

The Messenger

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The Messenger

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Summary

Eve learns of an attack on Amazon land, and journeys to Italia with her once enemy, Varia, to discover who is now planning a genocide of Amazons.

Notes

This contains similarities to a fic I wrote over a year ago called "The Journey Begins" and some similarities to other fics in my pervious series "Eve: The Messenger of Eli." If you read those and you recognize some of the similarities, know that this is a COMPLETELY different fic. It will feature a new story post-Friend in Need, as well as flashbacks from Eve's time in Rome as Livia.

There will be some mentions of rape eventually, and one brief mentioning of assault in the first chapter, but nothing explicit.

Chapter 1

I was twenty years old the first time I entered Amazon land— at least the first time I remember. My name was slowly spreading outside the provinces of Rome, gaining notoriety and inspiring fear as I conquered territory after territory for my empire. At the time, I was Livia, the future wife of Augustus Caesar and fierce commander for the country of Italia. My country's people had already begun calling me the Bitch of Rome, but even then, no one knew the kind of monster I would become. The Amazons were the first to find out; the first people I killed in absolute cold blood.

It was early morning when my army arrived onto Greece. I was used to being up before the sun, often watching it rise from a palace window before Augustus, or anyone else who might want something from me, could wake up. Sometimes I would walk around the forgotten trails of Rome, finding spiders and letting them crawl up my arm as the light slowly filtered through the trees. On the day of my Amazon invasion, I watched it rise again, covering the land in its golden glow as my men got in line and marched inland. By noon, we were loading beaten and bloody women onto our ships.

The screams from the battle echoed in my head, though the chained women being pushed onto my boat hardly made a sound. I had decimated their tribe and they knew they couldn't defeat my army. About half remained at their camp alive, surrounded by the dead bodies of their sisters and the knowledge that I had taken the rest captive. I was going to sell them as slaves.

The esteemed warlord, Gurkhan, was known for taking women as wives against their will, especially women and girls deemed to be “exotic” and rare. I sailed to North Africa hoping he would be my highest bidder. The amazons turned out not to be the type of exotic Gurkhan or any of his slave-holding cohorts desired. They were too fierce, too strong-willed. They weren't suitably domestic for the taste of rich and powerful men. When I went to auction them off, the sisters spat in the faces of their bidders. They cursed at any man who looked lower than their necks and swore the wrath of Artemis onto any who dared touch them. Even if they knew they couldn't win, and that they'd certainly be killed, they wouldn't be a man's slave. Every bid was withdrawn and I couldn't make a single profit.

The men laughed at me; told me I knew nothing about what a man looks for in a wife. “I can show you what makes a good bride,” one old, drunk voice whispered over my shoulder. I'll never forget the feeling of his dry, cracked hand pushing under my chest armour onto the skin of my breast. I elbowed him in the face before he could get his fingers to my nipple, but other men looked to me in similar sentiments.

I left the market in a rage, stopping only to punch a few slave-traders as they jokingly reached for my body, slurring things like “I'll put an auction on you any day, sweetheart.” By the time I got back to my ship, my mentor was waiting for me, laughing as he watched my men pull the Amazons by their chains back onto the boat.

“No takers, huh?” Ares said.

I didn't look at him as I yanked the last of the Amazons back on board by their shackles, kicking and punching the most resistant right in their wounds until they stopped fighting.

"Oh you're not mad at me, are you?" He chuckled.

"This was your idea," I said, then ordered my men to sail forward.

"Don't blame me because you're no good at making a sale," he said.

"There was no way to convince them," I said. "They wanted nothing to do with Amazons. They want women they can break and overpower. They're sick and perverted. They're--"

"Men?" Ares said, laughing again. "What did you expect? You want to rule this entire world and you can't even handle a room full of rich drunks thinking with their dicks? Get a hold of yourself, Livia."

He snapped his fingers and was gone from the ship, vanishing before I could defend myself or accuse him of misleading me. As we traveled out of the region, I made the coldest decision of my life up until that point. I was worse than a self-serving, power-hungry commander.

I threw the Amazons overboard my ship, their shackles still clasped over their hands and feet. The screams lasted only a few moments before being muffled by the deep waters of the Mediterranean. It was the first time since I was a child that I felt no pride or contentment in conquering a fierce opponent. The Amazons had been no threat to me, and there was no dignity in taking the lives of women bound in chains. But for the first time, I also felt no guilt or sadness in the murder of defenseless victims. I made the decision to turn away fully from whatever compassion and mercy still lived inside me. From that day forward, I left any remnants of a moral conscience behind as I turned my attention to the search for absolute power. This is what turned me into a monster.

Almost nine years have passed since that unforgivable incident, and I've spent the last two trying to atone for all of my wicked deeds. The Amazons have shown me mercy in the two trips I've made onto their land since. Theirs and many others' ability to forgive me and my past has made my path toward compassion and peace possible. There only two people who have helped me more: Eli, my one true God, and Xena, my mother. Like me, my mother chose a path of light and love only after overcoming darkness and crushing guilt. Long after I decided my soul was doomed for hell, she rescued me from the corruption of my empire, and lead me away from the sins of my past. Though she is now gone, I know her memory will stay with me always.

Two years after ending my reign of terror on the world, I was on my way back to Amazon land, traveling with Gabrielle, my mother's faithful partner. Looking at her, I was reminded of all the good my mother had done for this world. Before meeting Xena, Gabrielle was a young, naive village girl, writing fictitious tales of adventure in her hometown of Potidaea, wishing she could have stories of her own. After years with my mother, she did, and many at that. The scrolls Gabrielle wrote of their time together were so near and dear to my heart. Having spent the first 25 years of my life without my mother, reading stories of her adventures inspired me on my own path when I felt so lost.

