

# INFIRMOS MORTEM

by Jason Ragatz

## CHAPTER III

Leading with his shoulder, Tullius crashed straight through the wooden door. While the nondescript exterior gave little indication as to the building's contents, the pungent perfumes that assaulted his nostrils revealed he had burst into an abandoned brothel.

Behind him, Tullius' good friend and fellow soldier, Severus, hurriedly ushered in three civilians. The first was a somewhat elderly man who wore the robes of an augustale priest from the local Imperial cult. He was followed by a plain-dressed woman less than half his age, who in turn pulled along a boy no more than eight years of age. They stumbled in and pressed against the wall behind the street, sweating and panting nervously. Severus—after stealing a brief glance down the road—came in last and helped Tullius to replace the door to barricade it with a nearby sofa.

It was only seconds later when the frightened civilians and their two guardians could hear the *immortui* outside. Even without seeing them directly, the mere sound of their throaty growls elicited a disturbingly clear image of the decaying gray skin and festering black wounds that were common to all the creatures. Severus grabbed his companions with his eyes and silently lifted a finger to his lips. Their fear was not so easily concealed, but they each nodded understandingly.

A pot, or something equally fragile, suddenly shattered outside and caused the three survivors to duck their heads apprehensively. The child gasped, but they otherwise remained dutifully silent. The sounds of menacing growls, erratic footsteps, and further destruction of pottery continued as the *immortui* scurried through the streets in search of their prey. Tullius prayed that the brothel's effluvious aromas would mask their scent, though in truth he wasn't sure whether the *immortui* even possessed the ability to smell. The soldier closed his fist around the hilt on his belt, just in case the gods were not in a sympathetic mood.

The scene had become a common one for Tullius and Severus. After ensuring Tullius' wife and daughter had safe passage away from the city under Corvus' able protection, they had

tried to reach the medical clinic to warn the doctors of the inevitable horrors that awaited their newest patients. But they arrived too late. The immortui were everywhere, chasing panicked citizens in all directions from the clinic. Soon, the monster that their dear friend Lucius had become was far from the only creature terrorizing Herculaneum's streets.

It had been a week since then, and the situation in the city had grown increasingly dire. At first, Tullius and Severus had tried to hunt down as many immortui as they could find, but for every one they slew it seemed as if another half-dozen were infected. After the first couple days proved a losing battle, they turned their efforts to helping those who remained barricaded in their homes and shops simply escape. After four days, just finding someone who wasn't trying to rip them apart became a small victory in itself.

As the seconds continued to drip away in the brothel, Tullius held his breath, sure that at any moment another one of the beasts would come crashing through the window to take another of his survivors, like the unfortunate cook who couldn't overcome a twisted ankle not twenty minutes earlier. After what felt like an eternity, the noises gradually grew more distant and less frequent, until finally they ceased being audible. At last, Tullius released a long exhale and loosened his sweaty grip from his sword. For the time being, they were safe. And alive.

As Tullius pulled the pink curtains over the windows, Severus knelt before the boy.

"It's okay, lad. We're safe now." He ruffled the boy's hair and shot a smile toward his mother. "You're a brave little one, a hundred times more courageous than myself at your age."

They were still trembling as Severus stood up. "Any injuries? Bites?" None of them answered, so he checked them out anyway. "Just scrapes and bruises," he observed. "Nothing from *them*."

"Gather what rest you can," Tullius said softly, wary of any dangers still lurking outside. "Keep quiet and stay against the wall. Severus and I will look around and see if this place has anything useful, but we must continue moving as soon as we return, understood? We are not far from the northern gate."

Tullius waited for each of them to acknowledge his command, then handed the boy his water canteen. "Drink," he said simply.

There wasn't much to the bottom-floor vestibule; the solicited pleasures were saved for the private rooms upstairs. After some brief scrummaging, Tullius and Severus found nothing but carnal toys, empty coin pouches, and a half-empty sack of wine. He took a brief swig of the

latter before tossing the dregs to Severus, and then continued his search upstairs.

It seemed the whores did not need much more than their beds and bodies to conduct their business as the upper floors proved almost as bereft as the vestibule. Then again, it appeared the place had already been looted of valuables during the exodus from the city. Mirrors were mostly broken, mattresses had been upheaved, and drawers were torn off their runners, while linens, undergarments, and miscellaneous knick-knacks scattered the wooden floors. The whole place shared more in appearance with a sacked city than one facing mortal catastrophe.

