



DAWN EMPRESS



FAITH L. JUSTICE



RAGGEDY MOON BOOKS

DAWN EMPRESS

(Theodosian Women Book Two)

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

*To my bright, creative daughter Hannah Justice Rothman,
without whom I wouldn't be a novelist.*

*“The Byzantines did not call themselves Byzantines,
but Romaioi--Romans.”*

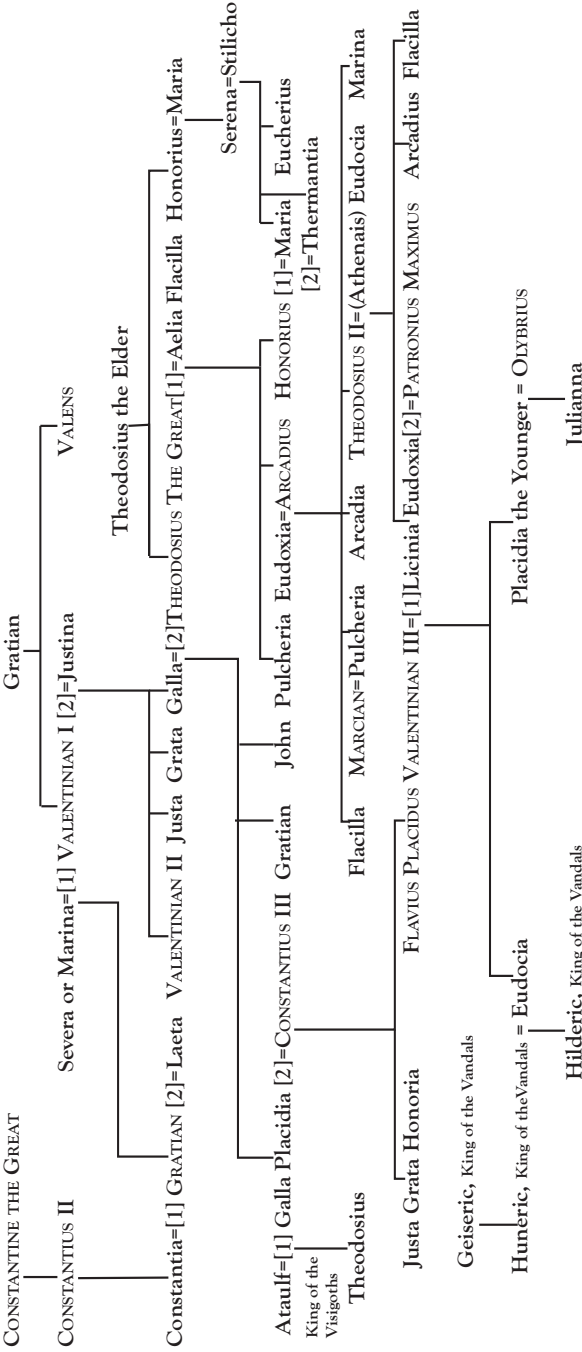
Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire*

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Theodosian Genealogy

Emperors shown in SMALL CAPS.



NOTE ON IMPERIAL TITLES AND PLACE NAMES

IMPERIAL ROMAN TITLES EVOLVED OVER TIME. The title AUGUSTUS (Latin for “majestic,” “the increaser,” or “venerable”) is the equivalent of the modern “Emperor,” and was conferred on the first emperor, Octavian (great-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar), by the senate in 27 BC. Every emperor after held the title of Augustus, which always followed the family name. The first emperor conferred the title AUGUSTA on his wife, Livia, in his will. Other imperial wives (but not all) earned this supreme title. By the fifth century, sisters and daughters also could be elevated to this status, but only by a sitting Augustus. I use Emperor/Empress and Augustus/Augusta interchangeably throughout the text.

Octavian took his adoptive father’s name, Gaius Julius Caesar, but later dropped the Gaius Julius. CAESAR became the imperial family name and was passed on by adoption. When the Julio-Claudian line died out, subsequent emperors took the name as a sign of status on their accession, adoption, or nomination as heir apparent. By the fifth century, it was the title given to any official heir to the Augustus (it’s also the root of the modern titles Kaiser and Czar).

Children of imperial families were usually given the title NOBILISSIMUS/NOBILISSIMA (“Most Noble” boy/girl). This is the closest equivalent to the modern Prince/Princess, though not an exact match. The title was usually conferred some years after birth, in anticipation that the child would take on higher office (Caesar or Augustus for a boy, Augusta for a girl). I generally use the modern title Princess instead of Nobilissima throughout the text.

There is no direct Roman equivalent for the title Regent—someone who legally rules during the absence, incapacity, or minority of a country’s monarch. In Imperial Rome, only males could wield magisterial power. An underage Augustus was still ruler in his own name. He must sign all laws and declarations for them to be legal. In reality, adults stepped into the role and administered the empire for minors. Placidia Augusta filled that role for her son Valentinian Augustus III (*Twilight Empress*). Anthemius does that for Theodosius II in *Dawn Empress*. The legal Roman term for that person is *tutela* meaning “guardian” or “tutor” for an adult (usually a man) who handled the affairs of someone (usually women and children) who would ordinarily be under the legal protection and control of the *pater familias* (male head of the family), but who were legally emancipated. I chose to use the more familiar term Regent throughout this book.

With one exception (Constantinople for modern Istanbul), I chose to use the modern names of cities and the anglicized rather than Latin names of provinces.

