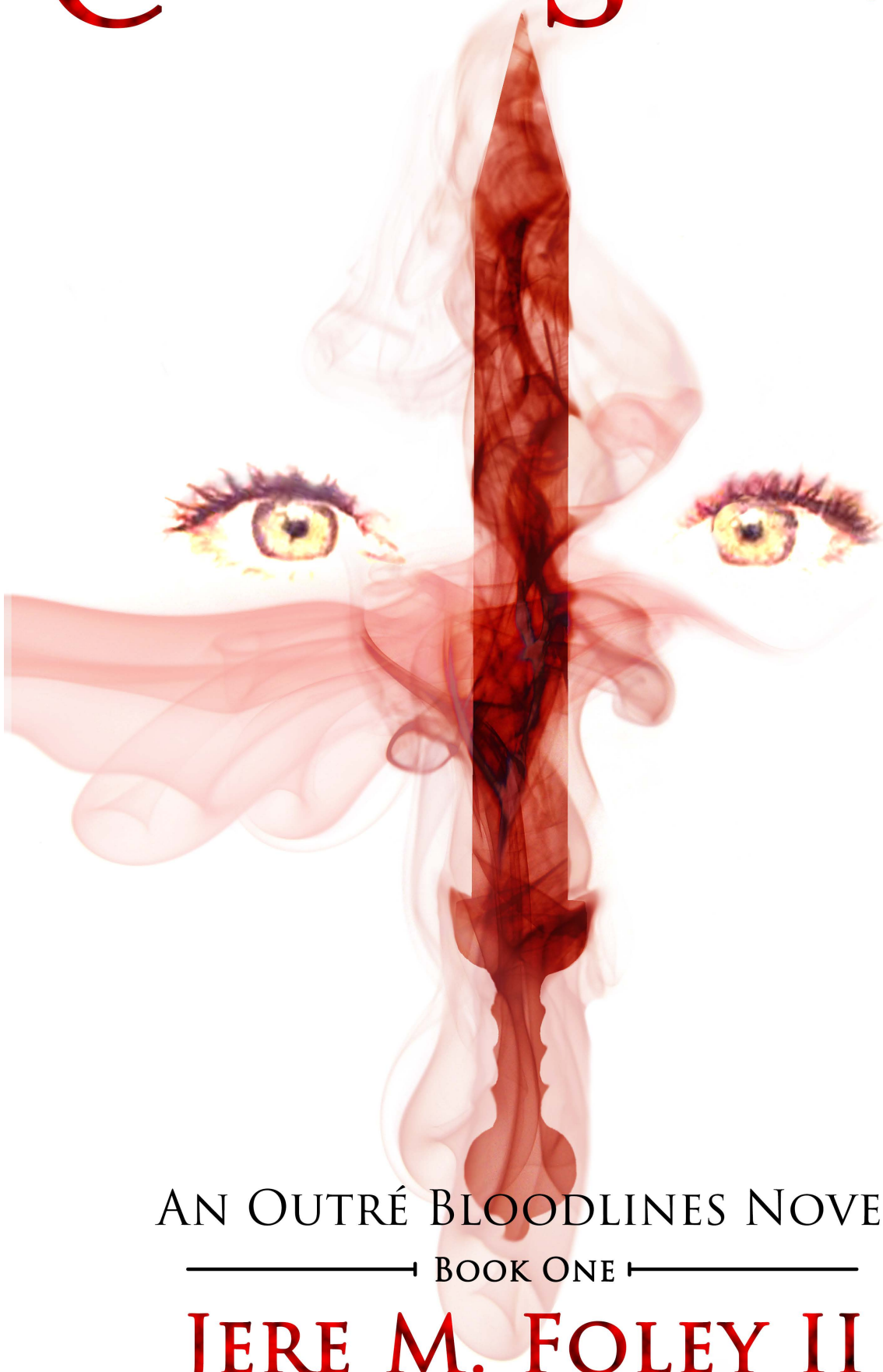


CAESAR'S SHADOW



AN OUTRÉ BLOODLINES NOVEL

— BOOK ONE —

JERE M. FOLEY II

CAESAR'S SHADOW

 PREVIEW 

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BOOK ONE



Rogue Ravens
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First Edition Preview

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Slumberscythe is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This novel is dedicated to every person who has struggled
to show the world who they are on the inside.

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE HOME OF A CENTURION OF ROME
MID-AUGUST, 48 B.C.

The messenger from Caesar's Tenth Legion barely acknowledged Nona, instead addressing her mother. "Your husband died protecting Caesar," the messenger relayed solemnly. Nona's mother started sobbing, absently pulling down the fabric to cover the windows. Nona was afraid if she moved it would be true. The gods had bestowed the gift of battle upon him. Her vision tunneled for the first time in her life. Her father couldn't be dead.

Nona watched the messenger give her grieving mother time to finish covering the windows. When she finished, he continued. "Pompey's forces at Pharsalus came from the right and left. Your husband Gaius Crastinus shouted to his men, 'Follow me, my old comrades, and show your general true courage! Only this battle remains; when it's over he will regain his dignity and we our freedom!' The men, upon hearing these words, grew excited for battle."

