

INFIRMOS MORTEM

by Jason Ragatz

“CHAPTER I”

At long last, Tullius’ eyes were greeted by the sight of Herculaneum, the home he had not seen for over six bloody years. The humble town was not quite as impressive in size as Neapolis or even Pompeii, but it remained a beautiful bastion of the Roman coastline sandwiched between Neptune’s glistening waters and the towering Mount Vesuvius. In front of Tullius marched nearly twenty other soldiers from Legion XXIII who had left Herculaneum as green as he did, but now each of them returned as hardened men. To his side, Tullius’ friends Corvus, Severus, and Publius helped him to carry the improvised cot that held another soldier, Lucius. As relieved as he was to finally be home again, Tullius knew that he must first endure one final mission in getting Lucius to his family and a doctor.

“You see that Lucius?” Tullius said, though he wondered if his friend could even hear him let alone take in the heart-warming sight in front of them. “Soon you will be in your bed—not a cot or a hole dug in the dirt, but a true bed.”

“I was rather fond of my dirt hole,” Corvus smirked. “I know a couple Parthians who found it so comfortable that they still lay in it to this day!”

“‘Lay’ is an awfully kind word for ‘rot,’” Publius said.

“It is no better fate than they deserve,” Tullius spat. “They fought with skill so lacking they would have fallen to a militia.”

“It is hard enough to defeat a Roman legion, but harder still without taking many of our lives,” Severus agreed.

“Every fallen Roman is one too many,” Tullius said. “But such is the cost of war.”

“That makes the Parthians the poorest men of all,” Corvus grinned. “Though I admit there were a few who could have been useful prisoners. In Neapolis I heard that the Emperor’s Colosseum is finally to open soon, and they will need plenty of gladiators.”

Tullius chuckled. Emperor Vespasian, famous for his promiscuous funding of architectural projects, had long championed the so-called Colosseum to be his magnum opus. Since Tullius’ youth the heralds had lavishly promised a grand monument unequaled in size to any existing structure, save perhaps Egypt’s great pyramids. Yet he was no longer a boy now but a man grown, left for war and returned, and still only promises in place of mortar and stone.

“Glory to the Emperor, but we will be withering old men by the time we see that Colosseum, if ever any of us makes it to Rome,” Tullius said. “And besides, we brought enough Parthian filth back to Neapolis with us.”

“Aye, women and children to be enslaved so some rich senator don’t have to wipe his own arse, but not gladiators for the people’s pleasure,” Corvus argued. “And your doubts are ill-warranted; it was only days ago I was told this latest news.”

“And who told you that, Corvus, a Neapolitan whore?” Severus suggested, igniting a wave of laughter from the surrounding soldiers that was outdone only when Corvus replied, “Why, of course!”

Tullius was glad they could laugh about such trivial things after all they had been through. He felt fortunate to have survived with only a few proud scars and to have surrendered

little more than sweat and blood to the Anatolian sand. Since their expulsion of the encroaching Parthians, Legion XXIII had sailed from Anatolia with ships full of triumphs commending their victory. After a few days idling in the port city of Neapolis, Legate Viserus dismissed his troops to return to their families, requiring only that each centuria first deliver groups of sold slaves to their new owners. Tullius' centuria was comprised of soldiers from the Campania region, so they all agreed to deliver the slaves that had been sold to the resorts of nearby Pompeii. It was during that short journey from Pompeii to Herculaneum that Lucius fell ill with some unknown affliction.

“Thank Jupiter, we are finally here!” cheered Corvus when they reached the gates of Herculaneum. Even with their ill compatriot, the local group of soldiers marched together methodically as if on the path to battle, proudly showcasing their scarlet robes, silver armor, and feathered helmets. It uplifted Tullius to see that they were greeted by the town's excited gentry as soon as they entered the gates. As they continued to march, the swelling crowd shouted and cheered at them as heroes on parade. The sight conjured Tullius' memories as a boy when he had similarly flocked to the town gates to greet his own father's return from Gaul.