CHARACTERS (*fictional in italics*)

EASTERN ROME

The Imperial Family: Constantinople Court

FLAVIUS ARCADIUS AUGUSTUS married to AELIA EUDOXIA AUGUSTA

Daughters:

AELIA PULCHERIA AUGUSTA

Arcadia

Marina

Son:

FLAVIUS THEODOSIUS AUGUSTUS II married to AELIA EUDOCIA (ATHENAI) AUGUSTA

Their daughters:

LICINIA EUDOXIA AUGUSTA (married to Valentinian Augustus below)

Flacilla

Imperial Servants:

Nana/Elpida, nurse

Antiochus, Chief Eunuch and head of household for Arcadius

Father Marcus, priest assigned to the nursery, and tutor to Pulcheria

Chrysaphius, Chief Eunuch and head of household for Theodosius II

Nobles and Government Officials:

Anthemius “The Great,” Patrician and Praetorian Prefect of the East

Isidorus, son of Anthemius, and Praetorian Prefect of the City of Constantinople

Flavius Anthemius Isidorus Theophilus, son of Isidorus and grandson of Anthemius

Paulinus, Theodosius’ childhood companion, best friend, and Master of Offices

Placitus, Theodosius’ childhood companion

Aurelian, former trusted advisor to Eudoxia Augusta, Patrician to Theodosius II

Olympiodorus of Thebes, pagan poet, diplomat, and historian

Leontius of Antioch, Athenais’ father, philosopher and chair of rhetoric at Athens

Asclepiodotus, Athenais’ maternal uncle, Praetorian Prefect of the East

Doria, wife of Asclepiodotus

Valerius, Athenais’ brother, Prefect of Illyricum

Gesius, Athenais’ brother, Prefect of Illyricum

Candidian, Count and imperial envoy to Ephesus

Cyrus of Panopolis, Praetorian Prefect of the East

Constantinus, Praetorian Prefect of the East

Military:

General Lucius, Master of Soldiers
General Plinta, Master of Soldiers in the Emperor's Presence, Consul
General Ardaburius, Master of Soldiers in the Emperor's Presence
General Aspar, Master of Soldiers in the Emperor's Presence
Tribune Marcian, later General

The Church of Constantinople:

Archbishop Atticus (406-425)
Archbishop Sissinius (426-427)
Archbishop Nestorius (428-431)
Bishop Proclus (434-446)
Basil, envoy from Proclus to Pulcheria
Archbishop Flavian (446-449)
Archbishop Anatolius (449-458)
Dalmatius, Archimandrite
Eutyches, Archimandrite

Other Church officials/Holy Persons:

Passarion of Jerusalem
Bishop Cyril of Alexandria (412-444)
Archdeacon Paul of Alexandria
Bishop Memnon of Ephesus
Melania the Younger
Geilar, Arian priest and envoy from King Gaeric of the Vandals
Bishop Dioscorus of Alexandria (444-454)
Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem (422-458)
Pope Leo I "The Great" of Rome (440-461)

WESTERN ROME: RAVENNA COURT

Imperial Family:

Flavius Honorius Augustus (co-ruler with Arcadius and Theodosius II above)
Galla Placidia Augusta (half-sister to Honorius and Arcadius)
married to Flavius Constantius Augustus III

Their children:

Justa Grata Honoria Augusta
Flavius Placidius Valentinian Augustus III married to Licinia Eudoxia (above)

Their daughters:

Eudocia
Placidia "The Younger"

PART I



PRINCESS TO EMPRESS



OCTOBER 404 - NOVEMBER 415



Chapter 1

Imperial Palace, Constantinople, October 6, 404

PULCHERIA WINCED AS HER FATHER'S HAND GRIND HER FINGERS TOGETHER. She stepped on the hem of her night shift and stumbled. Father jerked her upright.

“Come, girl, when did you become so clumsy?” His voice was rough with wine, anger, and pain. Pulcheria had never seen him so distraught in her five short years of life. For the first time her father Arcadius, the Emperor of Eastern Rome, frightened her.

When he had awakened her moments before, her head muzzy with dreams, she knew something was wrong. Father never came to her chambers. The palace nursery, where she and her siblings Arcadia, Theodosius, and baby Marina lived, was the province of nurses and tutors. She only saw him on those rare occasions he ordered the children to accompany him on some outing. Her mother, Empress Eudoxia, inspected the nursery and questioned the servants about her children's health and well-being when it suited her—which was not often. Now her father dragged her down the echoing marble halls toward a part of the palace to which she had never been.

They entered a sumptuous but disordered receiving room. A half-eaten meal of beef doused with fishy smelling garum sauce sat on a silver tray, the Persian carpet lay askew, and several cloaks lay carelessly on a gilt chair. The disarray only added to her chaotic feelings of fear and bewilderment. She tried to lag behind,

but her father dragged her forward, nearly pulling her off her feet. Pulcheria whimpered at the pain in her hand and shoulder but refused to cry out.

Antiochus, the Chief Eunuch and head of the imperial household, sat near the door to another chamber. He rose, approached her father, and bowed low. "I'm so very sorry, Augustus, but your blessed wife is dead. She passed on to God's good grace but moments ago."

"More likely she passed on to the devil. She will make him a good whore." Arcadius' face went purple as he spat the words at the eunuch. "The child?"

Antiochus glanced at Pulcheria and lowered his voice. "He came much too early to save."

"Better dead than another set of horns on my head," her father muttered.

Pulcheria struggled to find meaning in the words of the adults. Her mother was dead? What child? Her father grew horns? She looked at his forehead with muddled curiosity but saw no bumps.

Father started forward, pushing at the eunuch's chest. "Out of my way."