Tullius was pessimistically continuing to rummage through the scattered flotsam when suddenly something banged into the wall in the adjacent room. Almost instinctively, he spun around, dashed into the other room and had his sword drawn and ready, all within mere seconds. His anxiety faded and his sword sheathed when he discovered it was only Severus, alone.

The room was bigger than the others, no doubt reserved for the patrons with the biggest purses and most insatiable appetites. Extinguished candles adorned the walls, provocative poles linked the floor and ceiling, and an enormous bed fit for Venus accentuated the center of the room. But none of those things were what had startled Severus--a hardened veteran of numerous bloody affairs--enough to recoil into the wooden wall. That reaction was spurred by the three bodies lumped together on the divine bed, naked except for the dry blood that stained their bodies and the satin sheets around them. The knife that had inflicted the lethal wounds was still in one of the girl's hands—a sad end, but an honorable one considering the alternative fate, even for those of their profession.

“They have not been infected,” Severus said finally. A subtle quiver in his voice uncharacteristically betrayed a shaken emotional fortitude.

“No,” Tullius replied, “it appears they made quite sure of that.”

“Gods help us...is this what it has come to?”

“It bests what else could have become of them, unfortunately. Come, let us leave this sordid place. We've not got far to go.”

Severus followed his wartime officer back down the stairs where the terrified mother pointed a jagged piece of broken glass at arm's length, her hand still trembling mightily.

“We...we heard a noise,” she squeaked.

“Apologies, it was only me,” Severus reassured her. “Knocked some erotic statuette off a shelf. Egyptian, I think. Or Greek, more likely. It makes no matter—”

“—Time to go,” Tullius interjected impatiently. He had never much enjoyed patronizing brothels, and this one made him particularly uneasy in its current state.

“I’m hungry,” the boy whined softly, though it sounded more wishful than complaining.

“Not as hungry as those things chasing us. Come, there is no food left in Herculaneum. Not for the living.”

The boy could have burst into tears right then, and Tullius would’ve thought no less of him had he done so. Instead, he just nodded solemnly and helped his mother and the augustale to their feet. Tullius could not imagine his own daughter, Olivia, being subjected to such horrible circumstances, and this lad was even younger than she. After the turmoil of the past week, sending his wife and daughter to Pompeii had turned out to be one of the best decisions he’d ever made.

With the orange sun plunging rapidly toward the Mediterranean Sea, the five of them headed toward Herculaneum’s northern outskirts. They tried to move quickly while still keeping as quiet as they could. They passed by shops, homes, a couple stables, the massive Basilica Noniana, and even the priest’s own College of the Augustales as they wove through the northern alleys. Along the way they saw plenty of signs of the death that had ravaged Herculaneum. Doors and statues were broken, as were several carts, goods, and other things people once counted among their most valuable possessions. What little food was left rotted, what few valuables had been stored were looted, and all the while they did not come across so much as a dog, let alone any other survivors. Thankfully, neither had they run into any more *immortui*.

After about twenty minutes of nervously darting around, across, and through the abandoned streets, the quintet troop finally reached the edge of the city. Up ahead some hundred or so meters stood Herculaneum’s northern exit: an open archway giving access to the hills and fields beyond—and a path to the Imperial Road. Normally the archway was garrisoned by the Herculaneum City Guard, but today, at least from this distance, Tullius could not see any such security. In fact, he doubted the police force remained solvent given the city’s recent turmoil. Evidence of their presence was scarcer than warm bread.

Even with virtual safety at such close proximity, Tullius’ battle-honed intuition should have protected him from letting his guard down. But he was starving, sleep-deprived, and simply relieved to reach safety with three more survivors in tow. As such, he was not quick enough to react when an *immortus* came crashing through the upper window of a two-floor workshop on

the eastern side of the road.

The immortalus landed right on Tullius and sent them both careening to the ground sideways. His body's thud into the stone pavement sent shockwaves of pain through his back, but the force of the tackle proved somewhat fortunate as the immortalus bounced off of him and slid another five meters. Unlike that fateful night in Lucius' home, Tullius was not without prepared company. By the time the beast was on its feet again, a flash of steel was streaking past Tullius' face as Severus buried his sword through its decrepit skull.

Despite his body's screaming aches, Tullius managed to get back to his feet with a pull from his comrade. Rare was it at this stage of the outbreak that any remaining survivors could be lucky enough to encounter a lone immortalus. Sure enough, several more of the creatures poured out of the same building as the first, no doubt abandoning a stripped carcass at the evident presence of fresh meat.