Gabrielle was also inspiring to me. She was no longer just a young poet from Potidaea. She was a strong, brave, and wise warrior herself, taking all the lessons she learned from my mother and using them to help others. Even with her many experiences in violence and war, she was a beacon of light and hope, always believing in the good of man and the power of peace. It was no wonder she was one of the first disciples of my God. Without Gabrielle as well, my path into the light of Eli would not have been possible.

“She would be so proud of you, you know,” I said to her. She forced a small smile and looked to me with unconvinced eyes.

“Thanks, Eve,” she said. “Just wish she could be the one to tell me that.”

For a while after her death, the ghost of my mother stayed beside Gabrielle, coaching her through battles and keeping her company at night while she dealt with her newfound loneliness. Gabrielle said it was the only thing that put her at ease with Xena’s passing. As time went on, she was visited by Xena’s spirit less and less, hearing her only when she desperately needed encouragement. One night, she heard a soft voice whisper, “Thank you,” as she drifted to sleep. It was the last time she heard my mother.

By the time Gabrielle found me traveling in the East, her spirit was hollow. I saw her from across a village in Samje, but I knew even from far away that she was barely hanging on. Her head sunk low, her shoulders slouched, and as she came closer, I could see the area beneath her eyes had darkened like someone was literally sucking the light out of her.

I had known weeks before of my mother’s passing. My eastern journey as the Messenger of Eli started in Chin, a land not far from Jappa, where my mother was killed. Along with the news that Xena had been beheaded in battle, something that pompous warlords loved to laugh over in taverns, I heard legends of a new warrior, The Battling Bard of Potidaea, an Amazon who had inherited the chakram of the Warrior Princess and continued her fight for the greater good. Gabrielle was being heralded as a hero, one that brought hope to those in need of a brighter and more just future. Though I missed my mother greatly, I knew her memory would live on as long as people like Gabrielle were around to inspire others with her greatness and bravery. When I realized Gabrielle’s own light had begun to dim, I knew she couldn’t continue on her journey as she had been; so I joined her on a trip back to Greece where she could rejoin the Amazon nation and settle in as their Queen.

As we walked toward camp, I looked to Gabrielle. Physically, she was stronger than I had ever seen her. The months after Xena’s death had propelled her into a life of hard fighting. Without my mother around to take out tougher enemies, Gabrielle was left to handle every nasty warlord and criminal on her own. This forced her to get tougher, faster, and more determined than ever before. I imagine, as well, that Xena’s death pushed her into fighting more frequently. I know a thing or two about using battle as a distraction from your own thoughts and pain, and I could see so much pain in her.

But underneath her hardened muscle, there was a woman breaking apart in mourning. The once spirited bard, hungry for enlightenment and eager to share a human connection with anyone, now walked through life half alive, barely making it from battle to battle. In our entire journey from Samje back to Greece, I seldom heard Gabrielle speak about anything more than how far we were from our destination and where our next stop should be.

“She’s with you, Gabrielle,” I said as we walked onto the border of Amazon lands. “I know it.”

I didn’t know it, but I knew Gabrielle needed something to hold onto as she journeyed into her new life without her best friend. I also knew that I couldn’t stay long to settle her once we reached the Amazon camp. While my crimes against the Amazons had been forgiven, and I was no longer banished from their lands, my presence among them was not in favor of much of the sisterhood. I could be pardoned for every crime I had ever committed, change my name from Livia to Eve, but I could never fully wash away the blood that stained my hands or heal the pain I’ve caused. Coming onto Amazon lands, expecting the women to look into my eyes and remember how I once nearly destroyed their proud nation, would just be waking trauma best left asleep.

As we walked further, I allowed my head to fall lower, looking only to the ground as we pushed toward camp. Keeping a low profile, I thought, would be the most respectful thing I could do. Bring Gabrielle into the camp, ensure that she’s well and safe, then leave before bringing attention to myself. Perhaps I would make a visit to one Amazon, the one who pardoned me from execution, to express my undying gratitude. No matter how far from Greece and Rome I traveled, she was on my mind always, both for the shame and guilt I felt, and the respect I held for her willingness to forgive.

“Eve, look,” Gabrielle said after a few moments. I brought my head up, thinking we were close enough to see some of the huts of the village or maybe a few Amazons hunting. What I saw was smoke reaching high into the sky, above the trees and coming from directly ahead of us, in the Amazon village. A second later I began to smell it.

“C’mon,” she said.

Gabrielle began sprinting ahead and I followed. I couldn’t imagine what was going through her head now. The Amazons were a family to both Gabrielle and my mother, but they were constantly under attack from warlords, empires, or bratty wannabe-empresses seeking power and fame. A fire could have erupted at the Amazon village for any number of reasons, ranging from a brutal attack to some planned ritual. I knew that Gabrielle’s swift sprint toward the camp didn’t mean the Amazons were surely in danger, but she couldn’t risk it. She had lost Xena, she wouldn’t lose her sisters, too.

As we approached the camp, the Amazon village appeared empty on the outskirts. We couldn’t see a single person, but heard drums and chanting from not far away.

“It’s just an Amazon ritual or something,” I said, relieved and slightly out of breath from our run into camp. “Where’s the village center? It’s probably there.”