Antiochus stepped back, but still blocked their path. His voice quavered. "Most Kind Augustus, is this really the place for the princess? Let us at least ready the body before she views it."

Pulcheria tugged on her captive hand and cried, "Please, Father, let me go back."

Father's hand tightened on hers, but he turned and dropped to one knee to look into her face. "This is important, Pulcheria. You will be first lady of the land now. Show me how an Augusta behaves."

Pulcheria steadied under his gaze. She wanted to make him proud. "Yes, Father, I will do as you wish."

"That's my girl. You've got a backbone, unlike your sniveling brother."

A small flame of anger at this attack on her baby brother warmed Pulcheria's chilled body. Theo was not quite three, and still a child. As the oldest, everyone demanded more from her, and she was proud to give it. It wasn't fair for Father to compare Theo to her!

One look at her father's angry face doused that flame. She had no way to fight for herself, much less her brother. Helplessness clove her tongue to the roof of her mouth. She nodded. Father's lips curved into a smile, but he didn't look happy; his eyes were red with tears and his breath stank of wine.

Antiochus stepped aside, sparing a pitying look for Pulcheria. Arcadius straightened and led the girl into the bedroom. Antiochus' words came rushing

back. Her mother was dead. What did it mean? What would she see? A sense of dread knotted her stomach and again slowed her steps, so that Father had to, again, tug on her arm.

As her father opened the door, she heard the soft chanting of priests and the shriller murmurs of female servants. Burning musky incense failed to mask an odor that left a coppery taste in her mouth.

Blood.

She remembered the smell and taste from scraped knees and split lips. Blood usually meant stinging pain. This room reeked of it. Pulcheria's heart raced. She took shallow breaths through her mouth, trying to avoid the stench.

Olive oil lamps shone steady, illuminating the brilliantly painted scenes on the walls. Pulcheria noticed fleetingly that most of the images were of naked people entwined in awkward positions. Servants and priests bowed their heads as they passed. Her gaze fixed on the wide bed dominating the room. Her mother's court ladies screened the bed from her sight, but she couldn't miss the blood-soaked rags piled in a bronze bowl. At the sight of her father, the women parted, darting horrified glances at Pulcheria.

More gently this time, Arcadius pulled her to the foot of the bed and stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. "Here are the wages of sin, Pulcheria. Blood and death."

Pulcheria held her breath as she gazed upon the still body. Her mother's face looked angelic, eyes closed and face pale. People always praised her mother's beauty. The height and comeliness Eudoxia inherited from her father's Frankish ancestors had captured the heart of the teenage Emperor Arcadius nine years before. Those same people lamented that Pulcheria seemed the only one of their four children with the stamp of her dour-faced father.

Except for the sweat-soaked blond hair tangled about her face, Eudoxia looked asleep. A peaceful look, unlike the impatience her mother's face usually bore with her children. The last time Eudoxia visited the nursery, she spent most of her time complaining about ink spots on Pulcheria's robes and the disordered state of her hair. Mother would not be happy, knowing others now saw her own hair in such disarray.

Pulcheria's gaze strayed lower. She gasped at the fine linen sheets sodden with red gore. The stench caused her stomach to heave. An acid taste flooded her mouth. She took a deep breath.

"F-Father, must I stay longer?"

Arcadius squeezed her shoulder. “No, my good girl, you have seen enough.”

A midwife approached Arcadius with a still bundle, no bigger than one of Pulcheria’s dolls “What should I do with the babe, Augustus?”

“Give it to the dogs!” Arcadius snarled.

The woman gasped and backed away quickly. Pulcheria shrank from her father’s renewed anger, but his left hand held her shoulder fast. Antiochus approached the woman and whispered in her ear.

“Antiochus!” Arcadius pointed at the eunuch. “You will see that my daughter does not grow up to be like her twice-damned mother. Teach her the Gospels, train her to be a good Christian woman, modest and obedient.”

“As you will, Augustus.”

Her father’s hand began to tremble on her shoulder. In a choked voice, he cried, “All of you out.” Servants, priests, and court ladies filed out a back door, silent, but with frightened looks at the Emperor standing over the body of his wife.

Antiochus came forward to take Pulcheria’s hand. “Shall I take the princess back to the nursery?”

“Yes. Go.”

As they exited, Pulcheria glanced over her shoulder. Her father knelt at the foot of the bed, narrow shoulders shaking with sobs as he buried his face in the bloody sheets.

“Your father is distraught, Princess. Pay no heed to his words.” The eunuch led her through the receiving room and back to the marble hall.

She shivered, suddenly aware of her bare feet on cold stone. No braziers chased the icy fall air from the corridor.

“Are you chilled, princess?” The eunuch bent to look at her face.

“Y-y-yes.” Her teeth chattered uncontrollably. From the chill? The blood? Her thoughts and feelings reeled from the sights in the bedroom. What would happen to her and her brother and sisters?

Antiochus gathered her up in his arms and held her close. Warmth radiating from his soft plump body helped dispel some of the chill. “Poor child,” he muttered. “Poor, poor child.”

Pulcheria lay quietly in his arms, listening to his heart beat steadily in his chest, as he carried her slight weight back to the nursery. The regular double-thump settled her nerves. As they grew closer, his breathing grew more labored. A question nagged at her thoughts. “Is Mother in Heaven?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know, child. Only God knows.”

“Father said not.”

“Even the powerful Emperor of Rome does not command God. The Good Lord in his mercy will judge your mother’s soul. Hush now. Think no more of it.”