"Run!" Severus shouted to the others. They made a break for the northern gate, but were forced to stop abruptly as more immortui came scurrying around the corner by the wall, essentially trapping them right in the street. Tullius scanned their surroundings; each group of immortui numbered close to a dozen, though he was very well aware that more could emerge at any time. They were exposed and vulnerable and desperately needed a way to parlay the enemy's superior numbers.

"There!" he pointed to the left. "Into the Central Thermae!" He hoped the baths' corridor entrance would serve as a Thermopylaen funnel--precisely the tactical assistance they needed.

The panicked survivors did not waste any time following orders. They darted into the baths with Tullius close on their tail while Severus took a moment to slash at the legs of the two nearest immortui, which had the desired effect of momentarily tripping the rest.

While the citizens charged straight ahead to the main bath, Tullius pressed himself against the inside wall adjacent to the entrance and readied his blade. Severus came rushing through the doorway right past him, then seconds later, so too did the ravenous immortui. This time, Tullius was not caught off-guard and he proceeded to slash violently at each creature that entered the Central Thermae.

The sheer number of immortui rushing through the entrance inevitably meant Tullius could not swing quickly enough, or that some of his slashes would fail to fully incapacitate every one of them. To that end, Severus was ready to finish off any immortalus that did make it past

Tullius' barrage, and as the motionless corpses began to litter the Central Thermae's entryway, their plan appeared to be working.

The woman's scream from inside the baths dismissed any thoughts of safety or success immediately. Tullius and Severus exchanged a momentary glance, then both abandoned the entryway and sprinted toward the main bath, hoping that the pile of vanquished immortui could at least slow down those still coming through the entrance.

As the corridor spilled into the open area of the main bath, Tullius' worst fears manifested into reality. The frightened trio were at the center of the bath, and three immortui were closing on them fast. He and Severus would never reach them in time, and all he had time for was to think how foolish it was to lead them into the Central Thermae without considering there might be more immortui inside. In a desperate bid to save them, he instead had doomed them.

But suddenly, just as the immortui were about to reach the survivors, they collapse to the ground, one by one. At first it seemed completely unbidden, or that the gods had at long last decided the time had come to intervene. Then Tullius spotted the feathered sticks protruding from each fallen immortus' head—three arrows, all perfectly placed as if shot by Artemis.

As his eyes scanned the rectangular rooftop encircling and overlooking the main bath, they found the archer tipping his cowl toward him, as if to say, "You're welcome." For someone emulating a god's ability, the archer bore modest attire. A forest green cloak concealed almost every identifiable feature, including a hood that kept his face in shadow. Plain-looking clothes ran over the arms holding the bow as well as the legs on which the figure stood. And he was slender, almost feminine, with a smaller physique than any soldier that Tullius had fought with or against—enough to make him wonder whether the archer did in fact share the goddess's gender.

Then their mysterious savior did something very curious. He lifted his bow and pointed it straight in Tullius' direction. By the time the soldier realized what was happening, the archer had already released the bowstring. He closed his eyes and awaited the blow that would finally relieve him of the suffering he'd caused this city. Instead, he listened as the arrow whistled past his ear and just over his shoulder before finding its true target with a squishy thud behind him.

Tullius twisted around to see another immortus drop to the ground with an arrow in its eye socket. Behind the carcass, several more immortui approached; the pursuers from the street

had caught up.

A strange noise suddenly blasted from the archer's rooftop position. The sound rang loud and bold like a horn, but its pitch was much sharper. Tullius stole a glance back at the archer to see it was indeed a horn-shaped instrument held up to his mouth, but the device looked as foreign as it sounded, glinting gold in the dying sunlight. A glance was all Tullius could afford, though. The immortus were almost upon him.

He cocked his sword, then swung diagonally upward with all his might, slicing the closest immortus clear in half. In a seamless follow-up move, he spun his body around and used the momentum to slice another in half across the abdomen. He kicked a third in the chest so that it tumbled backward into several more. Black liquid sprayed all over the tiled mosaic on the floor.

Tullius expected arrows to rain down in punctuation, but they never came. In fact, when he turned to look at the roof once again, the archer was gone, just as suddenly as he'd appeared. Disappointed, but determined not to squander the small boost the archer had afforded them, Tullius fell back into officer mode.

"Move!" he shouted. "The baths have another entrance on the west side, past the steam rooms. We need a new position!"

Severus led the way and the others followed. Tullius brought up the rear, in case any of the immortui proved particularly quick. They wove through the labyrinthian corridors of the bath complex until they passed the closed steam room doors. Tullius briefly considered trying to spill the rooms' coals into the hallways, but realized they probably hadn't been replaced for a week. So the group pressed on until it finally reached the west entrance and escaped to the street outside.