Gabrielle nodded and lead me further in. On our way through the deserted-looking camp, the smell of smoke became stronger. I knew the smell well, though it was always hard to describe. It was like a mixture of feces, rotting meat, and a sweet perfume. Since I was nineteen, I had never been able to get this smell completely out of my nose. It was always hiding there, tightly clinging to the hairs of my nostrils, just in case I ever forgot. This could be no regular ritual.

I looked to Gabrielle as we entered the center of the village. Her eyes welled up with tears as she dropped her sais and cradled her head. Ahead of us, the Amazons stood circled around a burning pile of their sisters, watching as the smoke blackened the sky above them.

Chapter 2

Gabrielle wiped the tears from below her eye, clenching her jaw to stop it from trembling. Her sisters sat still and stern around us, backs pin-straight as they waited for Gabrielle to calm her sniffing and look back to them in the circle.

Kanae, Cyane, and Varia I recognized from my previous trips on these lands. Three others, however, I had never seen before this day. The Amazon Nation, despite its many enemies, was still growing; and there I was, a piece of their harrowing past, sitting amongst them. Even the Amazons I didn't recognize looked to me in disdain.

Maybe it was her tear soaked face or the general respect she often commanded, but no one stopped Gabrielle from bringing me into this space of Amazon Royalty. A few stared directly at me, eyes narrowed and filled with hatred, not even bothering to pretend otherwise when I caught them glaring. They wanted me to know I was being watched carefully, even if I had been allowed inside. Only two were ignoring my presence: Amari, the stony new leader of the Amazon Nation, whose face hadn't once flashed a sign of emotion; and Varia, who looked only to the floor, avoiding my gaze completely.

I had never seen Varia look so small in a room before. When I first arrived on Amazon lands with my mother and Gabrielle, she was a fearsome Amazon Princess, with a love for battle and a commitment to leading her tribe. When she became Queen, it was her that organized the unification of Amazon tribes and created the Amazon Nation as it now existed; and it was her that confronted me on my past and insisted I stand trial for my crimes. I didn't understand why she appeared so meager in this company now.

"When did this happen?" Gabrielle said from inside her palms, the only Amazon in the hut slouching as she rested her elbows on her knees.

"The attack was three days ago," Amari said. While I still didn't understand why Varia was no longer leading this Nation, I could see clearly how Amari could take over. In all my years as a warrior, rarely had I seen a woman's body so strong and firm, like the Gods crafted her as the model for human strength. Her arms looked as though they could punch through stone, her abs appeared impenetrable by blade, and her legs might've propelled her into Heaven with a strong enough leap. Even her cheekbones sat high and proud on her face like they too could cut any man who dared get too close. If the Amazons needed someone intimidating and formidable to face their enemies, Amari was perfect; and Varia, who once trained with Ares and beat both my mother and Gabrielle in combat, looked gentle in comparison.

"How many are dead?" Gabrielle said, her voice so quiet that it could barely be heard, even in the deafening silence of the room.

"Twenty-one of our sisters were killed during battle," Amari said, keeping her chin parallel to the ground as she spoke, letting only her eyes peer down to Gabrielle, who was hunched over herself and wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "Five more died later of injury."

Gabrielle straightened her back and took a deep breath, trying to muster the strong Queen within her; but the redness in her eyes and the dampness of her cheeks couldn't be hidden or ignored even as she puffed out her chest.

"Do we know who the men were?" Gabrielle said, her voice still shaky but not yet cracking.

A brief moment of silence struck the hut. I looked from Gabrielle to the other Amazons and they all looked to one another. Some mouths opened slightly, small, unintelligible noises coming from them as they exchanged hesitant glances.

"The soldiers were Roman," Amari said, not even glancing at her sisters.

"Roman?" The mournfulness of Gabrielle's face was replaced with bewilderment and she looked to her sisters for confirmation.

I looked toward an Amazon sister as well; toward Varia. It was she who pardoned me in the trial of my crimes against the Amazon nation. Her act of forgiveness I had since considered a gift from Eli himself; a true miracle. But it wasn't just me Varia had shown mercy to. On that trip toward Amazon land, I was yet again representing Rome, this time as a messenger for peace instead of a bringer of bloodshed. My pardon was a part of a new era, one in which a once power-hungry nation was reaching out in truce toward others, offering coexistence and kindness instead of violence and greed. And other nations were accepting this offer and showing mercy on those who were willing to change. Varia allowing me to go from her land free meant that Rome and the Amazons were no longer enemies, but allies. I hoped to see some explanation in her eyes; but I only saw the top of her head as she looked toward the floor.

"How could that be possible?" Gabrielle said.

I shared her astonishment. Following the death of Caligula, the Roman empire had been led by Claudius, the first emperor in modern Roman history to truly value peace and tolerance, even at the cost of power. He was on a mission to make amends with both the Amazons and the followers of Eli. My head spun at the suggestion that he could have ordered an attack on Amazon land. Rome was a changed empire.

Still, I couldn't allow myself to make a noise of objection in this room. Despite my closeness with an Amazon Queen, I was hardly welcome. I knew the only reason I had been allowed into this meeting of leaders was because Gabrielle had insisted I be near her as she attempted to cope with this tragedy, and her sisters respected her too much to protest.

"We don't know for sure that they were Roman," Cyane, queen of the Northern tribe of Amazons, said. I was relieved to hear her. Since my own trial on these lands, I had known Cyane as a fair and respectable leader. Without her, I may have been beheaded long ago at the hands of vengeful Amazons demanding my immediate execution.

"They were dressed in Roman uniform," Amari said. "Who else could have attacked us?"