But Pulcheria could think of nothing else. Her father never took an interest in the nursery. If her mother were not on earth or in Heaven to look out for them, would the servants bring them food or help them bathe? Pulcheria thought she could care for herself, Arcadia, and possibly her brother, but baby Marina needed a wet nurse. Would Nana leave? The thought of losing Nana, her nurse since she was a baby, brought on a new wave of shudders. Surely Nana would never leave me!

The eunuch grunted as he shifted her weight to one arm and opened the door to the nursery. The outer room filled with murmurs from servants as they clustered around low-burning lamps. Pulcheria spied her nurse and struggled to escape the eunuch’s arms. He set her down.

“Nana!” she cried, speeding to the comforting arms of the heavy-set woman whose plain features lit up Pulcheria’s world.

Antiochus followed her. “The Empress is dead.” He cut off the ritual wails with an upraised hand. “The Emperor is understandably distraught. He will not be pleased when his grief has passed if he finds his children neglected.”

Pulcheria noted a few raised eyebrows and pursed lips at this declaration.

“Attend them with good will. I will return in the morning to see to their affairs.”

Nana rose, Pulcheria clinging tightly to her leg. “Forgive me, Antiochus, but should not the Emperor appoint a court woman to oversee the children’s daily welfare? You are tasked with the entire household and have many duties to perform.”

“Daily care will proceed as before. The Emperor asked that I see to their religious instruction in the future.” He shrugged. “I don’t think the Emperor wants any of his wife’s women to influence the children. Perhaps I could appoint you to oversee the nursery. We will decide when this sad time is over.”

Nana offered the eunuch a slight bow. “Thank you.” She put her hand on Pulcheria’s back. “Come, dumpling, let’s get you into a nice warm bed.”

Comforted by the eunuch’s words and Nana’s presence, Pulcheria suppressed a deep yawn, nodded, and followed her nurse to bed. She struggled against sleep, her mind still awhirl with the changes to come. Her worry gave way as lethargy crept up her limbs and sleep quieted her mind.

TWO DAYS LATER, NANA DRESSED PULCHERIA IN HER FINEST PURPLE ROBES, with gold thread that scratched her neck and arms. Her sister Arcadia tugged at her own robes, whining. Theodosius ran around the rooms shouting about a wagon ride.

“Quiet, all of you!” Nana chided. “Can’t you be more like your sister?” The nurse grabbed Theodosius as he careened past her and wiped a streak of dust from his face.

“Are they ready?” Antiochus stood in the door, dressed in his finest court robes—white silk tunic embroidered in purple and gold, with a short purple cloak draped over his shoulders. He cradled a gold staff of office in his left arm.

“All but the baby. Marina is too young for such a long ceremony. I’m not sure Theo can tolerate it.”

“The boy has to learn court decorum some time.” His eyes lighted on Pulcheria. “How is the princess?”

“Doing as well as might be expected.”

Pulcheria, annoyed at being talked about as if she were not present in the room, spoke up. “Antiochus, what will happen today?”

“A procession through the city to the Church of the Apostles, prayers for your mother’s soul, and a feast for the dead. I will be with you, your sister, and brother.”

“Honey cake?” Theodosius piped up.

A sad smile crossed the eunuch’s face. “I’m sure there will be honey cake, young Caesar.”

Pulcheria straightened her shoulders and took her brother’s hand. “Come, Theo, let’s go on our wagon ride.”

Antiochus’ eyes glinted with approval as he escorted the three children to the enclosed imperial wagon that her late mother once used for trips around the city. The outside glittered with gilded wood. Two black horses in silver harness pulled the carriage. Theo forgot himself, tugged on her hand, and exclaimed, “Horsies, Ria! I want to see the horsies!”

“Not today, Theo.” He stuck his middle two fingers in his mouth to suck on—a sure sign he was upset.

A guard stepped forward to lift them into the spacious interior, decorated with purple silk drapes and cushions. The middle dropped so passengers could sit with their feet in the well rather than be forced to recline.

The short trip started with wails and lamentations just outside the palace walls. The loudly mourning crowd frightened the younger children. Four-year-old Arcadia whimpered, pulled her knees up, and wrapped her arms around her little legs, rocking back and forth. Theo's eyes grew wide and bright with tears. Pulcheria looked to Antiochus. He ignored the children's distress.

She remembered how Nana soothed them and comforted her brother and sister with physical pats, murmurs, and nonsense words.

"Thank you, Princess." Antiochus frowned at the children sitting across from him. "I hope they are better behaved at the church."

"Apologies, Antiochus. I'll see to it."

He sighed and peeked out the window from behind the curtains.

Curious about a world she had never seen, Pulcheria tried to push the heavy purple cloth aside. "What do you see?"

"No, Princess!" Antiochus shouted. He slapped the curtains back in place, but not before she caught a glimpse of sorrowful faces covered in tears and ashes.

Startled, Pulcheria shrank back onto her cushions, her momentary sense of confidence shattered.

Antiochus told her, more softly, "It is not permitted for the common people to look upon the sacred faces of the imperial family."

She wanted to ask why, but the deep frown on the eunuch's face deterred her. Everyone in the palace can see our faces. Aren't we just as sacred inside the palace as outside? Arcadia began to sniffle at the eunuch's sharp tone. Pulcheria put her arms around her sister and filed her question away for another time.