Nona knew the power in her father's blood reached into men's hearts and forged them into a single fighting entity. Even at fourteen years old, she had regularly heard the clarion call of her father's battle speeches. His men would have rushed into

that combat proudly.

“Then your husband turned to Caesar,” the messenger continued. “Saluting he said, ‘Today, general, I shall earn your gratitude whether I live or die!’”

Nona and her mother both knew the next part of the tale would break their hearts. Her mother stopped fussing with the windows and moved to be near her daughter. They needed to hear how he died.

“He then led the First Legion from Caesar’s right wing, nearly breaking through Pompey’s line before one among the enemy thrust a gladius through his mouth.” The messenger managed to convey both his awe of Crastinus’ feat and his sympathy for Nona and her mother in the retelling. “When the battle ended, Victorious Caesar proclaimed himself in Gaius Crastinus’ debt. Your husband’s heroism will be remembered at a ceremony of tribute. Caesar is selecting a site for an altar in his honor.”

Her mother, a traditional Roman woman in every way, was displaying both grief and pride. But Nona knew her feelings of rage and loss were unbecoming a girl of her station. She had always welcomed the rage as a gift; it made her stronger and faster than anyone her age. Such overwhelming loss was new to her, though, and coupled with the familiar rage it left her feeling adrift on an angry red sea. Her father had always helped her to understand what made her different. Now he had been taken from her. Hot red emotion boiled around the hole in her heart.

As her mother’s sobs grew louder, Nona watched the messenger grow increasingly more uncomfortable. “The paymaster will have Crastinus’ final stipend for you,” he said. Rooted to her spot, Nona couldn’t move to let the messenger out. The

harsh clicking of the door finalized the horror of her father's death. Nona stared at the fabric over the windows. It kept out the relentless late-summer sun. No breeze toyed with the fabric. It hung dead. Tears finally escaped the corners of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Her mother wailed, and moved to pull her close. Nona stiffened, but her mother didn't seem to notice. "What will we do now?" her mother cried. "The Republic is tearing itself apart, and we have nobody to protect us!"

Her words made Nona sick. She supposed they were exactly what a centurion's widow was expected to say, but they were uncharacteristic. Her mother ran a successful business using slaves to weave cloaks and tunics for soldiers. Financially, they would weather the civil war even without her father's salary.

Perhaps her mother worried that Caesar would lose the war and his enemies would come for the families of Caesar's loyal centurions? Nona could handle soldiers attacking her home. Sniffling back a sob, she cleared her throat. "I will protect us, mother."

"You? How do you propose to protect us?"

Nona's rage spiked again. She reined it in, hoping her mother was insulting her out in grief and not genuine disdain. "He taught me to wield both gladius and spear... and I'm a better fighter than any boy my age. Better than most grown men. I share father's blood."

Pushing her daughter away with clawed hands, her mother seemed to rage more to the gods than anyone, "That blood! THAT BLOOD! What good is it to have war and battle in the blood?"

"Mother, it protects..."

“Did you hear what happened to your father? That blood does nothing but destroy!”

Nona stared at her mother. Both of them were now raging through their tears. “NO, Mother! Caesar needs warriors. The Republic needs warriors! This power in father’s blood, in my blood, it... it... he used it to protect Rome! I’m going to...”

“To what?” Her mother interjected coldly, her wet eyes narrowing in hatred. “To offer yourself to Caesar as a new harlot?”

Mortified, Nona took another step back. “As a soldier,” she said hesitantly. The words had just come out of her, but they rang of destiny. “As one of Caesar’s warriors.”

“Ha! Not with your breasts filling out daily,” her mother pointed to her chest. “Even now you could not wear the armor. Don’t be a fool, girl. The gods gave you those for feeding babies, not for swinging swords.”

“You’re wrong,” Nona said. “I am my father’s daughter.” She felt a sense of purpose for the first time in her life. Hearing neighbors gathering outside near the fountain, Nona knew they were straining to hear what caused all the shrieking. She saw her mother realize it as well.

“OH MY CRASTINUS, MY GAIUS! WHY HAVE THE GODS TAKEN YOU FROM ME? WHY???” Her mother threw herself forward onto the lounge, wailing and thrashing. Nona noticed her mother motion she should throw herself down and wail as well.

Nona couldn’t take the false display any longer. She didn’t care about the damned window coverings or the neighbors’ gossip. She threw the door open and ran after the messenger.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO WEEKS LATER OUTSIDE ROME
LATE AUGUST, 48 B.C.

A couple weeks of living as a thief on the outskirts of Rome had taught Nona a great deal. She circled the countryside around the city, stealing food from farms in the night and taking shelter where she could find it. Caesar had broken the laws when he'd marched his legion into Rome, suddenly making soldiers on the streets a normal sight. She had listened to their tales and seen the dedicated few practice weapons and maneuvers even though they were technically disbanded while at home.

Though Pompey had not personally killed her father, his soldiers had. The soldiers were saying that Pompey had escaped during his defeat. Now that Caesar had been declared Dictator, Pompey's followers were shunned if they were peaceful. The violent ones were dealt with more harshly. Rumor among the soldiers was that Caesar was preparing his soldiers to chase Pompey to Egypt.

Nona had watched her mother's slaves make clothing for soldiers. She had hoped to parlay her pathetic weaving and sewing skills into a place in Caesar's envoy, but the ships would be traveling fast and light. They had no need for her.