They rounded the corner and ran north, turning back east along the city wall. The immortui continued to chase after them, neither gaining closer nor falling behind. When they finally reached the archway, they were running so hard they nearly collided into a troop of city guardsmen. And their Captain.

There was a tense moment as Tullius' and the Captain's eyes met and each recognized the other. After that moment, however, both simply recognized the apparent danger.

Tullius turned to the civilians. "Keep going past the guards and through the gate," he instructed. "Wait for us outside the walls. We'll handle the immortui."

“But mister—” the boy started, but he was immediately cut off by an emphatic, “Go!”

He and Severus looked on as the three civilians continued onward. When they ran past the guards, the Captain gave the command to his men to charge forward. Tullius and Severus turned back toward the *immortui* and led that charge.

“Hope you’re not getting bored of these guys!” Tullius shouted to Severus.

“They are no more difficult than Parthians, even if they smell as vile!” came the reply, and they both got a much-needed laugh before chaos engulfed them.

With the *immortui* and swordsmen running toward each other, it took only a few paces to close the intervening distance. Once they collided, a frenetic flurry of sharp steel sliced through decaying flesh and decapitated snarling heads. Tullius swung left, then right, then again to the other side, pacing forward as he repeated the motions. His methodical movement was interrupted only by the occasional spin-slash or stab. Severus balanced the same attacks on his right by the city wall, effortlessly keeping rhythm with his leader as they had done so many times before.

As they chopped through the flow of *immortui* with their swords, those they could not reach found a quick defeat against the wall of city guardsmen. The feral creatures were fearsome in numbers, but an abundance of experienced blades were the ideal counter against the unarmed savages.

On and on the soldiers swung until they finally reached the end of the flow of *immortui*. Then, Tullius and Severus turned right around and squeezed the remaining creatures between themselves and the guardsmen. When they were all at last neutralized, limbs, heads, and other body parts--all bathed in black ooze--littered the street in such density it was hard to make out exactly how many were slain. Between the combined efforts of the eight guardsmen, Severus, and himself, Tullius estimated they must have cut down at least twenty *immortui*.

With the bloodshed finished and the survivors through the gate safely, Tullius approached the Captain. The old man stepped forward and removed his helm.

“You blokes have got quite the balls to still be around when the city’s gone to hell! I’m—”

“—YOU!” one of his subordinates cut in, and the next thing Tullius knew he was frantically parrying blow after blow from one of the guards who had just helped him surmount the *immortui*.

“What...are...you...doing...stand...DOWN!” Tullius tried to shout between blows, but

it was no use. Neither Severus nor the guards seemed to know exactly what to do, and each began shouting at each other and at the two engaged swordsmen, which only added to the confusion.

When Tullius was able to dodge a reckless downward slice, he seized a chance to strike non-lethally and threw his elbow into the guard's face. Dazed, the guard stumbled backward and ripped off his helm. Even with the bloody nose and the rage-filled eyes, Tullius recognized him as one of the Captain's sentries in the incarceration—the one who's cousin Tullius had preemptively killed before he could become another immortal.

One of the other guards grabbed the attacker in an attempt to pacify him, but his vengeance was not so easily restrained. He pushed off his comrade and again came at Tullius, who was content to absorb the manic aggression with backpedaling parries until the guard gave him another open window to counter.

That window came when Tullius brushed away a heavy sideways strike, and this time his elbow caught the guard's exposed eye. Flustered and running low on energy, the guard attempted another charged slash, but he took too long with the wind up. Tullius punched him in the gut and the guard keeled over, gasping for breath.

Tullius paced a slow semicircle around the guard, no longer bothering to keep his blade at the ready, and when the guard finally recovered enough to attempt a stab, Tullius disarmed him.

"You forget who it is we fight," Tullius spat as he exchanged his blade with an outstretched hand. The guard rebuffed Tullius' peace offering and came up at him with swinging fists. The soldier was prepared for this, however, and simply turned out of the way. What he wasn't prepared for was the guard landing next to his blade on the ground and re-arming himself.

"Enough!" the Captain barked as he stepped between Tullius and his attacker.

"But sir—" the defeated guard objected.

"I said enough! That's an order, Elijah!"

It was fairly evident that Elijah had not had enough, but he gritted his teeth, threw down his sword, and stomped away muttering curses under his breath as his commanding officer leered on.

"Well, well, it seems you've been putting yourself to good use since we last shared your company, Tullius," the Captain of the City Guard said bullishly. Tullius did not appreciate the condescending tone.

