

INFIRMOS MORTEM

BY JASON RAGATZ

"CHAPTER II"

For a few moments, all Tullius could do was stand frozen while his eyes chased after the monster that his dear friend Lucius had become. It all felt impossible to comprehend, but he also lacked the time to try.

He spun around to steal a glance of the boy Petronius. He was bleeding badly, but his enduring consciousness assuaged little since he was also bleeding badly and staring blankly at the heavens between nervous, exasperated breaths. Tullius' heart ached at the sight, but the soldier inside reminded himself of a greater duty.

"Hang in their lad, I vow to return shortly." Tullius did not give the boy time to wrench further at his heart with objection. Leaving one of his torches beside the injured teenager, he rose swiftly and inspected the dark dwelling for a weapon, but to no avail. Disappointed, he set off with his torch—a poor substitute for his blade.

Tullius barreled down Herculaneum's shadowy streets as he sprinted in the direction the creature had gone. The stone-paved road bent off toward the coast while various residences and businesses staggered along its flanks.

It was neither a poor nor a rich neighborhood by coastal Italian standards, probably filled mostly with local traders, builders, scholars, and other military families. Tullius had only been through this area a handful of times, perhaps merely doubling the count upon returning from war.

A distant cry piqued the soldier's trained ears. Though the sound came from ahead of the street's bend, Tullius' mind unwillingly recalled the grotesque monster that had possessed Lucius' body—and the damage it had done to the boy. Tullius pushed his legs harder, but no matter how fast he went he could not outrun the image of Petronius on the floor.

The air was a little chilly for early summer, but the temperature was not to blame when Tullius shuddered as the road spilled into the district's web of interwoven blocks. Just two blocks ahead of him, the nightmarish creature was hunched over devouring some poor soul whose lame

body was obstructed by shadow. A few oil lamps imbued a soft orange glow, but only barely enough for Tullius to make out the horrid scene. The moon's disappearance behind an opaque veil of clouds only made things eerier.

The monster did not seem to notice Tullius from distance. With Petronius' dire state vivid in his memory, the soldier squeezed his torch and charged forward. When he reached the creature and its victim, he slowed his pace and stabbed at the creature's back with the torch's flame in a seamless motion. Just as at Lucius' home, the flames sizzled when they seared its skin and sent the beast retreating from its prey.

After stumbling back a few feet, the creature reared its horrible face at Tullius and let out its menacing, throaty growl. It unnerved Tullius immensely to get another detailed look at the abomination. The likeness of his friend's face remained, except sickly, colorless, and repulsive. The dark red eyes matched the color of the ooze dripping from its mouth and they burned with a savage hatred. Whatever had become of Lucius' body, his soul was clearly lost.

Tullius lurched forward again with another hefty swing of the torch. "Back, monster! Back!" he shouted.

The fire conquered the creature once more and this time it fled. Thrice had the flames proven effective, but could they also be lethal? Tullius was not even sure if this demon counted as being alive. He only knew that a sword would serve a more proper test to its mortality.

Tullius, still panting from the initial sprint, briefly examined the possessed Lucius' latest casualty. Close-toed sandals, a thin umber tunic under a brown toga, and the portly composition of a man rarely short of food to eat labeled him as a likely baker. At present, unfortunately, his most defining feature was the gaping wound in his abdomen, from which flesh and blood had been torn asunder. The man's violent twitching signaled he had not quite left this world, but neither would he be in it much longer.

Tullius yearned for a utensil to end the man's misery and prayed that Pluto would pity his soul's gruesome fate. He was about to renew his chase of the monstrous creature, but the sound of clanking armor and the thud of boots seized his attention.

A pair of city guardsmen rounded one of the street corners at his back. Their uniforms were plainly recognizable even in the low light: silver metal armor over a brown tunic with a sea-blue cape waving behind their shoulders. Knowing they had the weapons he sought so desperately, the soldier opted to wait for these guards before resuming his pursuit. He stepped

away from the baker, whose twitching had become more sporadic, and waited for the guardsmen to close the final ten meters between them.

He was alarmed when they slowed and pointed their spears at him as they crossed that distance. “Halt! Or we’ll skewer you like a pig!” one of them shouted. His voice was deep and his dark-skinned face hinted his origins lay in the desert lands beyond Carthage and Egypt.

At first Tullius was stunned, but he quickly realized they must have thought him to be the perpetrator of this heinous crime. “Wait!” he pleaded, “the culprit escapes as we speak! Lend me a sword and help me slay the monster!”

