

PART I

ROME, Capital of the Roman Republic, 82 – 57 BC

82 BC

“Gaius, you know, don’t you, that no one else is refusing Sulla’s orders. Young Pompey has just divorced his wife and renounced his friends. My cousins have used all their influence with Sulla to get you taken off the Proscription List. They can do no more. Now it’s up to you to decide whether to comply with Sulla’s conditions.”

Aurelia Cotta was talking to her eighteen-year-old son, Gaius Julius Caesar. Rome was in the midst of a reign of terror as the dictator Sulla, the victor in a civil war launched by him in 88 BC, was methodically killing his enemies, opponents, and suspected opponents, while confiscating

their properties. Championing the Senate and its nobles, the “Optimates,” he had defeated the followers of Gaius Marius and Cornelius Cinna, who were the favorites of the people, the “Populares.”

Gaius Marius had been a great general who had stopped the threatening migration of hordes of Germans toward Italy and served as consul for several unprecedented terms. Cinna had taken up his policies of land distribution to the poor and the expansion of citizenship to the Italian allies, and they had joined forces. But Marius passed away in 86 BC, after his own reign of terror, and Cinna ruled by himself until he was killed in 84.

Caesar's relationship to these two men had landed him on the Proscription list. Marius had been his uncle, married to his paternal aunt, Julia. Cinna had been his father-in-law, his daughter Cornelia marrying Caesar at Cinna's behest just the year before, shortly before Cinna's own killing. What's more, this Caesar, though only eighteen, had already shown himself to be something extraordinary. Sulla was not going to ignore him just because of his tender age.

“Dear Mother,” responded Caesar, “I know you fear for me, but I would not be true to myself if I put my wife Cornelia aside and renounced her father and my uncle as Sulla is demanding. I cannot even

imagine doing such a thing. It will just not happen.”

“Your uncle Marius and your father-in-law Cinna are both gone, Gaius. There is simply no one left who can protect you if you continue to defy Sulla.”

“Then I will not stay here. Cornelia and I can quietly leave Rome and just disappear. There are many friends of Marius and Cinna in the Italian cities who will hide us.”

“And they will have to feed you as well,” Aurelia said, “as Sulla will confiscate everything you own, including Cornelia’s dowry. He will also have me and my family watched so we will not be able to send you any help.”

“Please, Mother, I would not want you to risk yourself or your family on my behalf. We will be able to survive in the countryside. Sulla will never dare to touch you or the Cotta family if I just disappeared. He will send agents after me, surely, but I will deal with that.”

Aurelia, though still fearful of the dangers her only son was placing himself in, was nevertheless quite proud of the young man that she had raised. He would rather face death than not be true to himself, at eighteen years of age! How could he know himself so well at this stage of his life?

“Do as your spirit directs you, Gaius,” she said. “Whatever you decide you will always have my love and support.”

The eighteen-year-old then went into hiding with his young wife. A year later Aurelia's connections and family obtained a position for him on the staff of a relative serving in Asia. There Caesar served brilliantly and only when Sulla died a few years later did he return to Rome.

In Rome the intelligent and charismatic Caesar immediately gained the support of the people with his advocating of liberal policies for land distribution to the poor and the expansion of citizenship to Rome's Romanized friends and allies, following the policies of Marius and Cinna.

His devoted wife, Cornelia, died in 69 BC in the fifteenth year of their marriage. In the same year his aunt Julia, Marius's

widow, also died. He created a sensation with the funeral games he put on for them, the first ever for women, borrowing heavily to do so. During these proceedings he also boldly displayed the trophies and images of Marius and Cinna, much to the joy of the populace and the irritation of the Senate, most of whom were appointees of the late dictator, Sulla. His funeral oration was also extraordinary and was remembered for many years thereafter, particularly for his claim that his family was descended from the god Venus. This man was different in almost everything he did, defying tradition and the forces of power whenever he thought it necessary.