“Only doing your job,” he replied flatly. “Better,” he added.

The Captain laughed. “Still an arrogant little shit, I see. It matters not; we are all on the same side here. Although I’ll admit, I’m surprised to discover it’s been you blowing that horn this whole time.”

Tullius and Severus exchanged puzzled glances. “I beg your pardon, sir,” the latter said, “we are as clueless to the horn blower’s—the archer’s—identity as you are. In fact, I had presumed he was one of yours?”

The Captain raised his eyebrows. “Is that so? Interesting, to say the least. Whoever the identity of this mysterious archer, that horn has guided my men to rescue a great number of survivors.”

“It’s unlike any horn I’ve ever heard,” mentioned Tullius.

“Aye,” the Captain nodded. “Metal of some sort. I believe the Egyptians craft a horn in such a style, but cannot be certain this one is of similar origin. Whatever the case, you two have performed a fine service saving those citizens. I’ll not deny you credit for that.”

“And what of the City Guard? You claim to have rescued others, yet we’ve been facilitating escapes all week and haven’t seen a single one of your lackeys for most of that stretch.”

“I’ve kept patrols scouting the city in intervals, but we couldn’t risk sustaining continued losses,” the Captain admitted. “To prevent the outbreak from spreading elsewhere, I’ve been forced to allocate most of my men to securing a perimeter around the city. We’ve helped those we could, but we’ve seen no survivors for two days...I presume it’s been similarly scarce for you, today’s haul notwithstanding?”

“Aye,” Tullius nodded. An uneasy silence followed.

It was the Captain who broke the tension. “Swords as capable as the two of you shouldn’t be wasted, and I’ve slowly been losing men. We could use your talent against our common enemy,” he suggested.

“As attractive as the notion of serving your command sounds, it’s an opportunity we’ll have to refrain from,” Tullius said sarcastically.

The Captain laughed. “I would never suffer your insubordinate attitude on my Guard. But I—the city—needs all the help it can get.”

“We can do more to help on our own,” Tullius said.

“I’ve already admitted you’ve acted admirably. But you’ve seen it yourself, Tullius—the people are gone. Fled, dead, or walking as one of those *things* now. There is no more you can do inside the walls. Herculaneum is fallen. We need to start considering the rest of Campania, the rest of the Empire!”

“And how is tagging along with you supposed to accomplish that?”

“Thusfar, we’ve been able to keep the *immortui* mostly isolated inside the walls,” the Captain explained. “What they hunt—people—have been abundant in there, and the few monsters that have wandered beyond the walls have been swiftly neutralized by our perimeter defenses.”

“But that abundance has become a scarcity,” Severus observed.

“Precisely,” the Captain continued. “Sooner or later, the *immortui* are going to do one of two things. They are either going to stay inside the city and die off for good or, more likely, they will search for more victims beyond their present domain. In their numbers, we can’t hope to keep them contained for long by ourselves. I’ve sent a courier to Rome to request military assistance from the Emperor, but as yet we have not received any word.”

“You think two more blades will help you contain the droves of *immortui* in there?” Tullius questioned.

“*Any* blades will help,” the Captain pleaded. “I know inevitably such an effort will be futile without the Emperor. But if we can manage to contain them until help from Rome arrives....”

Tullius pondered for a moment. “And if they don’t come in time?”

“Then I pray the gods possess more mercy than they have shown to us. Pompeii, Oplontis, Napoli...the *immortui* are a threat to them all. And if they spread that far, what’s stopping them from infecting the capital?”

Tullius paused. “You ask us to trust you and join your cause, and yet I do not even know a name to call you by.”

The Captain outstretched his arm and gripped Tullius’ gauntlets, a customary greeting among Roman soldiers to signal their common allegiance. “Casamus Navarchus,” the old man said. “But name aside, I think you’d agree we’re acquainted well enough, Tullius.”

As thoroughly loyal as Tullius was to the Emperor, it was not Rome that he was most worried about. Captain Navarchus was right. If the outbreak spread, Pompeii—his family—could

be in grave danger. He knew, as the Captain seemed to, that the task was impossible unless Emperor Vespasian sent ample reinforcements. But he had to give them that chance.

“Very well,” Tullius said as he released his grip. “We’ll assist your cause, Navarchus. We are all Romans here, after all. Where is your base camp? I saw the guard station overrun with *immortui* when we passed it several days ago.”