They soon arrived at the Church of the Apostles. Antiochus led them through a thick corridor of Imperial Scholae—the Emperor's personal guards—who kept the crying, mourning people at bay. Pulcheria gasped as they entered the cool orderliness of the church. She was used to the much smaller scale of their nursery chapel. Here, the ceilings soared high above, held up by multi-colored marble columns. The walls glinted with colored frescoes of the Apostles' lives, lit by hundreds of candles and gold chandeliers. Gold glittered on the altar, the robes of the bishop, and the people gathered in the nave.

It was beautiful! Pulcheria stared in awe, soaking in the majesty. This was truly God's house! The sweet woody smell of incense wafted on the air from the gold censers on the altar. She pulled the soothing scent deep into her lungs—so different from the piney smell tinged with blood she remembered from her mother's room.

“This way, children.” Antiochus broke her concentration. He escorted them up marble stairs to a screened balcony overlooking the altar. They could look out, but the people standing in the packed church couldn’t see them.

Theo ran to the carved wooden screen and pointed to a dark red stone box lying before the altar. “What’s that?” The sides were carved with several scenes. From this distance, Pulcheria couldn’t tell what story they told.

“That’s a sarcophagus,” Antiochus answered. “It holds your mother’s earthly remains.”

“What’s a sar-sar...” Arcadia struggled.

Theo asked, “What’s ’mains?”

“The sarcophagus is the red stone box. Her body is inside.”

Theo’s eyes went wide. Arcadia’s face paled. “Is it dark in there? Won’t Mama be scared?”

“No child, she isn’t scared.” Antiochus patted their heads. “Her soul is with God. Now it’s time to be quiet.”

“I’ll explain later,” Pulcheria whispered to them. “Let’s sit.” She helped Arcadia onto a low padded bench and sat down herself.

Theo still looked puzzled, but one of the first things they learned in the nursery was to be quiet when an adult asked them to. Antiochus picked him up and sat him on the bench next to Pulcheria. His short legs swung over the edge.

Pulcheria took his hand. He smiled up at her and leaned against her shoulder. Arcadia curled up with her head in Pulcheria’s lap. Their trust tugged at her heart, making her sense of helplessness all the more hurtful. Her stomach roiled and throat began to close. She couldn’t keep them safe. She wasn’t Nana! An unsettling thought nibbled at the edge of her mind: *even Nana could be sent away by Antiochus...and Antiochus could be dismissed by...*

Her father and several richly dressed men entered the nave from the side to take seats in another screened area to the right of the altar. Her heart beat slower and her stomach calmed. Father was Emperor. No one could send him away, and he would never let anything happen to his children, especially his son and heir. Pulcheria pulled Theo tighter, praying that their father lived a long life.

THE NEXT MORNING, IN THE NURSERY PLAYROOM, PULCHERIA LOOKED UP FROM her primer on Greek letters. She found the chaos here, among comfortable cushions, the clutter of toys, and the low gossipy chatter of the nurses and

servants, distracting. She much preferred the quiet calm of the classroom or—even better—the prayerful drone of the nursery chapel.

Delighted cries from one corner attracted her attention. Baby Marina took some tottering first steps, to the loud acclaim of her wet-nurse. Arcadia sang a rhyme and played a simple hand-patting game with Nana, while Theo kicked a stuffed leather ball from one side of the room to the other. Their lives had quickly settled back into a comfortable routine, but Pulcheria felt uneasy. Her mother was dead. What other changes lurked in the future?

The pleasant noise faded to silence a few minutes later when Antiochus came through the door with a stern-faced priest in tow. Nana stood, smoothed her wrinkled stola, and approached the two men. She bowed.

“Antiochus, Father, what can I do for you?”

Antiochus indicated the priest. “Elpida, this is Father Marcus. He will be overseeing the children’s religious instruction.”

Pulcheria was momentarily confused. *Elpida?* She had assumed *Nana* was the name of the woman who raised her.

The eunuch frowned at the playroom chaos. “Father Marcus will also oversee the children’s chapel and lead the nursery staff in observing canonical hours with prayers.”

Pulcheria couldn’t see Nana’s face, but her back stiffened and shoulders straightened. “Not all the offices, surely! This is a nursery, not a monastery. The children’s health will suffer if you wake them during the night every couple of hours for prayer.”

Father Marcus smiled, softening the stern lines in his thin bearded face. “Only those offices during the day and before bed—Prime through Vespers. I had a child of my own before Christ took her to heaven and called me to the church, Nurse Elpida. I am here to ensure the health of their immortal souls, not to endanger their physical bodies. Do the children know their prayers? Can they read the Gospels?”

“Not the younger ones, Father.” Pulcheria noted the red blush spread up the back of Nana’s neck. “But Princess Pulcheria is very bright and her tutor says she is making remarkable progress with her Greek and Latin letters. She should be able to read the Gospels.”

“Then I will start with her and instruct the other children as they are able.” Father Marcus looked around the room, caught Pulcheria staring at him, and nodded.

He seemed pleasant enough, with intelligent black eyes and an olive complexion. His gray-streaked beard contrasted with his dark curly hair. Something about his erect stance and precise voice told her he led a disciplined life, but laugh lines framing his eyes hinted at a sense of humor.

“Do as you must.” Antiochus nodded to the priest. “Come see me when you’re through and I’ll show you to your quarters.”

Nana led the priest over to Pulcheria. “Princess, this is Father Marcus—”

“I heard, Nana.” Pulcheria closed her codex and stood. “This way to the classroom, Father.”