“A monster was it?” said the second guard. This one was shorter and more common looking, though his pale skin, distinct nose, and protruding curls suggested the man or his lineage hailed from Judaea, not far from where Tullius had spent the last six years. He paused in front of Tullius while the dark-skinned guard circled around. Both kept their spears pointed sharply. “What a coincidence then that this bastard’s blood just so happens to be all over yeh.”

“An’ the only soul out in the street, at that,” added the baritone behind him.

Tullius’ rage welled. “Imbeciles, the blood is not even his! I only paused to aid this man, the true criminal escapes you while you fail to do your job!”

That earned him a spear to the back of the knee, though it was only the rounded brunt of the shaft. Still, the force sent him buckling to the ground next to the baker’s bleeding body, which had finally stopped twitching.

The Jewish guard spat on the ground in front Tullius. “You’re coming with us.”

He felt the other guard’s spear prick him in the back, as if to say, “Don’t even dare trying to get away.”

But suddenly, a throaty growl came from his right, and next he saw the guard in front of him go wide-eyed and bewildered while the one behind screamed. The creature must have returned for a fresh meal.

Tullius twisted around and found the creature wrestling with the dark-skinned guard on the ground, his once-prickly spear lying hopelessly beyond his reach. Only this wasn’t the same creature that had assaulted him in the home of Lucius—this one looked like the baker who had been dying in the street only minutes before.

It still bore the nasty wound in its abdomen, but that no longer seemed to be of consequence. Its skin had turned a pasty shade of grey and it made the same feral growls as the

Lucius creature. Tullius also caught a glimpse of the same blood-red eyes.

Despite his superior height and physique, the dark-skinned guard struggled to fend the new creature off and his companion was not swift enough in aiding him. It clawed at his legs and managed a visible bite into his exposed shin before the other guard came to the rescue with his own spear. The Jewish guard stabbed it straight through the injured abdomen from the side, but that only caused the wicked creature's neck to snap toward him.

With his hands firmly gripping the spear that was impaling the creature, the guard had no defense against its wrath. The beast's own grey hands took hold of the guard's face then began to burrow viciously into it.

Tullius was on his feet now, his heart pounding thunderously in his chest. He scooped up his torch; though it was no longer burning it still crackled with embers, so he used it to make sure the creature didn't get too close while he eased toward the dark-skinned guard's spear.

The baker-turned-predator was too consumed with his meal to heed him. Blood cascaded down its face and spilled onto the street while the Jewish guard's limbs lay limp, his own spear still jutting out the demon's side.

With another sliding step Tullius reached the remaining spear, and though he did not dare tear his eyes from the bloody horror, his free hand easily found the shaft on its own. It was just as he lifted it that the creature finally turned to see him.

In the eight or nine meters between Tullius and the savage monster, the surviving guard lay bleeding, shaking, and panting apprehensively. The creature dropped the bloody corpse like a child suddenly bored of his new toy and launched itself toward Tullius, who ducked to the side and slammed it in the back with his dying torch. He let go of the stump as he did so and placed the extra hand near the back of the spear, then he thrust the weapon forward into the creature's back. Tullius' experience against the Parthians saved him from the same mistake the Jewish guard made, for the spear had no sooner sliced through the ferocious demon than Tullius was twisting it right back out.

The beast stumbled forward as black, syrupy fluid spilled out of its nascent wound. If it could be bled, surely it could be killed—for good. At least, Tullius hoped as much.

But the creature would not perish easily. It spun around and came after Tullius again. This time the soldier stood his ground and honed a well-placed thrust straight into its snarling mouth all the way through the top of its head.

The demon twitched and then was still. The crimson eyes remained open, but they were now absent their fiery bloodlust. Its wounds still bled, but it was banished from this world once more. Tullius removed the bloody spear and cast the baker's body aside. It was only then that Tullius noticed the deep voice that had been screaming behind him. And then he heard another throaty growl.

Just as Lucius' attack had caused madness to possess the baker upon meeting death, the Jew now appeared similarly infected. Despite having no eyes, nose, or barely even lips remaining, the new creature had crawled up to its former partner and was mindlessly digging its skeletoned teeth into his right thigh. Though the facial features were indistinguishable, the creature's lingering skin had also turned a decaying grey.

The sky was beginning to warm slightly as Apollo began his dawn approach. The guard's screaming was attracting attention and another quartet of city guardsmen were approaching rapidly from the south.

