare feet crusted with sores.

She scowled at him. "Scat, thief!"

"I wasn't going to steal anything," Marcus said. He should have ignored the hag like everyone else did.

But then the woman's face softened. She studied Marcus with her catlike green eyes. She was very old, with sagging cheeks and deep wrinkles. But Marcus could imagine that a long time ago she might have been pretty.

"What do you want, then?" she asked.

Almost without thinking, he reached into his pocket and took out the apple. "Here," he said. She looked hungrier than he was.

The woman took the apple in one of her gnarled hands. "Help me up, please."

Marcus held her arms as she got to her feet, and stood with her as she steadied herself. And then she suddenly grabbed his hand, gripping it with surprising strength.

"Be careful, kind boy," she whispered. "I have seen the signs. Terrible doom is coming for the people of Pompeii."

She leaned so close that he smelled the strange spices on her breath.

"When hope is lost, *follow the hand of Mercury*." She stepped back. "Do you understand?"

Marcus had no idea what she meant. All over Pompeii there were statues of the powerful messenger god, with his winged sandals and helmet. But what did that matter to him?

"I understand," he lied. Now he just wanted to get away from her.

"The end is coming," she said, finally letting go of his hand. "This

world will burn!"