Nana snapped her gaping jaws shut and nodded. Pulcheria led the priest to an adjoining room, smaller than the playroom and much more severe. Except for an embroidery basket, no fabric, cushion, or carpet softened the austerity. Bookshelves covered one wall, containing bound volumes on history, geography, philosophy, plays and poetry. Maps of the Empire covered another. A standing work desk of light maple stood in one corner. In the middle of the room, a short chair sat at a low table containing stacks of wax-covered tablets and a stylus to incise the wax or scrape away mistakes. A couple of folded backless camp chairs leaned against a third wall. No windows offered distractions, but an ornate brass chandelier held a dozen olive oil lamps, casting a warm glow over the room.

Marcus opened a camp chair and sat. “Please stand here, Princess.” He pointed to a spot directly in front of him. When she had positioned herself, with shoulders and back straight, he asked, “What have you studied so far?”

“I’m learning to read and write Greek and Latin. Tutor has started me on sums and differences and geography. I’m also learning comportment and embroidery. Would you like to see?”

The stern set to his face softened slightly. His sharp black eyes held a hint of laughter. “Yes, Princess, I would like to see your work.”

She went to her small table and brought back her practice tablets and embroidery basket. “Tutor praised my hand. It is much better than last year.” She showed him her writing samples. It still wasn’t perfect; she frowned at some of the awkward letters. Her embroidery was more of an embarrassment. She tried and tried, but could not master Nana’s small, neat stitches.

“Very nice work, especially for a child of your age.” He took a small codex of scripture from a pocket tied to his belt. “Do you read the Sacred Word, child?”

There was that word again: sacred. She shook her head. “No, Father, but I read some poetry.” Pride echoed in her voice. Four-year-old Arcadia was just starting on letters, and Tutor didn’t even try to get three-year-old Theo to sit for lessons. “I have a question for you.”

“Yes?” He leaned back, looking at her sharply.

“You describe the Gospels as ‘the Sacred Word.’ Yesterday, Antiochus said it was wrong for the common people to see my and my sisters’ ‘sacred faces.’ What does ‘sacred’ mean? The common people can see and hear the Gospels. Why can’t they see and hear us?”

“That, Child, is a very grown-up question. Sacred means holy—of God. The Gospels are the Word of God. Your father, the Emperor of Rome, was chosen and anointed by God to be His viceroy on earth, to rule in the way of Caesars. Thus, emperors and their families are accounted sacred. That’s why you live in seclusion and common people are not allowed to see your faces.”

“But Nana and the servants see our faces. They are common people.” She frowned.

“Good thinking, Princess!” His face split into a large smile. “You’ve put your finger on the complexity of the matter. Nowhere in the Gospels does it say an Emperor and his family may not be seen. That is a rule—like many—made up by men for their own purposes. Your father’s mother, Aelia Flacilla Augusta, used to go out among the people and care for the sick and the poor with her own hands. She obeyed a rule from the Gospels, ‘Care for the least of these.’ It is good to know what rules are made by God and what are rules made by man. You should never break God’s rules.”

“But I can break man’s?” Pulcheria was confused. “I can go out among the people without covering my face?”

“Sometimes. If all men obeyed God’s rules, there would be no need for additional ones, but that is not the world we live in.” Father Marcus sighed. “I can see you are going to be an apt pupil. We will work through these questions and many more in our studies. Be patient, Princess. As you grow older, more will be revealed.”

Annoyed at the constant admonition by adults to “wait until you’re older,” Pulcheria was inclined to demand an answer now, but her native caution took over. “Yes, Father. I look forward to learning the answers with you.”

His smile disappeared; the stern look of a teacher returned. “Do you know any stories from the Gospels?”

“I know about Christ’s birth and His re-re—resurrection?” She looked down in embarrassment over the stumbled word.

“That’s good, but there are older parts to the Bible, many stories that have lessons for us.” Marcus flipped through pages until he found the passage he wanted. “Do you know the story of Queen Jezebel?”

Pulcheria shook her head.

The priest closed the book and leaned forward. “King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel were bad leaders and wicked people. They worshiped false gods, made war on their neighbors, and did murder. You might hear some say your mother was a modern Jezebel. She *did* do some wicked things, but nothing like the Jewish Queen. It’s my job to make sure you stay true to the Christian path, that your soul pleases God, and you get to sit at His right hand after the Second Coming.”

“Do you think Mother is in heaven?” That question haunted her. Despite her mother’s indifference, Pulcheria did not want to imagine her in torment.

“I don’t know, Princess.” Marcus thought a moment, hand tugging at his graying beard. “Your mother’s sins were those of pride and of the flesh. If she truly repented her sins, God forgave her. If she didn’t repent...” He shrugged expressive shoulders.

He handed the codex to Pulcheria. She turned the chunky volume over in her hands. Its fine leather was worn with much use. What did her mother do that was so wicked? Would she find the answers in this book? Father Marcus counselled patience. She hoped, with time, all her questions would be answered. For now, she would do her best to learn his lessons.

“Your Father commands that you receive instruction in the scriptures, so you do not stray from the path of righteousness. Today we will begin with the creation and Eve’s fall from grace. Stand straight and declaim in a strong voice.”

She straightened her shoulders, opened the holy book to the first page, and read, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...”



Chapter 2

Imperial Palace, May 408

ANTHEMIUS, PATRICIAN, PRAETORIAN PREFECT AND SECOND MOST powerful man in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire, left Emperor Arcadius' bedroom to confront the anxious crowd in the anteroom. He was followed by the handful of councilors and priests who had shared his vigil through the night and acted as witnesses to the passing of power. No one had expected Arcadius to die at the young age of thirty-one, but a sudden fever carried him off, leaving Anthemius with a succession crisis. As prefect, he had been running the government for his dull-witted Emperor the last eight years and saw no reason he shouldn't continue. *The boy is only seven, for God's sake! It will be years before he can take the reins.*

Silence descended on the courtiers and foreign ambassadors as Anthemius schooled his lined face and made the expected announcement. "The Augustus is dead. God rest his soul."