Tullius could not wait for them. The creature-guard had crawled further and was now ripping a trail of bloody flesh up its former partner's torso and the massive blood loss was already draining his panicked screams. Tullius ran up to the pair of guards and kicked the creature off. It landed on its back and its deformed half-face roared at him, but he answered back with a fierce downward thrust that shattered the exposed skull. Like the baker before him, the creature-guard's rabid flailing ceased immediately following the lethal blow to the cranium.

The new guards were almost at the scene, but their remaining colleague had already surrendered his consciousness. Tullius knew the poor soul was already lost and that he must act quickly to prevent a repeat of events. Hence, he pulled the spear out of one guard's brain and drove it into the other before he too rose from death with a new appetite.

For his resourcefulness, Tullius received an arrow from the direction of the four approaching guards. He spotted the feathered dart at the last moment and attempted to twist out of the way. The arrow just missed and only graced his left arm but his instinctual recoil caused him to lose his balance and stumble to a knee.

Leather footsteps thudded up behind him, accompanied by the eclectic clanking of metal armor. That was the last thing Tullius remembered.

Tullius was getting thrown into a cell by the time he regained consciousness. He heard the click of the iron lock, the rattling of keys being put away, and the laughter of impudent

guards who knew nothing of the horrors he had witnessed—and performed. His vision was still hazy, so he took his time gathering himself into a sitting position against the cell’s back wall. The back of his head throbbed incessantly.

Even once he came to his senses, there wasn’t much to see. The room was dim; the only light came from the streaks of sun that ran through two brick-sized holes near the top of stone mason walls, and a loan sconce. The air was musty and thick to breathe, the ground nothing but padded dirt and scattered hay. Otherwise there was just the putrid chamber pot in the corner, iron bars, and Tullius.

Hours passed and no one came back for him. It felt as long if not longer, but he also knew it was fact by the sun’s movement. Its morning streaks no longer ran through the stone and the soft glow that replaced them paled compared to the flame that danced across the walls. Occasionally, Tullius would stand up and shout for the guards or bang on the bars to gain their attention. All of his efforts were futile, and he grew restless.

Meanwhile, the creature that was once Lucius still prowled the streets. For all Tullius knew the boy Petronius was still suffering helplessly as well, if not transformed into a monster like the others. Tullius’ spirits sank further at the thought. For all he accomplished for Rome against Parthia, he had been home not one day and his life was falling to ash.

Finally, the dungeon’s unseen entryway swung open and in stepped three city guardsmen. Tullius thought he recognized two of them from the posse that dragged him in, but he never got a clear look so he couldn’t be sure. The third appeared to be the captain, judging by the ornate detailing of his armor, tunic, and cloak. The two minions posted up against the back wall on each side of the flickering torch, while the captain approached the iron bars.

He looked markedly older than his sentries and actually looked like he’d seen a real battle or two. His hair, which was the same trimmed length all around, including his beard, was nearly all white and only streaked with grey, yet he looked as if he still wielded the strength of a man decades younger.

“Sir, there has been—” Tullius began, but he was sharply cut off.

“I have not given you leave to speak, criminal,” the captain snapped.

Anger welled in Tullius, but he pushed to keep his emotions at bay. “I am no criminal,” he replied tersely.

The captain bellowed with laughter, turning to his men who forced out their own

obedient chuckles. “Well, boys, apparently murder is not a crime!” The Captain of the Guard made an exaggerated arm gesture and gripped the hilt on his waist, pulling it out just a decimeter. “So if I decide I want to relieve you of your head right here in this pit, I wouldn’t be committing a crime.”

Tullius gritted his teeth. It would be no easy task cajoling this one. “The true criminal still roams the streets freely. He is a monster birthed from the dead gone mad, its disease spread to the very victims it slays.”

The captain stepped as close as he could to the bars and stared Tullius straight in the eye. “You take me for a fucking boy to be amused by mythical poetry?” His eyes fumed with anger equal to his tone.

Tullius refused to relent. “I know it sounds of lunacy, but I swear it to be true. I am a soldier of the Twenty-Third Legion, sir.” He braced his fist diagonally across his chest, then straight out to the captain, per the soldiers’ salute. “I swear upon my honor, it was an abomination the like of which I’ve never seen.”