Except for her fighting prowess, she had no other skills to offer. And her mother had been right about one thing, there were no women in Rome's Legions. It simply wasn't allowed. Nona finally came to accept she would not be part of the contingent heading to Egypt. It only made her more determined to be ready to serve Caesar by the time he returned.

Nona kept rhythm with her walking stick as she meandered along a road, trying to come up with a plan for proving her worth so Caesar would accept her as a soldier. She became aware of a figure approaching her. His armor marked him as heavy infantry. The sunlight played off a blue cloth tied to his legion insignia. Pompey had styled himself a Son of Neptune, wearing a blue cloak to the Senate.

She was wary as he approached, and he leered at her predictably. "Girl, come show your respects to a soldier of Rome," he called. The combination of blue cloth on his armor and entitlement in his voice woke an anger in her blood.

"Tell me, soldier, whose legion do you fight with?"

The soldier glared at her. "The only true Consul of the Roman Republic, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus. And in the name of ..."

"Be gone, traitor," Nona interrupted him. "Lest someone loyal to Caesar show you why you've lost."

He looked up and down the road. "Little girl, there are none loyal to the Usurper on this road. Now give me my due."

Nona gripped her staff tighter. "No."

He moved quickly, grabbing her arm and dragging her off the side of the road toward a tree. She beat him ineffectually with the staff in her free hand. It rang off the back of his helm and bounced harmlessly off the linked iron rings of his armor.

Choosing the timing of her fight, she allowed herself to be pulled all the way to the tree. When he stopped and shifted his grip, she lashed out hard with the staff. He grunted and drew his blade, a standard gladius. He swiped, clearly meaning to break her walking stick in half. With a twist, she deflected his blow down her staff and across her arm.

Blood trickled from the gash. She kept her eyes on her enemy as she wiped it on her tunic.

The soldier lunged again. The battle rage that was Nona's legacy strengthened her arms and allowed her to parry her attacker's thrust with a clang that rattled the bones in both of their skeletons. For two weeks she had been watching soldiers train. She knew their standard movements. His were no different. She already had his measure.

He made a couple tentative swipes at her, keeping his right side turned and protected. She had seen soldiers train to lure their opponents into a trap. He was trying to draw her into striking that way. She curled her lip. Not a chance.

Instead of swinging her staff around into his right side, Nona stepped toward his trap. She felt him tense and ready. She pivoted at her waist and brought her staff around in an arc that hit the armor on his left side instead. But she didn't stop at mere contact. She grunted and heaved, using her newly widened stance to plant herself so her follow-through pitched him off balance and down onto the very side he'd tried to get her to attack.

Snapping forward, she slammed the end of her staff through the opening in his helmet, shoving his head back with her enhanced strength.

He kicked, but she was growing even stronger now. His foot crunched into her shin, but he was the one to cry out in pain.

Nona pushed forward, channeling all of her anger into her weapon. "I'M LOYAL TO CAESAR!" She shouted. The soldier's limbs flailed desperately. She roared, feeling her father's strength pouring through her.

CRACK! Something gave. At first she thought she'd broken her staff, until she saw the blood pouring from the soldier's helmet.

Nona pulled back on her weapon and saw chunks of gore clinging to its bloodied end.

Nona stepped away. She had killed a man.

He had been a traitor and had tried to rape her, but a man.

Nona had always expected the power in her blood would exult if she'd ever been forced to kill. But it didn't. She was breathing heavily. Every muscle was tensed and ready to keep fighting, but there was no exultation, no crow of victory, no hunger for more. She glanced around.

No one had seen their fight. What she imagined was a soldier's practicality came over her. She set about stripping the dead man of his armor and weapon. She donned his sword belt over one shoulder, replacing the gladius. The helmet could be washed, but she would need to find a new scarf to protect her neck from the armor. Pulling his armored shirt off over his crushed head filled the iron links with blood. She wanted to clean that as well before trying it on. He had a few denarii, but no other hidden treasures for her to find.

The only memorial she gave him was to shove the offending piece of blue fabric into his broken face before she dragged the armor away.

CHAPTER THREE

SIX MONTHS LATER IN A RURAL TAVERN
FEBRUARY, 47 B.C.

Half of a year living on her own had hardened Nona to the ways of the world. With the Army of the Republic in Egypt, the military's presence in Rome was minimal. Nona had used her time to learn where the individual Legions were headquartered. She knew the location of every important Centurion's home, and where their families did their business. She'd tried to befriend retired legionnaires, but they had looked at her dirt and torn clothes and sent her away as a beggar.

As her clothing acquired new tears she inexpertly repaired, Nona took to being silent and unnoticed. Information still came her way, but instead of having her questions answered directly, she often had to wait for meandering conversations to get somewhere interesting.

Then one rainy winter day she discovered the magic of taverns. Nona discovered that people in taverns needed to be the first to present news. It was a point of social pride. It was a badge of importance. And, Nona mused, it was a lot easier than lurking in open air markets.

Nona was in a tavern idly listening to the farmers complain about the weather, the crops, the slaves, and the rising

prices of just about everything when a young man practically danced in through the door. Nona recognized him as the oldest son of a farmer who regularly sent his boys to sell their produce in the city's markets.