“Aye, we were forced out of there rather early on,” the Captain conceded. “For the time being, we have been granted permission, space, and resources to set up camp outside the last place in Herculaneum the *immortui* have not overrun yet: the Villa Caesoninus.”

It was dark by the time they reached the edge of the Villa Caesoninus’ surrounding estate, though the ornate structure itself rested atop the hillside, flanked by grapevines, orchards, and the Mediterranean coastline. At the foot of the hill, below the vineyard, the City Guard had pitched a camp complete with sentries, weapon stations, and plenty of torches. The villa was liberally considered within Herculaneum’s limits even though it sat well beyond the rest of her outskirts. Between the segregation from the rest of the city, the bastion of remaining city guardsmen, and the prevalence of flames—the *immortui* had displayed quite an aversion to fire in Tullius’ previous encounters with them—the luxurious villa was the last haven for Herculaneum’s citizens.

As it turned out, such a privilege was only reserved for the fortunate social elite.

“What do you mean the survivors can’t accompany us to the villa?” Tullius snapped, his tone rising.

“I don’t like it any more than you do, but as difficult as it is to believe, this not my home,” Captain Navarchus retorted.

“So?” Tullius had assumed Navarchus was eminently in command; he certainly carried himself in such a way.

“Would you allow another man to dictate the rules in your own home? Particularly a man of lower stature?”

“I’d damn well listen to the man who’s protecting me! To hell with his riches, the whole bloody city has become flesh-eating mob!”

That comment elicited a sarcastic smirk from Severus. “He must not think anything has changed.”

“Listen to me, Tullius,” the Captain said with an atypically calm demeanor. “It’s alright.

I'm sending a man to escort the civilians on horseback to Napoli. From there they're on their own, but they'll be safe for the time being, if we can do our part. In the meantime, the villa's owner, Appius Pulcher, is allowing us to shelter on his property, eat his food, and even drink his cheaper wine."

"Interesting," Severus observed, "You gain a strategic base location and sustenance for your men in exchange for private, preferential security. Maybe some coin, too, to sweeten the deal?"

"They are not paying me for private security you insolent wretch!" Apparently Severus' accusation had struck a nerve. "We have need of resources and a dearth of supply. Yes, the nobles enjoy a certain benefit of having the entire City Guard parked on their front lawn hunting stray immortui, but without them the city would have been abandoned long ago."

"What do you mean, 'nobles'?" Tullius asked. "Are there others besides Pulcher?"

Navarchus sighed. "Witness for yourself. I can't imagine you've had anything substantial to eat in at least a few days. Go ahead and get your fill. You'll need your strength soon enough."

Together, they walked up the path cutting through the vineyard up to the villa at the top of the hill. Just as they were coming up to the edge, Captain Navarchus stopped.

"I must meet with our host. Try not to cause too much trouble." Navarchus started walking away.

"Go ahead, file your report to the boss," Tullius called after him jokingly.

The Captain scowled back. "I regret this partnership already."

As Navarchus proceeded to a private entrance, Tullius and Severus continued on to the villa's ornate atrium. It was unlike any Tullius had ever seen or been in, and he was sure the lavish house would even be suitable to accommodate Emperor Vespasian. Potted gardens, exquisite statues, and vine-laden columns decorated the atrium, which by itself was several times larger than Tullius' entire home. Perhaps most impressively, it was architected with an open-air view of the sea, which lay just beyond the careening edge of a nearby cliff. As the moonlight danced off Neptune's dark domain, Tullius couldn't help but admire the beauty of the place, despite all the recent treacheries.

He and Severus continued into the hallways, occasionally directed by slave servants who were busy tending to the various things around the villa, most notably the extensive private library for which the estate earned its nickname, "The Villa of Papyri." Eventually, the soldiers

reached the villa's centerpiece: the grand peristyle. Ever since he was a boy, Tullius had heard tales of the magnificence of this courtyard, and he couldn't help but revel in its allure. A large pond stretched down the middle, complete with a statue of a siren that spewed water from its marble lips. Several other statues featuring various deities and fabled heroes littered the surrounding area, along with carefully-trimmed hedges that were cut in the shapes of animals that Tullius had only seen in crude paintings. At the far end of the peristyle past the pond, a massive mansion dominated the horizon while two covered corridors ran along the courtyard's sides, forming a neat rectangle around the area.

Despite the impressive setting, Tullius was soured by the courtyard's contents. Not only had the villa's residents not evacuated, but they were hosting a party with what must have been nearly a hundred guests, all of equal or similar exalted stature, judging by their fine dress. Here and there a couple small pockets of Navarchus' men had carved out a nook to drink wine and belch, but otherwise the Villa Caesoninus housed a gala of nobles whilst Pulcher refused sanctuary to the common refugees fleeing the adjacent ruined city. The whole idea of it all left a very bitter taste in Tullius' mouth and he suddenly found himself in a poor mood.