“And what would you know of honor?” the captain said. He pointed one of his leather-wrapped fingers at the curly-haired guard behind him. “This man *watched* you stick a spear in the skull of his cousin! The lad’s face was so mangled his own wife couldn’t recognize him when the body was brought to her. Will you stand here and deny your crimes to his face? *Soldier?*”

Tullius matched the captain’s unyielding leer. “He saw me slay only the monster, not the soul who was already on Charon’s ferry.” He turned his back to the captain. “I don’t expect you to believe me, but the truth it remains. You will heed my words when the attacks continue whilst I lay here in my own shit.”

The old man only grunted. “I’ve seen your like before, you know. Young men who ran off at the first scent of war looking for glory. I should know--I was a legionnaire myself a lifetime ago. Aye, there are heroes born from all that bloodshed--but monsters as well.” Tullius felt the spray of the captain’s spit on the back of his neck. “Monsters who never quench the thirst to spill more blood.”

The captain turned away and signaled for his henchman to follow after him, and all three marched out in their clanking armor.

“You’re making a grave mistake!” Tullius shouted after them as they ascended the stairs

and slammed the hidden iron door. After that, he was accompanied only by his own thoughts.

The fatigue must have finally grabbed Tullius, because the next thing he knew the captain had returned and was barking at him to get off his arse. He wasn't sure how long he had slept for, though the change in lighting suggested at least several hours. As he shook away his grogginess, Tullius noticed that the captain was again flanked by two others. But instead of henchmen this time, he was followed by Tullius' legion brothers, Corvus and Severus.

The ragged prisoner jumped up hastily at the sight of them and his earlier frustration now bloomed into hope. The captain didn't speak, but the disdain that emanated from his icy glare said plenty. He pressed his keys into the cell door's lock, twisted, and pulled the iron trap open. Then he stepped back and allowed Corvus and Severus to go in and greet Tullius.

"About time someone talked some sense into that...elder," Tullius bristled.

"Heard some city guardsman in the forum asking about the soldiers who returned yesterday," Corvus grinned. "Was looking for someone to vouch for your identity."

"Lucky for you, the bloke found us," Severus nodded. But that was the extent of the good feelings for Tullius.

He turned toward the captain. "I presume my friends' words, honorable as they are, are not the only reason you're releasing me?"

His response was another dismissive grunt paired with a curt nod. "You're might only be half as dull-minded as I made you out to be, *soldier*, I'll warrant you that." Tullius did not like the way the captain hung on his profession. "Your words have rung true enough. There have been further attacks during your incarceration."

"And the attacker?"

"Still only mythical poetry, I'm afraid, though his crimes speak plainly enough for his existence."

Tullius studied the captain, but the old man betrayed no emotions other than his plain doubts about Tullius' vindication. "Do I have your leave to return to my family, now?"

The captain gritted his teeth. "No," he said plainly, then, "but it is no longer in my power to keep you here." He abruptly left and marched toward the door, but when he reached it he paused.

"I'll be watching you closely, Tullius of the Twenty-Third Legion." And then the old man was gone.

Tullius turned back toward Corvus and Severus. “Brothers, I have grave news.”

Severus, already frowning, simply nodded. “The rumors are spreading quickly throughout the city. The captain demanded to personally interrogate some of the victims at the medical clinic before he would agree to release you.”

“Kept saying he’d grown too old for this madness and would sooner let you rot in here,” Corvus added. “Well, can’t really argue with the first bit, and by the smell you of he wasn’t too far off on the latter, either...” He smiled as he waved the air in front of his nose.

Tullius glared at the youngest among them. “This is no time for jests!” he scolded. “Lucius is dead, and the body he left behind has risen and developed a hunger for flesh.” He gave them the quick version of the prior night’s events.

“Aye, sounds similar to the stories we been hearin’” Corvus said, his usual snark notably muted. “The people are calling them *immortui*—the dead reborn.”

“It is a frighteningly apt name for the demons,” Tullius observed mournfully. “Do you know if Petronius still lives? Or what has been done to the mother?”

Severus shook his head. “The city guard had the house sealed off when we stopped by around midday, though they would say nothing of anyone inside. It is possible that Petronius had already been moved to the clinic.” Not one of them dared to suggest the alternative.

Tullius clenched his fists and prayed silently that the boy made it. “We must move quickly,” he said. “But first I must ensure my family’s safety.”

Tullius led Corvus and Severus away from the guard station toward the eastern side of the town under the watchful Mount Vesuvius. They pushed through the crowded streets, at one point knocking a basket off a woman’s head as she passed. She cursed them angrily but Tullius ignored her and continued to press toward his home.