Brimming with excitement at being the first to know something, he shouted above the din, "Caesar has conquered Egypt, the siege is ended!"

"Euge!" the folks in the tavern shouted their hurrahs, "Euge! Euge!"

Nona kept to herself while the atmosphere around her grew louder and more boastful. Chewing on a minted apple, she listened intently.

One know-it-all farmer Nona recognized piped in, "Caesar killed the assassins who deprived him of his right to bring Pompey to justice!"

"No he didn't!" The tavern's owner corrected him, "That Egyptian prince killed the assassins... but Caesar killed the prince!"

"Caesar's in league with Cleopatra, the Egyptian princess!" shouted a farmer who had propositioned Nona more than once.

"She's cast an evil hex upon him!" countered a pimple-faced farmer Nona knew was more afraid of superstitions than he was of being wrong. "You know I'm right! She's used strange magic to seduce Great Caesar!"

"Don't be daft," a particularly devout farmer scoffed, "The haruspex claims Caesar will die in Rome, not Egypt!"

That got Nona's attention. Memories started coming forward. She had attended the festival where one of the sacred diviners read a sacrificial bull's entrails after Caesar conquered Gaul. She remembered that her father had regularly

insisted on consulting Rome's known diviners before leaving for a long campaign. When she had asked why he had to go talk to a soothsayer he replied, "They are allies because people don't understand their powers either."

She hadn't considered consulting a diviner. If the *haruspex* had powers from special blood like her own, then the *haruspex* was a person she needed to find.

"Tell me," she asked the devout farmer, "Where can I find that *haruspex*?"

The man's collection of religious warding symbols jingled as he turned and seemed to consider Nona for a moment. Finally, the farmer said, "He doesn't do husband readings, girl."

"Good." Nona fought to keep any sense of desire out of her voice. "Because I don't need a husband. I DO need to ask about this year's growing season."



Later that afternoon Nona regarded the simple gate with curiosity. She had expected a religious diviner to display wealth and opulence in honor of the gods. A household servant set aside his chores and came to her.

"I've come to speak with *Spurinna*, the astrologer," Nona said.

"How shall I introduce you?"

She was almost tempted to tell a lie to test the seer's powers, but Nona decided to stick with truth. "The daughter of the centurion *Gaius Crastinus*."

The servant didn't appear to recognize the name, but motioned her in anyway. An old man greeted them in the

front room of the house. The sun had not yet tanned his skin where it looked like he'd recently shaved off a beard. Pompey had worn a beard, but Caesar was smooth of cheek. Nona realized that Spurinna was making it clear whose side he had been on.

The servant looked at the old man. "Master," the servant said, "the daughter of centurion Gaius Crastinus wishes to see you."

The seer's heavy eyebrows shot up. "Leave us, Magnus."

Nona listened as the sound of Magnus's footsteps grew quiet. Spurinna indicated that Nona should sit on a cushioned bench. He made a bit of a show seating himself in a formal chair on the other side of a low table. "If I'm not mistaken, your father was killed by Pompey's men."

Nona nodded. "It is on that matter that I wish to speak with you."

He regarded her again. Nona realized his eyes were unfocused and he was looking just past her shoulder.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Nona."

She tried to see what the haruspex's eyes were studying. Nothing appeared to her. He inhaled deeply through his nose. She took a tentative sniff, and again learned nothing new.

After a few moments, he seemed to return from wherever he'd been. "I do not need a sacrificial goat's entrails to see your truths. You are surrounded by scenes of battle. I smell blood, and rage, and steel wafting from you. Where Mars blessed your father that he might excel at leading men to war, it seems you have been blessed in personal combat."

Nona gasped. "You have powers in your blood, too? Father

said there were others like us! He even made hints about the haruspices.”

“Yes, I am like you.” Spurinna chuckled, “Though not all of us are. Some of my temple brethren are little more than actors pandering to their crowds. But more than a few of us know of the hidden bloodlines. My powers are vastly different from yours.” Spurinna explained. “Where you have strength and speed, I see things as they really are and as they may yet come to be.”

“Then I have need of your sight. Please. I cannot pay much, but I have some denarii.”

“Easy. Your father was not unknown to me. He was generous when he sought wisdom before a campaign. Tell me what you seek to know, and if it’s mine to uncover then we shall bargain a fair price.”

Hope kindled in Nona’s heart for the first time in months. “What must I do to serve Caesar as a warrior?”

“Do? You are a woman... There is...”

Nona caught herself before she spat on the seer’s floor. “If I am the better warrior, why should it matter?”

“Should and should not are arguments for senators and generals. I know only what is ... and what I know is that they will not allow a woman into a legion.”

“Can you see nothing, then?”

Spurinna the haruspex closed his eyes. Nona thought she felt a light stirring of power, but wasn’t sure. After a moment he opened his eyes and focused on her. “I receive no visions on the matter. If you wish me to ask the gods, then bring me a rooster and I shall check the entrails.”

Nona nodded. “Yes. I know where to get a chicken.”

“Not just any chicken,” Spurinna cautioned. “It must be a

male rooster and in the prime of its life.”

“I understand,” Nona stood up. Remembering her rusty manners, she bowed her head, “Thank you!”