"Why would Rome attack us?" Samira said, a new face of Amazon leadership. "We have been under peace treaty since before the battle at Helicon and we have only dwindled in

numbers and supplies since. There is nothing to gain for them.”

“Having nothing to gain did not stop Rome from infiltrating our lands before,” Kanae said.

I looked to the ground but I could feel eyes drifting toward me, some of them trying to cut directly into my skull.

“Amari is right,” Kanae continued. “I’m sorry, Gabrielle, but there is no other explanation.”

“Rome has not been in conflict with other nations since the death of Caligula,” Cyane said. “Why would they go back on their treaties now?”

“We cannot trust the treaties of this empire,” Amari said. “They have not earned such good faith.”

“I have spoken with the new emperor,” Gabrielle said. “He personally pardoned me, Xena, and Eve for our crimes against Rome when Caligula died. He went on and on about pursuing peace and tolerance. I don’t understand why he would do this.”

I looked to Varia again. She hadn’t spoken once in the time since we entered the hut, nor had she even looked at me. She saved my life once, but I couldn’t expect her loyalty. I killed people she loved, enslaved and murdered her sisters, and almost brought her people into extinction. She owed nothing to me, yet I still yearned for her support and hoped she would say something to defend the nation I represented. It was a selfish and arrogant thought, but I couldn’t help but feel some sense of disappointment and betrayal from her silence.

“Now that you have returned, you are the rightful leader of this Nation, Gabrielle,” Amari said. “Whatever decision you make following this attack will be supported by myself and my tribe, but I urge you to not let your feelings get in the way of what must be done. Romans cannot be trusted. This empire must be taken down, even if you have sentimentality toward some of its citizens.”

My eyes didn’t wander from Varia, but I knew where Amari was looking. I could feel her dark eyes penetrating straight into me, like a burning beam of light illuminating my unwanted presence. Had I thought I could keep a low-profile in this room?

“Gabrielle’s right,” I said, nearly flinching at the sound of my own shaky voice. I searched for the right thing to say and looked to each sister, hoping they could see the sincerity in my eyes. “Claudius is personally sponsoring my travels in the East as I spread the message of Eli. He believes in preserving the love of humankind. This isn’t the Roman Empire you’ve known.”

“You mean the Roman Empire you used to slaughter our people for?” Kanae said, her voice booming in the hut, stronger and harder than my own.

“Yes,” I said, hearing a small crack in my voice and looking to the floor again.

“Eve is a changed person,” Gabrielle said. “And she’s helped change Rome.”

“Eve had nothing to do with the attack,” Varia said, looking up finally. This was the defense I had wanted. For a moment I was relieved, but the sound of Varia’s voice did nothing to quiet the sound of my heart. As she looked toward me, it was as Zeus had risen from the grave and was pumping lightning into my blood. I was in her debt yet again, but I had done nothing to deserve her compassion and trust. Even if she could not defend my home country, she had some remaining faith in me and I didn’t know why. She looked to Gabrielle and continued, “We know that. But I know Romans when I see them, and that’s who came to slaughter us.”

“Eve is Roman,” Kanae said. “Whether or not she knew of this attack or contributed to it does not matter.” She looked directly at me before finishing, “If you do not abandon your nation and take allegiance with us, you are our enemy as well.”

“Hold on,” Gabrielle said. “I am the leader of this Nation. I will decide who our enemies are.”

“There is no denying that Rome played a part in this attack, Gabrielle,” Amari said. “You get final decision but I would advise you not let foolishness get in the way of protecting our nation, especially when it is so vulnerable. Whatever treaty we had with Rome is dead now.”

“The soldiers had Roman-looking uniforms,” Cyane said. “That’s all we know. Another nation could have similar armor.”

“They fought like Romans,” Varia said. “I’m positive they were trained in the Empire. The way they moved, I’m just positive.”

“I trust Varia’s instinct,” said Jessamine, a petite girl whose eyes I often caught switching between Varia and myself. She had watched me closely when I entered the hut, following so near I could feel her breath against my neck while we walked. My warrior instinct pushed me to elbow her in the face a couple of times, but luckily I was good at resisting those urges.

“Who was it that first showed you how Roman soldiers move, Varia?” Kanae said.

“Livia did,” she said. “But that is not who I see sitting with us today.”

“A change of name does not mean she has a right to sit amongst us,” Kanae said. “Not when her heart belongs to another nation.”

“My heart belongs to Eli,” I said, knowing that this would not convince Kanae, whom I saw roll her eyes. I could sense something in her. It was dark, birthed out of neither hatred nor cruelty, but desperation. In this struggling nation, I was not a welcomed guest. To Kanae and other Amazons, I was simply a reminder of the evil being inflicted upon this once strong sisterhood. Kanae was not being cruel to me, she was being protective of her people, and my head fell in surrender as I sensed the anguish radiating off her.

“Eve has a right to be here just like anyone else in this room,” Gabrielle said.

“Eve is here because you have requested her,” Amari said. “And you are our rightful leader. That doesn’t make her seat here truly acceptable. She is not Amazon royalty. She is not even an Amazon.”

“Eve has my rite of caste,” Gabrielle said. “Upon my death, she is my rightful successor. That makes her above all of you in succession. She stays.”

“You’re giving Eve your rite of caste?” Samira said.

“She’s had it,” Gabrielle said. “It was my gift to her as a baby.”

I looked up, astonished. Never in my life had I heard my name associated with Gabrielle’s rite of caste. If what she said was true, I was an Amazon Princess.