As the troops continued their homecoming march into the plaza, it warmed Tullius to recognize a familiar portly figure clamber atop the herald's podium.

“Citizens of Herculaneum!” Antoninus Drusus bellowed to the gathered crowd. The years had seen his hair whiten and wither while his belly had grown ever more padded, but Tullius was glad to hear that his voice remained as strong as ever.

“Behold!” Drusus continued, “It has been weeks since I first told you of Rome's crushing victory over Parthia! Now, the gods have rewarded your humble prayers and returned our sons

safely from Mars' battlefields! Behold! These men, who left as mere boys suckling Juno's teat, have returned, baptized by blood, as champions of all Rome!"

The crowd erupted in cheers at the words, and Drusus—never one to miss an opportunity to share his voice—continued heaping hyperbolic praise over their success in the east. The crowd continued to amass in both size and vocality, but Tullius paid little attention as his eyes searched the crowd for Lucius' wife. As the line of soldiers began to disband and find their families, the chaotic plaza made it increasingly difficult to locate her. Thankfully—or perhaps not, given her husband's condition—she was able to find them and came rushing forward to the cot when she realized who lay in it.

"Lucius!" she cried as she collapsed next to him. "My beloved husband, what ill fate has befallen you?"

"Claudia, I am glad you have found us," Tullius said in a steady tone that betrayed none of his worst fears. "We must get Lucius to a bed and find a doctor to tend to him."

Severus left to fetch a doctor, so Tullius took it upon himself to bear the extra weight. They carried the cot through the streets to Lucius' house while concerned onlookers politely offered their prayers. When they finally reached the house, they all helped Claudia to remove Lucius' armor and lay him gently in his own bed.

"Tullius!" Lucius' wife cried hysterically, her eyes now swollen, reddened, and weeping. "Tell me what has happened to my husband!"

He put his left hand upon her shoulder to help calm her.

"Truthfully, Claudia, we do not know. He was in perfect health when we departed from Pompeii only yesterday, but come this morning when Apollo raised the sun, Lucius appeared

pale and frail. He has since scarcely been able to move, speak, or eat, but I know inside he remains strong in his desire to feel your warmth again.”

Tullius squeezed her shoulder a little more firmly and gave her an assuring smile.

”Thankfully, he is now in the comfort of his wife’s love. Fear not, the doctors will restore him to full health again, gods be willing.”

In truth, Tullius had feared the worst for Lucius. He looked closer to death by the hour, but he dared not share such cynicism with Claudia. She continued to weep, but nodded and thanked Tullius for his friendship.

“Petronius shouldn’t have to see his father like this,” she sobbed.

“That lad must be almost a man now,” Tullius said, desperate to change the subject. It was a short respite, however, as talk inevitably came back to the father’s poor condition. Claudia then asked him to stay for awhile until Severus returned with a doctor, and he agreed.

When Severus did return, Tullius was mildly surprised to find Galen by his side. Galen was a few years older than Tullius but had still been only a student when the latter left for war. Now, Galen wore the insignia of a professional doctor—a reminder that time had not stood still in Herculaneum while he was off killing Parthians.

“Welcome home, Tullius,” Galen greeted with muted enthusiasm before he immediately set about examining Lucius. This allowed Tullius a brief reprieve from the burden of responsibility, and again his thoughts turned to his family. Though he continued to observe, the doctor was preoccupied assessing Lucius’ symptoms so Tullius inched toward Severus near the doorway.

“Galen?” Tullius whispered to Severus, whom he was now standing next to. “I’m sure

he's a fine young doctor—he's always been smart—but why not Animaheus? Surely he is not so old that he couldn't attend to Lucius himself."

"Apparently he was offered a position in Rome a couple years ago," Severus whispered back. "Gaius Baltus is gathering supplies in Neapolis and Manilaeus was called to tend to a senator at his estate in the countryside. Galen was the only doctor left at the clinic, but he assured me he is much more practiced than before we left for war."