Running to the nearest market, Nona spent the last of her coin on a plump bird she thought might be pleasing to the gods. For the first time in months, she felt like she was moving toward her goal. Nona rushed back to Spurinna’s home.

“I have brought what you asked,” she said, offering him the rooster.

Spurinna nodded. “It will do nicely. Magnus please prepare for the sacrifice. You, Nona, follow Magnus to the bathing chamber. Wash the sun, sweat, and dirt off your skin and anoint yourself with the oil you’ll find there. When you are ready, Magnus will bring you outside where I will conduct the ceremony.”

Nona brimmed with questions, but she did as she was ordered. Cleanly scented and wearing nothing but a simple belted tunic that had been set out for her, she followed Magnus into a courtyard. The stone table would handle an animal the size of a goat, and its size made the plump rooster look small. Nona realized it had been washed and was wearing a goat-sized regalia of Mars.

Spurinna motioned Nona to the table. “Stand here, and be open to visions.”

Nona nodded. She had witnessed public sacrifices before, but never had she been this close to one. Magnus tended a nearby fire. Spurinna seemed satisfied everything was in place.

Nona paid close attention as he addressed the sky, “Oh Victorious Mars, a daughter of yours seeks your guidance. We make sacred this animal in your honor. To receive your

exta you need only show her how she might serve Caesar as a warrior.”

Nona held her breath, though nothing happened. Spurinna made light cooing noises at the chicken, stroking it with one hand while he grabbed a shining blade with the other. In a startlingly fast motion, he brought the blade up and down into the chicken's back, severing its spine at the neck. Nona jumped. He turned the bird over while extricating the blade, then he cut the chest and disemboweled it. Handing the hollow carcass to Magnus, Spurinna used the knife to push the entrails around the table, making patterns in the blood.

Nona grew bored after a few minutes. Nothing had happened when Spurinna called to Mars, and now she wasn't seeing a damned thing in the entrails. She lifted her eyes and noticed the seer had changed. Even though he was still hunched over his task of scraping and muttering, Nona saw a corona of reddish-gold light around him. The two colors seemed to fight for supremacy as they gradually brightened. Suddenly, in a voice as loud as a clarion, Spurinna intoned:

*“A mother of warriors you could be,
but the march of legions you'll never see,
if as a soldier you'd fight abreast,
seek the cohorts praetoria bequest.”*

As suddenly as it began, the proclamation ended. Nona wasn't sure what to do after something like that. She looked from Spurinna to Magnus. The old seer looked winded, but his servant's eyes were wide in shock.

“Master?”

“I am well, Magnus. Prepare the meat for us and I shall

guide Nona in preparing the organs for Mars. Then we will seal the divine contract and complete the ceremony.” At that, Spurinna reached for a skewer. He offered it to Nona, who took it without hesitation.

“Gather the organs in this order – gall bladder, liver, heart, and lungs.” He pointed as he recited, and Nona dutifully impaled them on the skewer. “Now... sprinkle them with this.” He handed over what felt like salted flour. It stuck to the blood on her fingers, but she did as she was told.

Offering him the skewer, he shook his head. “It is right that you complete this. Sprinkle on some of this wine and place it near the fire to cook. Keep it from burning. When it’s ready, place it there on the altar and thank Mars in your own words.”

Again, Nona did as she was instructed. While the skewer cooked, Magnus helped her clean her fingers. When the meat was only just blackening at the edges, Magnus again came to her rescue with a slight nod. She carefully lifted the hot skewer and placed on the altar.

Nona had never formally prayed to the gods before. She tried to mimic the feel of Spurinna’s ceremonial words. “Victorious Mars. I thank you for your insight. Please accept this offering.” Nona watched for a few moments, but nothing happened.

“Nona,” Spurinna said. “The magic is done. Come. Our share is almost ready.”

She and Spurinna shared a bench in the sun.

“Do the gods really listen to us?” she asked. “I mean, those of us with these powers?”

Spurinna regarded her carefully. “I believe the gods listen to those of us who have a greater part to play in Rome’s des-

tiny. The fact that Mars Pater gave you an answer for as small an offering as a rooster instead of requiring his usual bull means you are very special to him. Very special indeed.”

She thought about this. “Was my father descended from him like the heroes in the tales?”

Spurinna shrugged. “Who is to say? It seems that is possible, but the gods have never confirmed my suspicions on the matter.”

“What do I do now?”

“Are you intent on pursuing life as a warrior?”

She nodded. “Now more than ever.”

“Are you familiar with the cohorts praetoria?”

“I am. They are the guardians Caesar established to protect Rome’s walls when he returned from Gaul. My father was at Caesar’s side when Vercingetorix surrendered. He told me all about it. The Gallic tribes had guardians that gave Caesar the idea for the cohorts.”

Spurinna laughed in amazement. “It appears you could educate me on a topic or two. Yes. Rumor has it that because Caesar’s campaign in Egypt called so many soldiers away, the cohorts are recruiting and training at the fields northeast of Rome. That is not far from here.”

Magnus delivered their meal, and they ate in thoughtful silence for a few moments. “Have you a plan?” Spurinna asked.

Nona nodded, “Yes, I think I do.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SEVERAL DAYS LATER NORTHEAST OF ROME
FEBRUARY, 47 B.C.