I looked to Gabrielle. *Maybe she was lying*, I thought. *Maybe she only said that to keep me here with her.* Or maybe it was true and I had tried to sell my own sisters into slavery.

As I studied her face, I realized it was no fabrication. Her eyes, though still red, showed no signs of dishonesty. In fact, she sat taller than before, facing her sisters like a leader for the first time since entering the village. A new light radiated from beneath her skin, like declaring me her rightful successor and taking back control of the Amazon Nation was giving her purpose again.

The other Amazons looked around the circle. Even Amari struck a look of confusion as she checked her sisters’ faces for confirmation and wondered, like I had, if Gabrielle could possibly be lying. Only Cyane looked was unsurprised by Gabrielle’s admission.

“She’s telling the truth,” Cyane said. “My tribe has scrolls telling of Eve’s initiation. She’s an Amazon Princess.”

I looked up to see Varia’s furrowed brows and slightly parted lips. I felt like she wanted some kind of explanation from me, but I looked back to Gabrielle.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before,” Gabrielle said. “Your mother and I didn’t think it was your path anymore.”

My path, I thought. I had spent most of my life walking down the path laid by my empire. My whole existence was once dominated by Roman emperors, Roman commanders, Roman politicians. In the past two years, I had thought a lot about how my life there was never planned to be. How narrowly I missed out on a childhood raised by two strong, loving women. I often thought about how differently things could have been, how I could have never met the monster that’s inside me if I was given the chance to grow up beside mother. Hearing now that I was to hold the title of Amazon Princess felt like I was seeing a glimpse of the path I was stolen from.

“Are we expected to allow a woman who once slaughtered our people,” Kanae’s voice boomed through the stunned silence. She leaned forward now, almost popping out of her seat as veins popped out of her neck. “To take a place amongst us as rulers?”

“Eve is no longer an enemy of the Amazon Nation,” Gabrielle said, her voice louder than I’d heard it since my mother’s death.

“But she was once,” Kanae said.

“She’s been pardoned,” Gabrielle looked toward Varia. “By Varia, whom I pardoned myself when she tried to kill me.

Yet again, I was bewildered. Varia had been down dark paths before, once corrupted by my own ex-mentor, Ares; but killing Gabrielle didn’t seem like something she was capable of. She was too protective of her sisters. Could this be why she was no longer in control of the Amazon Nation? I watched her head sink in shame and knew it must be true.

“She is still an Amazon Queen,” Gabrielle said. “Despite her crimes against her people. Surely, we believe in redemption.”

“Varia’s made mistakes as a leader,” Amari said. “And for this, she is no longer trusted to lead our tribes. But her dishonor does not compare to the atrocities that Eve has committed. We will decide as a nation if we are going to respect your rite of caste.”

“You don’t need to debate this,” I said. “I don’t want the rite of caste.”

Gabrielle was right. This wasn’t my path anymore. I had revoked my violent ways and chosen to follow the nonviolent path of Eli. Even if I was tempted by the life I once could have lead, becoming an Amazon would be a detour from where I was headed now.

“This isn’t something you need to decide now,” Gabrielle said. “You can think about this before you accept.”

“She has made her position clear,” Kanae said, backing down as she realized her and I may actually be on the same side. “She is not one of us.”

“She is my daughter,” Gabrielle said.

Despite the growing hostility in this crowded space, my heart fluttered at the sound of being Gabrielle’s daughter, and I ducked my head to hide my smile. Though she was Xena’s partner, my familial relationship with Gabrielle was long strained. With every terrible thing I had done to my mother, I was still her flesh and blood. I grew for months in her womb and was fed by her body; we shared a spiritual connection that even my bloody past couldn’t destroy. Gabrielle was different. We didn’t share the same blood, and it was harder for her to see herself in me. Even with her by my side as I fell into the arms of Eli, I was still the bitch that tied her up and murdered her and my mother’s best friend, Joxer. And yet she was ready to consider me family anyway.

“Eve,” she said. “Think of the good you can do as a messenger for Rome, Eli, and the Amazons.”

“We cannot possibly let a citizen of Rome become an Amazon Princess,” Kanae said.

“Kanae’s right,” said Samira. “Even if we don’t know that Rome launched this attack, I don’t think it’s wise to allow a Roman into our camp.”

“What if Eve disavows any allegiance to Rome?” Varia said.

“How do we know we can trust her?” Jessamine said, looking me up and down as if something on my body was going to tell her any secrets I might be keeping.

“We can,” Varia said. Jessamine’s eyes dropped from me and flew back onto Varia, who looked to her like a parent assuring her child.

“What if I prove that Rome had nothing to do with this?” I said, hoping desperately that they would listen to my appeal. I didn’t know exactly where I was going with it but I couldn’t let the Amazons go to war with Rome. If these Nations could achieve peace, we had hope for Eli’s message, and I would do anything to protect that.

“How would you do that?” Amari said.

“By traveling there,” I said, hoping I could come up with some convincing plan quick enough to convince this room of skeptics. “I’ll meet with Claudius and have him swear he would do nothing to harm his truce with the Amazon Nation. I’ll bring back a new peace treaty, with his signature.”

“That is foolish,” Kanae said. “Why would we trust you to meet with the leader of Rome on our behalf? You could forge it yourself. Or come back with your own Roman army and attack us once more.”

“I’ll bring an Amazon with me,” I said and looked to the one I knew I could trust most. “Varia.”

Varia looked up, puzzled but not upset.

“You want me to travel with you to Rome?” She said.