The crowd echoed, "God rest his soul. Blessings be upon him."

Anthemius ran a hand through his impressive head of curly silver hair, then stilled his unexpected fidgeting. *I must be more tired than I thought. When did I lose the ability to work through the night and greet the dawn with vigor?*

He took a deep breath and addressed the crowd. "Our beloved emperor, Flavius Arcadius Augustus, named his son, Flavius Theodosius, as Caesar and heir some years ago. The Imperial line continues. Theodosius is the next Emperor, the Second of that Name." *It never hurts to remind people of illustrious ancestors!*

He scanned the crowd for hints of dissatisfaction. This was a dangerous time for the boy emperor and Anthemius was on the lookout for any sign of rebellion. Most of the men wore grave or sorrowful faces. He made note of those few showing a blank or calculating mien. He paid little attention to the women ritually crying and praying.

“The city prefect will arrange the funeral. I will continue to serve as Patrician to the emperor and praetorian prefect of the East. The senate will appoint a regent for Theodosius Caesar, soon to be Augustus.” Anthemius waved his hands toward the door. “You are dismissed.” He turned to several young pages and gave them instructions on whom to notify.

“Patrician?” Antiochus bowed before him as the last of the youngsters left. “May I have a word?”

While Anthemius ran the empire, Antiochus ran the palace and had physical custody of the emperor’s young children. The two had worked well together over the years. Antiochus had had a calming influence over the moody Arcadius and didn’t try to exercise power beyond the palace. The prefect hoped to enlist the eunuch in his plans for the children.

“Certainly.” Anthemius nodded to his son. “Isidorus, join us.” He had been grooming his son for high honors since boyhood. He hoped to leave the empire in his capable hands—someday—in the future.

The three men stood at an ebony sideboard laden with food left over from the night’s vigil. Anthemius ignored the wilted lettuces, crumbs of cheese, and picked-over meats in their congealed fat. He signaled a servant to pour chilled pomegranate juice over crushed cherries in silver goblets.

Antiochus declined, but Isidorus took a large drink. Anthemius frowned at the tart taste as he sipped his own.

“Your Sublimity, this sudden and tragic death leaves us a dilemma.” The eunuch shuffled his feet and looked longingly at a padded chair.

“Only one?” Anthemius gave a sour smile.

“What is to be done with the children?”

“They are to be cared for, as always.”

“I hesitate to bring this up, Noble Prefect, but I fear for their safety.” The eunuch put up his hands as if in defense. “Not that I suspect any specific person of plotting rebellion...uh...or wishing them harm. But they are young and without champions. It is an easy thing to shove aside a seven-year-old boy in favor of a mature man. Perhaps they should be housed in a more secure location?”

I could take the children to the palace in Hebdomon, away from the public eye.”

Anthemius was pleased at the eunuch’s concern. “Rest assured, Antiochus, I know of no one who wants to put aside the new emperor. The palace is the safest place for the children, especially with such a vigilant person as yourself in charge. The senate will soon appoint a regent. That should settle the matter until the boy reaches his majority.”

“Theodosius’ Uncle Honorius is now senior Emperor and might want some say in that appointment.”

“More likely his General Stilicho will claim some influence, since he acted as regent in the West during Honorius’ minority. I’m sure the eastern senate will be unanimous in its will to have one of their own in the position.”

Antiochus raised a questioning brow but did not comment on Anthemius’ bold assertion of independence in the East. “I still fear some disaffection in this court. Luckily, Emperor Arcadius—blessed be his soul!—provided a safeguard.”

“What’s the nature of this safeguard?” Alarm quickened Anthemius’ blood. *What the devil has the eunuch been up to? Will he oppose my regency?*

“At my urging, the late Emperor—may he be honored in heaven!—named the Persian King guardian of his son.” Antiochus flashed a satisfied smile, handing Anthemius a sealed packet. “This letter from Yazdgard, First of his Name, declares that he will wage war if the boy comes to harm. Please make it known to others of the court and the council.”

Anthemius broke the seal and scanned it quickly. He had not suspected the eunuch of being under foreign obligation. Antiochus had not tried to influence foreign policy, so was likely just taking a small pension from the Persian king for general information about the court, a common practice. *I need to strengthen my network of informers inside the palace to confirm Antiochus is not more ambitious. We have a history of eunuchs getting above their station.*

Anthemius handed the letter to his son. “There is no need for such foreign protection. I give you my word, no harm will come to our new emperor.”

“Your word is good with me, Patrician, but you do not command all. There are many ambitious men about. I’ll leave you two to your deliberations. I must inform the children of their loss.” Antiochus bowed and left.

With the eunuch gone, the prefect waved his son over to the chairs and took a deep swallow of his own drink.

Isidorus looked at his father over the brim of his goblet. “Well, Father?”

“Well, what?” he answered with a touch of asperity.

“Are you one of those ‘ambitious men’? You have managed the empire successfully for the last eight years while our ‘Blessed Emperor’”— he rolled his eyes—“drank himself to death. Many would rally to your cause.”

“I have sworn before God and the people of Constantinople to protect this empire. I will not break that oath by instigating a civil war.” Anthemius frowned at his son. “That means protecting the young emperor and running his empire to the best of my ability.”