"They drink and laugh as if nothing's amiss," Tullius said with palpable disgust. "How...how can they do this?"

Severus shook his head. "You and I could never in a lifetime understand how people of this life think, brother. They are probably so accustomed to their servants and terraces and roast swine that they don't even realize the threat they risk by staying here."

"I just...I can't...I don't want their food," said an exasperated Tullius. "Stay if you wish; I'll be down at the camp."

Severus grabbed hold of his arm before he could leave. "Tullius, I know what plagues your conscience, but let's have some sense here. We've scavenged stale, rotting food for the better part of a week. We've not slept more than a few hours at a time, and never peacefully. I understand your feelings; partaking in this indulgence causes me discomfort too. But if we are going to keep fighting these creatures, we need to replenish our strength."

Severus always kept a cool head, no matter the situation; it was one of the reasons Tullius placed so much trust in him. And trust him he would. Had it been Corvus opining for a night's stay in this villa, Tullius might've been skeptical of ulterior motives: booze, boar, a chance to illicit a few nobles' laughs, and perhaps a bit more from their wanton daughters. Severus held no

such adolescent ambitions. And of course, he was right about needing to replenish strength.

Casting his reservations aside for the time being, Tullius nodded relentingly. “All right,” he grumbled.

After layering their plates with bread, cheeses, and scraps of roasted swine, Tullius and Severus settled in an open spot next to the pond. One bite into the pork and Tullius couldn’t believe he had been considering forgoing the food. Even the bread tasted better.

A woman’s voice stole Tullius’ attention away from his feast. “You boys don’t fit in with this haughty lot,” she said, and when Tullius turned his gaze toward her he found the remark came attached to a playful smile. “Some wine?”

“Please, my dear!” said Severus excitedly. The woman laid down two smoothly carved cups and filled them each with a rich red from a decanter she carried in a sling around her shoulder. She had a foreign look about her—Tullius couldn’t quite place from where, but her darkened skin suggested somewhere east. The edge of her slender lips curled in a tempered grin as she handed the soldiers their fresh beverage. Tullius gulped it down, not even pausing to relish the succulent flavor.

“I’d wager this is the most expensive wine you’ve ever drank,” the servant woman said as she dutifully refilled the cup.

“You don’t look like you’re from around here,” Severus flirted after taking a few generous sips from his own cup.

“Oh, my blood is as Roman as yours,” she smiled, “but you are right in that I am not from Herculaneum.”

“So where might home be?”

“Wherever pays the best,” she laughed. “I am originally of Thessaloniki, although I do not recall it much. As a girl I lived in Byzantium, and for a short while in Alexandria. More recently, I’ve found work in Syracuse, and the last year or so I’ve been here.”

“I’ve not met many women who’ve had the pleasure of seeing more of the Empire than I have,” Tullius said. “Or any, in fact. What is your name?”

She smiled again and batted her long, black eyelashes over her jade eyes. “I had been under the impression soldiers didn’t meet many women at all, discounting brothel whores and sacking victims.”

Severus laughed. “First a traveler, now a jester. You are quite the fascinating little dove.”

“Are you drunk already?” She turned to Tullius, saying, “You’d do well to keep an eye on your friend here.”

“He can manage himself,” Tullius said. “I would not begrudge him a drop after the week we’ve had.”

“Surely you’ve heard the rumors?” Severus offered eagerly.

“Aye, I’ve heard of the *immortui*. Seen plenty, too.” Her lips curled into that salacious smirk again. “Perhaps I’ve even killed a few.”

Severus roared with laughter. “Now that I’d love to see. Let’s trade; you help my friend Tullius slay the *immortui*, I’ll stay here and make coin pouring wine. What do you say?”

This time it was the woman laughing. “I’ll warn you, there’s not much coin to be had.” She leaned a little closer so as not to be overheard. “But some things are more valuable than gold.” Before Tullius could ponder what she meant by that, her voice returned to normal volume. “I better get going. This wine won’t pour itself, after all. And then what would these poor nobles do?”

She topped off their cups then turned toward a group of socialites further along the pond.

“You never said your name,” Tullius noted aloud.

She paused, looked over her shoulder, smiled, and winked. “Niobe.” And she was off.