“Yes,” I said. I wasn’t entirely sure of my own plan yet, but I had to think quickly. “And see for yourself that Rome is a changed empire. You’ll observe my meeting with Claudius, and we’ll bring a peace treaty back together.”

“Varia has committed crimes against our nation,” Samira said. “But I trust her to be honest with us in her return. If Rome is innocent, Varia will be the one to tell us.”

“And what if they’re not innocent?” Amari said, looking toward me. “What will happen if you arrive onto Roman land with an Amazon Queen? She could be taken hostage in an instant.”

“They don’t have to know she’s an Amazon,” I said. “I know my way around Rome and I can find a disguise for her.”

“What about before you reach Rome?” Jessamine said. “Varia trusts you, but how do we know you won’t betray her on the way?”

“I can kick Eve’s ass if it comes down to it,” Varia said, giving me a sly smile like we shared some inside joke.

I remembered that smile from the first time we met. Before realizing who I was, we bonded over our shared love for battle, showing off scars and bragging about how we got them. I often wished I could have stayed in that moment, letting Varia look at me like that forever, never discovering how our paths had crossed before. There was a sort of dare in the look she gave me then, like she wanted to coax out the dangerous bitch she saw inside me, and I saw it in her eyes now. I bit my lip and tried not to smile back. For a moment, I forgot about the tension in the room. That look erased the months of strain between us. I felt like I was back in that tent with her, about to show her a different scar and hoping she would be impressed by it. I broke out of my fantasy as she looked to me and spoke again.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll follow you to Rome.”

“I thought we could have at least one day together before you left again,” Gabrielle said as we entered her hut.

“We’re not leaving until the morning,” I said. “And I’ll be back once we’ve gotten the treaty.”

“But you’ll leave again,” Gabrielle said. “It’s ok. You’re like your mother. Always moving.”

“You’re quite the traveler yourself,” I said.

“Maybe not anymore,” she said. “I always kind of hoped your mother and I would settle down eventually. That’s why I never gave up my rite of caste. I thought maybe we would end our lives here, after everything. Now that she’s gone, it’s my time to stop moving. I don’t know what I’m doing out there without her.”

I couldn’t imagine what Gabrielle was feeling. All my life I had been a lonesome wanderer. As a small child, I would sneak away from Roman guards, traveling as far from my home as I could before getting caught and dragged back to Augustus. My strict military training was at first just a way for him to keep me under control. Putting me into military camps kept me within my empire’s borders; at least until I proved my worth as a fighter. Once I became commander for Rome, I was off again, this time with an army behind me. But even with my men following, they were only ever tools for my liking. I was the leader. I decided where to go, what to do, and eventually who to kill. Finding my mother and Gabrielle again, and deciding to travel alongside them, was the most unfamiliar experience of my life. For the first time, I was traveling with women I considered not even my equals, but my guides. I was following and learning from people I respected and it was more fulfilling than a younger, more stubborn, version of myself could have ever imagined. Even so, I knew it wasn’t my natural way, and I left to travel alone once more, taking the lessons I had learned with me.

Gabrielle was different. She had grown up in Potidaea, a small town inside Greece, with just her family and her scrolls. For most of her young life, traveling was only a dream, something she could read and write about, but never truly experience; until she met my mother. With

Xena, Gabrielle journeyed across the globe, soaking in my mother's greatness and learning everything she now knows about being a warrior. Unlike me, Gabrielle never yearned to travel alone. Her dream to see the world always included a partner, and the universe handed her one she could never replace. I traveled with my mother for less than a year before returning to my life of solitude. Gabrielle had spent her entire adult life as part of a pair. Now her partner was gone and I could tell she was yearning for some sort of substitute for her missing family.

"Why did you tell your sisters I'm an Amazon Princess?" I said. "Why now?"

"I don't know," she said, but turned away in shame. "That's not true, I do know. Kanae wanted to kick you out and I panicked. I didn't want you to leave and I knew that if I brought up your rite of caste I would have a reason to let you stay. I shouldn't have done it. You've had a complicated enough life without this."

I could sense Gabrielle's disappointment in herself. Like she said, being an Amazon Princess wasn't a part of my path anymore. As a messenger for Eli, life with the Amazons meant constant temptation to fight again. I couldn't pick up another sword and Gabrielle knew it.

"When I gave you my rite of caste," she continued. "It was all I had as a parent. Xena got to carry you for nine months; you were her flesh and blood. Making you an Amazon Princess made me feel like you were mine too. I wanted you to be a part of my family. But your mother and I didn't get to raise you, anyway. And even after you left Rome, I knew my gift wasn't going to fit you. Not after you found Eli."

"I'm sorry," I said. It was all I could think to say.

"I was okay with it because I was so proud of you," she said. "I followed Eli once, but I wasn't cut out for it. Watching you succeed and spread his message made me wish I was your real mother. I didn't need to share some sisterhood with you, I was blown away by the woman you became without me. But since Xena died, I keep thinking about how nice it would be if you stayed here. She's gone but we could still be a family, Eve."

"We are a family," I said. "And you are my real mother. You and Xena both. Just because I don't share your blood doesn't mean you're not in my heart."

Gabrielle turned around, looking me in the eye for the first time since leaving the meeting. I opened my arms and embraced her. Her body felt stronger from the last time I hugged her goodbye, but the woman inside was more fragile than ever.

"Hey," I heard from the doorway, and looked up to see Varia.

"Hey," I said as Gabrielle and I ended our embrace.