Blood flooded his son’s face at the mild rebuke. “I meant no disrespect, Father. I do not doubt your loyalty, but many are dissatisfied after the disastrous rule of Arcadius and are looking for change. General Procopius claims descent from the Great Constantine. He could make a bid for the diadem.”

“The good general has never expressed an interest in ruling. Besides, I have plans for Procopius. I believe he would be much happier with a connection to our family, where he could accumulate wealth and influence without the headaches of wearing the diadem.” Anthemius smiled. “I’ve been looking for a good match for your sister.”

Isidorus looked startled, then nodded. “A very good move. Best to bring him into our faction and avoid civil war.”

“The senate is sure to name me regent.” Anthemius stared into his goblet for a moment. “I’ll replace Arcadius’ corrupt friends with men of good repute throughout the government. People will see a change and our young emperor should reap the benefit. If he proves as malleable as his father, we continue as now. If the boy shows strength of character and good judgment, he will keep us close. Either way, we benefit and avoid a civil war.”

“What if he grows strong-willed and foolish?”

“It is our job to surround the boy with good tutors and amiable friends who will have his ear for many years. By education and example, that is how we form a sensible man and competent ruler.”

“And keep him away from the wine.” Isidorus grinned.

“Yes, moderation in all things is the Hellene way.” Anthemius rose and stretched. “It was a long vigil last night, and I have more work to do. I best get to it.”

A MONTH LATER, PULCHERIA PREPARED HER BROTHER FOR ONE OF THE MOST important days of his life. “Stand still, Theo, or we’ll never get you ready for

your acclamation. You do want to be the emperor of Rome, don't you?" The cherubic toddler had grown into a weedy seven-year-old, missing his front teeth, and usually stinking of horses and dogs. One of his favorite hounds paced the carpet by his side, whining at the commotion.

Pulcheria inspected her brother with reserved approval. His attendants had arranged the boy's dark blond hair in glistening curls and dressed him in new robes of purple silk encrusted with gold thread, seed pearls, and amethysts. He positively glittered! Theo was a handsome boy even with his gap-toothed smile. He reached down to sooth his hound, mumbling, "I am emperor. Nobody can take that away from me."

She raised one eyebrow, an affectation she practiced in a mirror and used to devastating effect on servants. She needed Theo to know the precariousness of his position, but didn't want to needlessly frighten him. It was enough that her stomach clenched with apprehension.

Pulcheria tried again, "One would think you have not studied your histories. Many an emperor has lost his throne and his life because the army or the senate did not want him."

"But the people love me!" Theo whined.

She sighed, resisting the urge to tousle his carefully coifed curls. Pulcheria worked hard to keep up with the outside world, isolated as they were in the palace. Instinctively, she knew knowledge was power, even if she had no way of wielding that power as a child. It infuriated her that the adults in her life tried to deny her this one safeguard. Nana patted her on the head and suggested she not worry about such things. Antiochus deliberately kept disturbing news from the nursery, so her tutors deflected her questions on current events.

Only Father Marcus kept her apprised of the current state of the empire. For a priest, he seemed well informed and had the bonus of respecting Pulcheria's questions. But he had no access to the thinking of powerful men and that was the knowledge she sought. Luckily there were no restrictions on history, so she concentrated on learning as much as she could about past imperial rulers—what traits made them successes, and which made them vulnerable.

The one history lesson she learned over and over again was that the emperor was always in danger. That knowledge was a curse. As she had after her mother's death, Pulcheria struggled with a sense of helplessness. She was a young girl with an impossible task. What could she do against an entire court of adults to keep her family safe? What could she do if the army revolted?

Little to nothing, except pray.

If the worst threatened, Pulcheria planned to ask Father Marcus for asylum for the children in the church. Whereas the people of the court were all too vulnerable to bribes and promises of power, Father Marcus taught her God granted his grace to innocent children and would protect them.

Pulcheria blinked tears from her eyes. How to get through to Theo? Should she? If they can do nothing, shouldn't she let him enjoy his innocence? No. Through God's grace, and good luck, her brother would become emperor. He needed to know how to rule. If the tutors wouldn't do it, she would.

"Brother, we live in perilous times. Father Marcus tells me the Huns have invaded from the north, the Goths muster under Alaric, and General Stilicho returns to the West by our Uncle Honorius' order, leaving the East vulnerable. In the past, people have turned quickly against any emperor who cannot protect them. We must have the support of the eastern armies, as well as the people, or our lives are forfeit."

Theo's face turned somber. "How did you become so wise, Ria?"

"I had to. No one else looks after us except Nana and Father Marcus. What can one old woman and a priest do to protect us?" Pulcheria thought bitterly of her drunken father. Could he not have lived another five or six years, until she was of age? She had little affection for him, but alive he kept the vultures of the Court from his children, and Pulcheria knew some peace. Now all was chaos and uncertainty. With a boy on the throne and she only nine years old, their fate fell to whoever the senate declared regent.

"When I come into my majority, Sister, you will be my foremost advisor." Theodosius gave her a lop-sided grin. "For I know you love me and have my best interests at heart."

Pulcheria swept her brother into a hug, just as Antiochus appeared at the door. "Children, it's time to go."

Pulcheria straightened her robes and her brother's, bowed low, and pointed to the door with an outstretched arm. "Emperor Theodosius, your people await you."

A fearful expression flitted over the boy's face.

"You'll do well, Brother. Show the people you are worthy of our grandfather's name."

Theo's face settled into the mask of genial good humor all imperial children learn at an early age. He offered his arm. They walked out the door side-by-side.

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