To his relief, he found the girls talking in the kitchen as they prepared a stew. They were thankfully unharmed and rushed forward to greet him.

After prying off a clingy Olivia, Tullius approached his wife to embrace her. He was startled when a hard slap slashed his face in return.

“Where the hell have you been?” she demanded. “You’ve been home a matter of hours and you’re sneaking off in the middle of the night to only the gods know where. Were you at a brothel?”

After the endless night, Tullius couldn’t help but laugh. “No, my love. I...well, it’s a

lengthy tale, but I've just come from the carcery."

She looked puzzled. "What in Juno's name did you do to get thrown in the carcery? And what happened to your arm? And what is that *smell*?"

He brushed off the boyish giggles behind him and kissed his wife gently on the forehead. "I'll explain later. Right now I need you and Olivia to pack your things."

Worry washed over her face. "Tullius, what's wrong?"

"Is this about the monsters?" Olivia asked timidly from the background.

Tullius looked at her then to Cassiopia, then back to Olivia again. He stepped gently toward his daughter and knelt before her.

Cassiopia and the soldiers stood quietly, but Tullius just smiled reassuringly. "Pack your things, you're going to go visit your aunt!" He ruffled her hair and eschewed her to her chamber.

He turned to face his wife, who looked equally angry and nervous. "Tullius..."

"I'm sending you both to your sister's in Pompeii," he said bluntly. "You'll be safe there and needn't worry."

"But I'll worry about you!" Tears began to well in her eyes and one even escaped and slid gently down her cheek. "You've just gotten you back and now you're going to turn right around and try to get killed again?" The tears were falling more easily now.

"Listen...I don't know where she heard it, but Olivia was not wrong. A great danger stalks Herculaneum. You'll be safer at your sister's for now, and I'll ride out to get you very soon."

"But why can't you just come with us? Haven't you spilled enough of your blood already? Does Mars still thirst for more of it? This isn't the army anymore, Tullius. If the city is dangerous, *take* your family from here!"

She was standing firm now, her voice having grown fiercer as her tone grew angrier. Tullius had stared back fearlessly against thousands of Parthians trying to end his life, but this woman's glare was far more intimidating.

"You don't understand, Cassi. It's *my* fault the city is in danger. It's *my fault* that Lucius is a monster and his only son dying, dead, or worse." Cassiopia's were not the only wet cheeks now. "I cannot leave. By the gods I love you and cannot bear for you to stay here at risk. I promise, you will see me soon. Please."

Cassiopia said nothing, but only continued to cry and stare deep into her husband's eyes.

Finally she sniffled, pulled her gaze away, and stomped to the back of the dwelling to collect her things.

Tullius pinched his eyes with his thumb and forefinger then set about the house rummaging for his armor. He did not bother being hospitable to Corvus and Severus, but could not appreciate them more for leaving him to be. They waited in the atrium while Tullius went to his war chest. He strapped on a boiled leather underarmor over his tunic for slightly thicker protection and fastened the belt that carried his sheathed sword. He slipped a dagger into the belt as well, but he didn't bother with any more.

When he returned to the atrium, his wife and daughter were ready. Their expressions were somber, but they voiced no dissent. Tullius and the other soldiers escorted both of them to a carriage bound for Pompeii and paid the driver generously for a hasty departure.

As the driver hitched his horses, Tullius helped his women into the vehicle, then turned to his two companions. He would not send his family away to safety only to have their carriage raided on the Empire's notorious roads. The driver would provide some measure of protection, surely, or he would not be in this profession for long. But Tullius was not ignorant enough to leave their fate to a stranger alone.

The two soldiers watched their former *optio* expectantly. Corvus, the brash, light-hearted youngster could keep their spirits up and their lives in tact; Severus, the quieter veteran, would be methodical in his protective protocol.

Both were capable men, but Tullius needed to choose one for the task.

READER CHOICE:

(GAMMA) - TULLIUS SENDS CORVUS TO ESCORT HIS FAMILY.

OR

(DELTA) - TULLIUS SENDS SEVERUS TO ESCORT HIS FAMILY.

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

LINK NOT WORKING ON YOUR DEVICE? COPY/PASTE THE FOLLOWING URL INTO A WEB BROWSER:
[HTTP://WWW.SURVEYMONKEY.COM/S/JSWCHX2](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/JSWCHX2)

Copyright © 2012 Jason Ragatz. All rights reserved.