"I do not doubt it; still, it would be more comforting to have our brother's life in the care of Animaheus' expertise."

To that comment Severus simply nodded, and the two of them looked on as Galen continued his examination. Despite the obvious physical symptoms—loss of color in the skin, fleeting consciousness, precipitous sweat, and fever—Galen proved unable to provide a conclusive diagnosis.

"Whatever sickness this is, it is unlike any I have seen either in person or in scrolls," Galen said. "Could it be that this is some Parthian affliction from your campaign?"

"I would not be so bold to presume I know more of disease than a doctor," Tullius said. "However, that does not seem likely; Lucius was as strong and healthy as any of us until just this morning. If he was infected in Parthia, surely it would have shown by then, and perhaps in some of us as well."

"Then whatever has taken hold of him is truly a mystery," Galen sighed.

"We did bring prisoners back to Neapolis and even some to Pompeii," Corvus suggested. "Perhaps this is their nefarious work? Lucius could have gotten sick just breathing the same air as those filth!"

“And what of you, or I, or any others of our legion who returned on the same ships as Lucius and shared the same watch over our prisoners?” Tullius said.

Corvus shrugged. “For all we know, others *do* suffer the same illness as he. As to us, I do not know.”

Tullius did not bother to exploit the hole in his friend’s logic; the day had been long and arduous as it was and bickering about unknown causes would not cure Lucius. Already night was beginning to fall upon Herculaneum and Tullius’ stomach groaned with an emptiness echoed by his heart’s longing to see his own wife and daughter. He gave his best wishes to Claudia and thanked the others for their assistance. He also promised Claudia that he and Galen would return at first light tomorrow—whether or not Galen wanted to arrive at dawn was of no concern to Tullius. Galen administered some general medicines to Lucius and left a small supply with his wife, then took his leave with the soldiers.

“Whatever Lucius seems to have caught does not leave him with much promise, I fear,” Galen admitted once they were outside. But he tried to reassure Tullius before leaving and said, “I will bury myself in texts tonight in search for a remedy, that I promise you.”

Tullius’ memory of Herculaneum guided him through the city streets as easily as riding a horse for the first time in years. Familiar abodes of friends present and past flanked the streets and alleys as he made his way back home. He was grateful that the late hour and advancing darkness meant there were few people left in the streets to delay him, however good-hearted their intentions might be.

When Tullius finally reached the door to his home, he stepped in to find his daughter practicing dance in the atrium. She was eleven now; much different from the tiny child he had

left behind. She stopped instantly at the sight of him, and for a moment she stared at him with fear in her eyes, as if she thought him to be a stranger. But only seconds later the fear melted to wonder and she slowly approached him with a nervous smile across her face.

“Father?” she said tentatively.

Tullius smiled. “Olivia.”

He opened his arms and stepped forward to embrace her in a long hug. It took her a moment, but she too wrapped her arms around him. After what felt like whole minutes yet was still impossibly not long enough, he pulled back to see her crying.

“Olivia, my daughter, why is it you weep? Does my return upset you?”

She shook her head and smiled widely. “These are tears of joy, father. I was afraid I’d never see you again. And yet, here you stand! I came by the plaza earlier, but...but I...”

“Shh, it’s okay child. I’m here now. The gods have been generous enough to see me home safely.”

She paused, wiped away some tears, and then smiled at him once more.

Indeed, it was surreal to see his daughter grown up so much, almost a young woman in her own right. Had he really been away that long? Tullius hadn’t thought so, but somewhere inside burned a sense of regret that he had missed so much of his family’s life.

“Olivia, it is so good to see you. I cannot wait to hear all you’ve—” he stopped as he noticed the figure who had emerged in the hallway over his daughter’s shoulder.

“Cassiopia...” he breathed. His wife smiled as he rose and came to her, but after six years of longing he couldn’t find the words to express his joy. The moment of their reunion was more awkward than he had imagined, and when he leaned in to kiss her they almost bumped

heads. It was Cassiopia who settled Tullius' anxiety with a gentle caress of his beard, and a moment later they consummated the homecoming with an elongated kiss. The sensation he felt then was one he had been missing for far too long.