The recruiter shouted to be heard over the pouring rain. “You will be paired with another hopeful,” he said. “No quarter will be given for size, speed, or background.”

Nona, along with twenty other applicants, looked up and down the line, instantly judging one another. “A Praetorian can expect to defend Rome against all manner of enemy,” the recruiter continued. His boots squelched in the mud as he turned on his heel and walked back down the line. “Your suitability will be judged not on whether you win or lose, but on whether you fight for yourself, or for Rome.”

Nona’s tunic was drenched under her stolen armor. She had cleaned it as her father had taught her. Her blade was sharpened, and she’d used it to cut away her hair. The helmet, also cleaned of blood, rested against her stubble and made her head itch. Worse, her breathing was constricted by the tight cloth binding she had improvised in order to flatten her chest.

In spite of the recruiter’s threat, she was paired with a boy her own size. He looked strong, as though he worked a farm when he wasn’t a soldier. The cohorts only accepted applicants

who had served well in a legion. By chance, the soldier Nona had killed had earned an honor from a general and the insignia was still attached to his armor. The boy she faced also wore the armor of the heavy infantry. As they squared off, Nona respected he may be more trouble than his age would indicate.

He set his shield to block her. In a legion, he'd be next to other soldiers and they'd form a shield wall that was notoriously hard to breach. Nona wondered if he had any skill fighting without his brethren. She tested with light feints to the right and left. He pivoted perfectly to keep the shield between them.

The soldier whose armor Nona wore hadn't carried a shield, so she had only his gladius. The rain was making her worry about her grip on its hilt as well as her footing. But the threat and thrill of combat pulsed in her limbs.

Nona considered her options. The only advantage she had was her power. She flexed a few times in her wet tunic and felt her strength growing. In a sudden burst of speed and strength, she charged his shield low. Taking it with her shoulder, she angled up and used the surge of adrenaline to lift him up and off balance. As he was coming back down to plant himself, she kicked his feet out from underneath him. Nona watched as he went down on his back.

He was solid and greatly outweighed her, but she had a burst of strength that seemed to flow from the gods. She lunged forward blade first, nearly repeating her roadside killing blow. At the last instant, though, she angled her blade past his head and slapped the side of his helmet with the flat of her blade.

The boy grunted and swiped with his shield, forcing her

back. It afforded him time to roll to his knees and set himself with a lower center. She saw his plan. He was going to force her to continue doing all the work, until she was exhausted. Then he'd finish her.

Even with her battle endurance heightened, his tactic was sound. She curled her lip into a cunning smile. It was sound against a normal soldier. She was more than normal.

Controlling her slide, she shot around him. His knees stuck in the muck and he couldn't bring his shield around fast enough. Pivoting her torso for added momentum, she back-handed the back of his helmet. His head snapped forward into his shield, dazing him from the impact. Using her free hand, she yanked his helmet off, tearing the chin strap and no doubt injuring his jaw.

Placing the point of her blade at the base of his skull, she shouted, "Yield!"

"HALT!" the recruiter shouted. He shot a look at one of his underlings. "You," he pointed at Nona. "Come with us."

The recruiter and his men retreated to a tent pitched at the side of the field. Nona handed the helmet back to her opponent, sheathed her gladius, and followed them, moving quickly to get out of the rain.

Just inside the tent, the recruiter stepped close and gave her a critical stare. "Remove your helmet and state your name."

The helmet, undeniably for a head larger than her own, was only held on by the strap she now unbuckled. "I'm Nonus, sir."

The recruiter grabbed the helmet and inspected the inside. Nona had made sure there was nothing within that would identify a previous owner.

"Who is your general?"

Nona had prepared for this question. "I had served under Gaius Crastinus at Pharsalus. We were victorious, breaking through Pompey's right flank, though centurion Crastinus died in the battle. I've been unattached since returning to Rome." She hoped the catch in her voice indicated loyalty for her general.

The recruiter narrowed his eyes. "Remove your armor."

She removed the armor and held it as her father had taught her. Supernatural power lent her arm strength to hold it casually, yet keeping it from dragging in the mud. She assumed they would inspect it as they had the helmet.

The recruiter nodded and the other soldier moved behind her. Before she could spin, the man behind her ripped away her tunic. Horrified, she spun to face her attacker, only to have him pull away her chest binding.

"WOMAN!" both men shouted.

Familiar anger flushed up Nona's torso and reddened her cheeks. Tensing, she was ready to kill again.

Instead of an attack, they started laughing.

"She thinks she can be one of the cohorts!" one of them cried.

Humiliation stoked the battle fury inside her.

"I knew her voice was too high, and that helmet too big."

They would die at her hands!

"Is she wearing her brother's armor?"

She would kill them both like the last one!

"No woman can be a soldier!"

The man on the side of the road had been a traitor. But these men were loyal to Rome. How could she profess to serve Ceasar after putting a blade to their throats?

Quivering with rage, she bore their insults and jeers. Mars

had said this was her path! "Seek the cohorts praetoria bequest." The final line of the augury gave her an inspiration.

"Let me don my armor and face your finest warrior," she offered. "If I best him, consider my entry, for I am Crastinus' daughter and more warrior than woman."