Gabrielle wiped a single tear from her cheek before turning to face Varia. They exchanged awkward smiles and I remembered the other revelation made in the meeting. Was I really about to travel with a woman who nearly murdered Gabrielle?

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Varia said.

“It’s alright,” Gabrielle said.

“Eve and I should go over a few details before tomorrow,” Varia said. “I’d like to leave at sunrise.”

“I can do that,” I said.

“I’ll let you two talk alone,” Gabrielle said.

“You can stay,” Varia said, but Gabrielle was already grabbing her sais off the table.

“I wanna go for a walk anyway,” Gabrielle said, walking out into the pitch black night.
“Clear my mind.”

Varia turned to me as the sound of Gabrielle’s footsteps faded into the distance.

“She’d rather walk around in the dark than be in the same room as me,” she said.

“I think she just has a lot on her mind,” I said. It was true, Gabrielle did have a lot on her mind, much of it threatening to crush her soul; but why she chose to walk into the black night instead of staying with Varia and myself, I didn’t know. I once watched Varia beat Gabrielle unconscious, then nearly murder my own mother, all so she could sentence me to death. But she realized her how her hatred controlled her, and stopped her crusade to extend forgiveness and atone for her sins. When I left the Amazon nation, Gabrielle and my mother planned to stay; with Gabrielle to take part in a ritual confirming Varia as Queen. What could have happened between then and now that finally broke Gabrielle’s trust in Varia? If not even she could be in the same room as her, could I bring her all the way to Rome with me?

I looked at Varia from head to toe. Nothing on her body had changed; her muscles were still just as strong, her clothes and hair hadn’t been altered, and her sword still sat in its sheath behind her back, ready for an attack. She was the same Varia I always expected to see at the front line of a battle, but something was different. Her shoulders weren’t as far back, her eyes didn’t look to me with the same confident stare.

After being baptized into the way of love, Eli gifted me with the ability to see what was in people’s hearts. It must have been His way of inspiring compassion because I could always sense what people were feeling. Looking at Varia then, I could feel she was sorry. Whatever happened between her and Gabrielle left her a little broken inside, like she had lost a part of herself. Any hesitation I had over traveling with her disappeared immediately. I wanted to be around her even more and help her find her way back to herself.

“I’ve done some terrible things,” she said.

“You’re in good company,” I said.

“God when I think of the things Ares made us do,” she said, lips curling into a snarl as her hands became tight fists.

“Ares?” I interrupted. “What do you mean?”

“Well you know,” she said, her voice rising. “He tricked us. He made us do all those horrible things so he could-”

“Ares didn’t make us do anything,” I said.

“Well no not technically, but-”

“Look I’ve been through this,” I said. “I did awful things to innocent people. Ares played a part in it, yes, but it was me.”

Varia’s eyes fell and her chest, recently puffing out with rage, went with them. I didn’t need any gift from Eli to know what she was feeling now. We had both been trained under Ares. Under his guidance, we made shameful decisions that would weigh forever on our consciences. But it wasn’t ever completely honest to blame him for our sins.

“Ares manipulates people,” I said. “He takes something that’s inside them and he uses it to his advantage. But he didn’t plant those things. He just sees them.”

I stepped closer to Varia as she looked to the floor, then gently put my hand onto her arm.

“But what Ares saw in you wasn’t evil,” I said.

“I was going to murder you. What if Xena hadn’t stopped me? What if I became just like-” she looked up at me. She didn’t want to say it out loud, but I knew her fears. Since I first stepped foot on her lands, I had been the enemy. Now she was realizing just how similar we unfortunately were. Still, I knew that she could never become the monster I once was.

“When Ares started training me,” I said. “It was because I was young, powerful, and angry. He knew he could use that anger, just like he knew he could use yours. The difference is, I was angry because of my hatred for others and the way that they treated me. You were angry because people like me were threatening people you loved, people that you protected. Ares needed to use your loyalty. You did horrible things, Varia, but that doesn’t mean you’re a horrible person.”

Before I could move, Varia wrapped her arms around my waist and held me tightly. Never before had I received such physical affection from her. Only once had I even attempted to embrace her, on the day she realized Ares was nurturing her hatred. She allowed me to hold her as she cried on the ground, and I later left peacefully from her lands. I thought for a long time that that would be the closest we ever became; two women with a painful history who learned to grow and let each other coexist. Feeling her hug now made me realize that we could be not just former enemies, but friends. She needed comfort from someone like me, someone who understood her pain and saw her for who she truly was.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

It's been a while (I think almost an entire year!) since I updated this fic, but I am finally getting back to it after a busy year.

This chapter is dominantly flash-backs, and the chapters from now on will probably go back and forth between the present and flash-backs.

I was really interested in exploring how Livia became the way that she was and how her relationship to Octavius came to be, so this chapter does get into some rough territory in that sense but nothing too explicit.

We walked for hours in silence. I shouldn't have expected anything different; despite our embrace in Gabrielle's hut, I was still the woman who killed her sisters and nearly decimated her tribe. We may have no longer been enemies, but we weren't yet friends; something that bothered me with a surprising intensity.

I knew I needed to make a deeper connection with her. If we were going to travel this distance together we should at least have something to talk about.

"So, how long have you been an Amazon?" I said.

"Um," she said, either thrown off by the awkward question or the fact that I was speaking for the first time since discussing our route. "Since I was born."

"Right," I said, searching my brain for how I could possibly elongate this conversation. "So your mom was an Amazon?"

"No," she said.

A brief moment of silence passed. I considered letting it continue, but Varia spoke again.