“Thank the gods,” Tullius said as he placed one arm around each of the important women in his life. “I’m finally home.”

Cassiopia had prepared a small feast of sorts in celebration of her husband's return. Despite their somewhat modest means, she roasted an entire chicken for the meal. The poultry was joined by a freshly uncorked cask of wine—one that had been unopened since before Tullius left and saved for just this occasion—along with fresh fruits she and Olivia had picked.

Over several helpings and even more cups of wine, they recounted myriad events that had occurred in his absence, most of them to do with Olivia. Many were familiar from letters they had written to him, which eased his regret slightly. Tullius, too, shared several tales about life in the east, though he spared them the bloody bits. Finally, they salted the leftover chicken, put Olivia to sleep, and at long last Tullius was alone with Cassiopia, and not a thread more.

It was the middle of the night when Tullius was woken by someone shouting his name.

“Tullius! Tullius! Please wake up!”

Tullius stirred and rolled over, knocking an empty cup of wine off the bed in the process. The movement also caused him to pull the linens off Cassiopia's nude body, which caused her to stir as well.

“Tullius! Please, you have to come! It's my father!”

Cassiopia, half-awake, blindly flailed for the linen, and upon grasping it she pulled it

over herself and rolled to the side.

“Who is that?” she groaned.

“Go back to sleep, my love, I’ll take care of him,” her husband whispered.

“Tullius!” the voice continued to call from the atrium. “Tullius!”

“Grant a man a moment to dress!” Tullius called back as he lumbered out of bed. He grabbed a tunic off the floor and threw it over his head before stumbling out from the back of the house into the atrium. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he found a teenage boy standing there holding a torch.

“Petronius?” Tullius yawned. “Is that you?”

“Please, sir, Mr. Tullius, I’m sorry for the late hour of my visit, but it’s my father,” Petronius stuttered.

“Now hold on there, calm down. What’s happened to Lucius?”

“He’s...I’m not sure, he’s...really sick, I...please, come back with me.” The boy was clearly shaken by the state of his father.

“It’s okay, son. He’s still alive, right? Doctor Galen said he would come by at dawn....”

“No, listen, something has happened to him. He started twitching and groaning and making these horrible noises with his throat. My mother’s trying to settle him down and I left to go get Mr. Galen from the clinic, but nobody’s there. Please, Mr. Tullius, I don’t know where else to go.”

Tullius hesitated for a brief moment, but knew he must go. He grabbed a cloak and lit a torch of his own, then set off with Petronius to his father’s house.

The streets were dark and barren with only the distant sound of a barking dog to be

heard. Above, the heavens glowed in patches behind the clouds while the full moon likewise punctured through them in soft beams of light.

Lucius' house was eerily dark when they arrived. As they stepped through the door, they heard a noise come from the rear of the house.

"Mother?" Petronius called. "Mother, I've returned! I couldn't find Galen, but I brought Tullius with me."

There was no response. The air hung still and an anxious tension crept up Tullius' spine.

"Did you leave them without light?" Tullius questioned skeptically.

"Nay, there was a candle in the bedchamber," said the boy. The two of them eased their way through the hall that connected the atrium and bedchamber. Whatever candle Petronius had left before, it was now snuffed.

Luckily, they each held torches to beat away the darkness. Petronius led the way as they entered the bedchamber, but the boy jumped back so abruptly that he almost knocked Tullius over. The soldier struggled to simultaneously keep his balance and hold up Petronius.

"What is with you?" cursed the soldier. "Even Mercury doesn't move so quickly."

Petronius pointed a shaking finger into the bedchamber and Tullius raised his torch. To his horror, he saw that Lucius was no longer lying the bed in which they had lain him in the afternoon. Instead, collapsed over where his stricken body had been, lay Claudia. She wasn't moving and there were crimson stains all over the linens and her clothing.