Moments later, one of Navarchus’s guardsmen came stumbling into the villa’s peristyle. To most of the elite denizens, his menial presence went unnoticed as they went about their allegedly more important activities. Those closest to the entryway paused long enough to see something wasn’t quite right, although Tullius could see it was much worse than that from halfway across the patio. The guard was bleeding heavily from multiple wounds and as he stumbled in he lost his balance and crashed into a row of glass vases, each of them probably worth a hundred denari.

The commotion drew the attention of many of the nobles who had at first ignored him, but while they slowly came to realize what was going on, Tullius and Severus were on their feet rushing to the guard’s side, beaten only by his Captain. Appius Pulcher stood closely nearby, his face a ghostly pale shade.

“Silvio, what happened!” Navarchus yelled. The guard, whose neck was chewed up and bleeding, among other places, struggled just to turn over and cough blood onto the patterned stone floor. He appeared incapable of articulating a coherent answer, but that was enough for the

three around him to justify their initial fears. Any lingering optimism was immediately cast away by the screams erupting behind them.

They each whirled around to see an immortal making a meal out of a nobleman's mistress, while two of its fellow abominations came scampering into the villa behind it.

"Immortui!" the Captain boomed in a voice so loud it instantly recalled Tullius' wartime memories. "Clear the—AAARRGGHH!" His vocal command was cut short by the guard who had first stumbled in, now fallen to the grips of monstrous evil. In a flash, Tullius and Severus both withdrew their steel, but Navarchus was even faster as he spared no remorse for his former vassal. Tullius had not even seen where the dagger had come from, only that it was now gripped in the Navarchus' hand with the point burrowed upward through the immortal's chin. The creature was vanquished, but the damage was done; the bloody bite on the Captain's arm marked his fate plainly.

The Villa Caesoninus exploded into a full-on panic. Nobles and servants alike scrambled anywhere and everywhere in a desperate bid to escape with their humanity intact. Many of the drunken guards inside the villa joined the civilians, casting away their oaths when they were most critical. Those who stayed were not in the best of fighting states, though they were augmented by some of the guards from the camp who had come rushing up the hill after the immortui. More immortui poured into the villa from seemingly all directions, abruptly ending several escape attempts and sending the party into further hysteria.

There was little time to act and even less to think, so Tullius had to rely on his gut. He pointed his sword straight at Captain Navarchus's throat. The move enraged the Captain so that his face twisted with anger and his skin tone shifted closer to the color of the blood leaking from his arm. Severus, who at first was as stunned as the Captain, now held his own blade up in a threatening position against the commander of the City Guard. The nervous expression on his face betrayed his doubts but he voiced no dissent to Tullius' action. While bloodshed continued to erupt around them, Tullius felt as if the three former soldiers stood in their own pocket of time.

"What in Hades do you think you're doing!" Navarchus yelled within a second of Severus' reinforcing threat.

"You know what must be done," Tullius said coldly, although he did not lift his blade—not yet.

“You fool! We waste precious seconds while lives continue to be lost around you! Get out of my way!” He stood, which threw Tullius off balance for a moment, but he just as soon had his blade back on the Captain’s neck, this time hard enough to draw a couple drops of blood.

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re on the same side!” Navarchus yelled.

“Not for long.”

“Do I look like a bloodthirsty immortal to you?”

“We both know it’s only a matter of time. I have to end this now. If I let you go, you’ll be trying to give me one of those bites before the night’s out.”

“Only if one of those buggers takes me out. You don’t turn until you die, you’ve seen plenty examples of that.” The Captain’s left hand closed tighter over his dagger, his right over the hilt of his sword.

Time was running out. Immortui continued to overrun the villa. Captain Navarchus could help stop them...but he could just as easily become another one of them and further diminish the chances of survival. An immortal wearing armor could prove ten times deadlier than the standard monster, and even if he made it through the night, it was only a matter of time—Lucius hadn’t died of fatal wounds, and yet the infection still took his soul eventually. But as the tension with Elijah had shown, a preemptive execution could risk losing the trust and support of Navarchus’ men, particularly critical now that the immortalui had proven capable of breaching those perimeter defenses.

Time was running out.

(Continue to the next page to influence this pivotal moment!)

## READER CHOICE

**(EPSILON)** Tullius lets Captain Navarchus live, knowing his experienced blade could be a great asset to help survive the night, even if inevitable problems loom.

-OR-

**(ZETA)** Tullius executes Captain Navarchus, not wanting to risk the threat of facing him as an immortal, even though it could lose the support of the other guards.

[CLICK/TAP HERE TO CAST YOUR VOTE NOW!](#)

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