Silence held for a heartbeat, then the men burst into laughter again. "Girl, we too grieved the loss of your father. We gave tribute at his altar. But run home. Use the Crastinus name to take his holdings and serve Rome as a mother and owner of business."

Nona shook her sword belt. "This is how I'll serve Rome."

The smile faded from the recruiter's face. "You try my patience, girl. Cover your pretty breasts and be gone."

She would not kill these men for doing their duty. But neither would she cry in front of them.

Silenced by her failure, she stomped on the pieces of her torn tunic, grinding them into the wet dirt. Picking up her weapon and grabbing her helmet from the recruiter's hand, she stormed onto the field.

Armor in one hand, sword belt and helmet in the other, she made sure every hopeful on that field saw her breasts as she pushed past them. Their stunned silence as they came to understand that a woman had bested one of their own in combat lent her the strength for stoicism.

Only when she was alone in a copse of trees leagues away did she allow tears to mingle with the rain against her cheeks.



Later that night Nona yelled to the sky. "If as a soldier I'd fight abreast?"

She stomped a few paces. "Is that what you meant, Pater Mars? Or did you mean I should fight 'a breast' like the Amazons of legend?"

Her voice echoed back to her, "Amazons... Amazons... Amazons..."

Brandishing her gladius, she steeled her resolve and shouted to the gods. "Then it shall be as you wish it. I am not a man. I am not a woman. I am a warrior!"

With a shriek of pain she brought the blade up, cutting into the underside of her breast. Wound-lashed rage strengthened her arm, allowing her to finish cutting. Tears spilled down her face, tears of anger at men and at gods. She knew the second cut would weaken her sword arm. So she dug deep into her blood for the strength required, and she sliced away her other breast. She passed out in a haze of rage and pain and screaming anger.



A force flung Spurinna out of his bed in his sleep. His elderly body crashed to the floor, and twin lances of pain spread across his chest.

Magnus stormed into the bedchamber. "Master!?"

Looking around, the servant saw no attacker. The seer was crumpled on the floor, massaging his chest. "The wagon, boy," the seer whispered. "Ready the cart at once!"

Moments later, Magnus was pushing his master through the countryside, careening around turns as Spurinna called

out directions. Panting and sore, the seer guided them to a figure lying in the muck. It seemed the mud was created as much from blood as from the day's rain.

"Put her in the cart, then gather her things," Spurinna said. He tried to stanch Nona's wounds with his own night tunic. He could see her aura, angry and red. It was all that was keeping her from dying.

Magnus complied with his master's wishes, and without further instruction began pushing them home at an even faster pace.

When they arrived, Magnus transferred the wounded girl to a pallet where she could be tended. He started mixing herbs when Spurinna took the tools from his hands. "If you have strength left, I bid you run to Caere," the seer told him. "Fetch Tanaquil. Tell her that I place myself in her debt, and she can ask a boon of me if she comes in all haste."

"Master, Caere's over thirty milliariis away!" Even in the wagon it would take all night and well into the morning to get there.

"Steal a mule and wagon if you must, Magnus. I shall make restitution. Just go!"

After his servant had gone, Spurinna busily tried to keep enough of Nona's rare blood inside her that it would sustain her until help arrived. "What have you done, daughter of Mars? What have you done?"



Near to sunset the next day, Magnus returned with two women in a wagon. Spurinna greeted the taller and more

aristocratic of the two first. “Domina Tanaquil of Caere, I thank you. As I bid Magnus relay, I will owe you a great boon.”

“We shall see what is owed to whom shortly. It is time for introductions. Spurinna, Haruspex of Rome, this is Vita, one of the few living Rasna.”

Magnus cleared his throat. “The detour to ask Vita’s help delayed us Master, please forgive me.”

“Rasna?” The seer was clearly awed. “There’s nothing to forgive, Magnus. Return the wagon and mules to their owners and find out what I must pay.”

“Of course.”

After Magnus had gone, Spurinna turned to Vita. “We Oracles have long sought out portents that there were Rasna still in this world. How is it you’ve remained hidden?”

Vita blinked at Spurinna like he was insane. “It’s true what they say then? To be an Oracle is to be touched in the head? You ask me questions about hidey-holes when I have been brought here because a girl’s life balances on the edge of Atropos’ abhorred shears.”

“Oh dear me, of course.” Spurinna motioned her inside. “She’s in here.”

Seemingly forgotten, Tanaquil arched one beautifully powdered lip into a half smile. “This should prove to be quite delightful.”

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APPENDIX

AURAS

Everyone has an aura. Normal folks have weak, thin auras that are often only detectable when emotions run high. By contrast, Outré have very strong auras. Spurrinna was seeing and smelling Nona's aura when he said "You are surrounded by scenes of battle. I smell blood, and rage, and steel wafting from you."

DETECTION

In addition to seeing Auras, most Outré can see when other powers are in use nearby. Just as we normal people have varying levels of visual acuity, individual Outré vary in how sensitive they are when picking out powers.

WHAT ARE THE OUTRÉ BLOODLINES?

Outré bloodlines are extended families each of which is widely believed to be descended from a common ancestor. Each bloodline is identified by its mystic tie to an aspect of reality. Because of their connection to these forces, Outré

auras are significantly stronger than normal. So much so that most Outré also develop the ability to see auras in order to recognize one another. Consequently, Outré commonly practice their powers as extensions of their auras, trained to use the aura as the storage space for their particular flavor of energy.