Tullius stumbled back in shock and Petronius fell to ground. Tullius had seen many grotesque injuries during his years in Anatolia, but none disturbed him half so deeply as this sight. He gathered his breath a moment, raised his torch once more, and stepped back into the

bedchamber.

It had not been the wicked illusion he silently hoped for; there indeed lay Claudia, motionless on the bed and covered in blood. She had wounds all over her arms, chest, and neck that were too haphazardly torn to be the effect of a blade. Tullius waved his torch around the small bedchamber, but Lucius was nowhere to be seen.

“No...” Tullius muttered to no one in particular. “You couldn’t have. You wouldn’t. Lucius, where *are* you?”

He had little time to consider possible answers before Petronius let out a sound that was a cross between a yelp and a scream.

“T-T-Tullius!”

Tullius spun around and jumped into the hallway, holding out his torch in his left hand. Instinctively, his free hand reached for the hilt of a sword on his belt, but to his dismay he was not in uniform. Whoever had scared Petronius receded from the light back into the shadows of the cooking chamber in the house’s rear.

“Lucius?” Tullius shouted, but no answer came. “Who’s there?”

When again only silence responded, Tullius turned to pull Petronius up off the floor. He picked the boy’s torch off the ground and thrust it into his hand.

“Do not let go of this!” Tullius commanded.

Petronius had no sooner seized the torch that his eyes went wide and his mouth opened to scream. Tullius knew the intruder was coming up behind him and his battle-hardened instincts helped him to twist around with the flame of his torch pointed outward like a sword. Unfortunately, the intruder was quicker than Tullius and his torchbearing arm thudded

harmlessly into the lunging attacker's side. The collision caused Tullius to lose his grip on the torch while the intruder tackled him to the floor. They rolled on the ground until Tullius was on his back, at which point he grasped the intruder's neck with both hands and held him an arm's length away.

It was then that the flickering flames finally allowed Tullius a good look at his attacker. Fear pierced him deep to the bone unlike he had felt since the eve of his first battle. At the end of his outstretched arms, he was holding off Lucius. Rather, it *looked* like some decayed facsimile of Lucius, but it was not any Lucius that Tullius had known. This...creature had grey skin that was covered in blisters and peeling off in some places. Its face resembled Lucius' except twisted and deformed. Patches of hair were missing, the eyes were red as blood, it was dripping mucus and saliva from a bloody mouth, and its breath smelled like a slaughtered wolf that had been left to rot for months.

The creature roared and growled and struggled to get free. It flailed wildly and tried to claw and bite at Tullius, but his tunic and elusiveness protected him. Despite all his strength, Tullius struggled to keep control over the creature and the ensuing skirmish sent them tumbling across the atrium floor. All the while the creature continued to flail and growl and scream, claw and bite.

At one point Tullius managed to pin the creature on the ground and punch it in the head with a solid right hook, but the act failed to assuage its bloodlust. Moments later, it was Tullius who was pinned to the ground. The creature was about to attack him when suddenly a bright flame erupted behind it and the creature howled. Tullius looked past the creature to see that Petronius had thrust his torch into its back--an act which now drew the creature's attention.

The burn appeared to wound the creature that resembled Lucius, but it did not defeat it. It effortlessly lept off of Tullius and attacked young Petronius, pinning him to the ground and biting flesh from his neck while the boy screamed in agony.

Tullius was up on his feet as quickly as he could manage. He grabbed the creature with both hands and flung it with all his might across the atrium. He picked up both torches—one in each hand—and charged angrily toward the creature. At first it appeared undeterred and tried to attack again, but Tullius was able to burn the creature’s eye and abdomen, which finally sent it scurrying out Lucius’ door into the streets of Herculaneum.

READER CHOICE:

((Alpha)) Tullius chases after the creature that looks like Lucius.

OR

((Beta)) Tullius lets the creature go and attends to Petronius.

(Cast your vote at <http://nerdsontherocks.com/infirmosmortem>)