KNOWN BLOODLINES

These are the bloodlines Nona meets and learns about in her tale.

- **Myrmidons, children of battle:** Named for a type of Greek warrior, the Myrmidons are entirely physical. Theirs are the powers of combat. Each starts with uncanny battle reflexes, but it quickly grows into supernatural mastery of one aspect of combat. Nona's father mastered strategy and wielded his legions with godlike precision. By contrast, Nona is a superior hand-to-hand combatant, blessed with supernatural strength and resilience.
- **Oracles, children of insight:** A bloodline renown for diviniatory powers, Oracles have visions. Some are more adept at seeing the present at far distances, others can at predicting the future or read the past of an object. Oracles are by far the most perceptive when it comes to detecting nearby Outré abilities in use. Spurinna sees the truth in the present and receives vague warnings of the future.
- **Temptresses, children of emotion:** An unfortunate moniker they cannot shake, Temptresses bridge the gap between mental and physical abilities. They have the ability to enhance and manipulate emotions at close range,

but it always seems tied to their target's bodily reactions. Most Temptresses are strongest with one emotion over all others, and in certain regions they may be known exclusively for that emotion. In ancient Rome, Wrath and Lust vie for the most common. Tanaquil skillfully used her control over other people's Desire to acquire a position as Roman nobility. Males are called Tempters.

- **Rasna, children of the body:** Descended from the ancient Etruscans for whom they keep the name "Rasna" alive, this clan is blessed with the ability to heal or harm a body by touch. Coveted as miracle healers, feared as witches, the Rasna have gone into hiding for their own protection. Vita has been hiding on Tanaquil's estate for years, trusting her Temptress friend to keep her safe.

A NOTE ON OUTRÉ POWERS -OR- WHY DON'T ALL SANDMEN HAVE THE SAME POWERS

Think about guitar players. Sure, really good guitarists are probably gifted with some natural talent that's just in their blood, but most of it comes down to training. A cowboy who picks up an acoustic guitar and trains as a country musician is a very different artist than a band leader with an electric guitar who trains as a rock-n-roll player. They appeal to vastly different genres, but they're still lumped together under the aegis of "guitar."

How does this relate to the Outré?

Historically, people lived close together and learned from each other. It makes a lot of sense that Reapers in the Carpathian region, possibly even living under Prince Vlad Tepes himself, might have all learned the same blood-based death

powers thanks to their shared cultural heritage. They might even consider themselves a whole separate bloodline. They are going to be very different from the Reapers of Egypt, who in turn are vastly different from the Valkyrie of the north.

A FEW NOTES

First, the legal bit. Elements in what you're holding *may* change in the final printing. An editor's been over this once, but a lot can happen in six months. I'll promise you something, though. Any changes made will be for the sole purpose of making the novel even better.

Second, where possible I kept Rome as historically accurate as possible. I have not altered the historically accepted facts about big important events like battles and assassinations. However, I have taken a few liberties in small places; namely with personalities and a few personal interactions. And bloodlines with powers. I'm pretty sure that's where I will send history teachers into pear-shaped conniptions.

Why mess with history? It's important to me that I tell a good story. . . . okay that sounded lame. I want to tell a bloody great story. Nona's battle resonates with the battles so many of us have faced, and as her tale unfolded, she became my hero. And Rome was her home, so I took up the cause of weaving her into history.

Finally, I beg that you forgive the liberties I've taken. Especially if you love Rome and regularly feast on dormice with Romulus and Remus. I promise that I'll never try to pass *Caesar's Shadow* off as anything other than historic fantasy. Well maybe I'll sneak a couple author copies into a few "Inspirational" sections in some snooty bookstores. But only because I believe we need to push against boundaries to actualize our epic awesomeness.

ON BEING DIFFERENT

I'm going to lay it on the line because this is serious shit. If you've read this preview, you know Nona cuts her breasts off. Her society refused to see her for who she was. She was lost. She was angry. And she took horrible, self-mutilating action.

She is a fictional character whose entire life is less than 400 pages in length. She's awesome, and heroic, and I was inspired to tell her story... but please treat it as just a story.

Nona did not have access to professionals who would listen. She needed an authentic person to really fucking sit down and understand to her need to live the identity she knew was trapped inside. Hopefully that person would be grown-the-fuck-up enough to help her find a real solution. But she only had Rome where the people ordered her to be a plebian woman. To Nona, Rome sucked mint-scented ass.

If you also feel like you're being smothered inside a shrinking box where all these talking heads are telling you who you're supposed to be. I give you permission to take a deep breath and find someone who will stop telling and start listening.

Just do not cut yourself. There are better answers. There really truly are doctors and other professionals here in the real world who will actually listen and work with you. People who believe a healthy person starts inside and blossoms as their outside catches up.

I won't bullshit you. You're probably going to have to sift through a couple quacks and a lot of haters before you find that one person who will hear what you are saying. I wish I could give you Nona's resilience. You'll have to find your own strength, but **allies exist.**

Nona's entire life story was told in 400 pages. Your life is not a stand alone novel, it's an epic series. Please LIVE and fill VOLUMES with tales of all the awesome shit you're going to do.

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