"I don't know who my mother was," she said. "She came to my tribe already pregnant and asked them to shelter her for a while. They gave her a place to sleep, and she cooked for them and cleaned for them until she gave birth to me. Then she took off. Left me there. Came back about a year later, pregnant again. She died giving birth to my sister, Tura."

"And you don't know anything about her?" I said.

"No. When I got older, I asked about it to any of my sisters that met her, but she pretty much kept to herself. When she came back pregnant with Tura, I guess she talked about wanting to become an Amazon and begin her training after she gave birth, but she never got that far."

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know what it’s like to grow up without a mother.”

I really was sorry, not only because I knew the pain of growing up without a mother, but because I knew what had happened to Varia’s other family, Tura; her only sister that I killed right in front of her.

To my surprise, Varia smiled.

“I didn’t grow up without a mother,” she said. “Not really. I had a whole tribe of mothers, and sisters. Maybe the woman that gave birth to me wasn’t around but Amazons take care of each other.”

“Well, that I can’t relate to,” I said. “Do you ever still wonder about her though?”

“Not in a long time,” she said. “She had the opportunity to stay with me the first time and she didn’t. I’m glad I was left with the Amazons but she still abandoned me. I can’t imagine she would have made a very good mother even if she were alive.”

“Maybe she had a good reason,” I said. “I thought my own mother abandoned me until I was an adult, but I was wrong.”

“Yeah I think that’s a different situation,” she said. “I don’t think I was being hunted by the gods.”

“You never know,” I smiled, and she smiled back at me.

“Maybe,” she laughed. “Who knows, maybe I’m a child of Zeus and my mother had to hide me to avoid Hera’s rage.”

“You think you’re a demigod?” I giggled.

“Well why not,” she punched my arm playfully. “It would explain why I’m so strong.”

“You’re human strong, not demigod strong.”

“It would also explain why my father hasn’t come looking for me. Zeus being dead and all.”

“I mean, I guess.”

“Look, I’ve got to have a father, right? I might as well imagine it’s Zeus. Not all of us were immaculately conceived by *angels*,” she emphasized that last word mockingly and smirked at me. We both knew the story of my birth, how I was born “pure” and “without sin” just because my parents didn’t fuck to have me. We both knew it was bullshit.

“It’s so ridiculous,” I laughed. “I hear that all the time. The followers of Eli always hold the story of my birth up like it was some righteous miracle, and maybe it was, but saying that I was immaculately conceived is nonsense. What is immaculate about me?”

“Well your mom got pregnant without entertaining a dick. Sounds pretty immaculate to me.”

“Even if making love were a sin,” I said. “What would my conception matter with everything I’ve done in my life?”

“I don’t know, it makes you mythical or something,” she said. “To be honest, I always assumed it wasn’t true. A baby born of a human and an angel, sounds made up to me.”

“No, it’s true.”

“You’re sure?” she said with a small chuckle. “Your mom was pretty close to Ares. Maybe you’re a demigod.”

“Um,” I started to say, feeling my face crinkle in disgust at the thought of Ares being my father.

“Oh, right,” she said. In the trial for my crimes against the Amazons, I had told them of Ares’ influence on me. Varia likely pieced together that he was more than just my mentor. “That’d be pretty gross.”

“Well, the reality of my situation wasn’t all that wholesome anyway,” I said. “I think ‘pretty gross’ would just about cover it.”

She looked at me with furrowed brows.

“The closest thing I had to a father figure, Octavius,” I started to say, but paused for a second. It was the first time I had said his name out loud in possibly two years and I could feel my stomach drop at the sound of it. “We were to be married.”

Varia was silent for a moment. Of course, she knew I was the future wife of Augustus, everybody knew. My betrothment was the reason I could become the monster I was. No matter the blood I shed, most were too afraid to challenge the intended Empress; Ares and I counted on that. Still, not many considered the fact that Augustus raised me since I was a child. Varia let that sink in.

“Yuck,” she finally said.

“It was complicated,” was all I could think to say.

“Oh,” Varia said, and I was thankful she didn’t press the issue any further before redirecting the conversation back to herself. “Well, I still bet I’m the daughter of Zeus.”

I laughed again.

“Maybe you’re just the daughter of a slightly less powerful God,” I said. “Like Hephaestus. Or Hermes.”

“Hermes?!” she yelled. “Are you kidding? With the fucking wings on the feet?”

By the time we set up our first camp, we had talked nearly the whole day, mostly about Varia's childhood and her life as an Amazon.

I have to admit, there were times I felt jealous of her. Her biological mother may have not been around, but the Amazons were the type of family I always wanted as a child. They supported each other, loved one another unconditionally, and put the lives of their tribe over everything else.

Even the one thing Rome and the Amazons had in common—the fierce training of their militaries—was different. From the way Varia described her coaching as a child, the Amazons learned to fight so they could protect themselves and one another; Romans fought so they could conquer.

My jealousy of Varia ended when I remembered who threatened and very nearly destroyed her loving family: the same person that murdered her blood sister, Tura.

"I probably don't want to know who either of my true parents are, to be honest," Varia said, hitting two rocks together to start the sparks for our fire.

"Why not?" I said.

"My mother abandoned me as an infant, so how good of a person could she be," she said, finally igniting a pile of dead grass into a proper flame. "And I've rarely met a man that I liked. Or that didn't fuck me over."

"They're not all bad," I said, taking a seat as closely beside her by the fire as I hoped would be acceptable.

"Says the girl whose dad tried to marry her."

"I told you, that was complicated. It would take a lot to explain."

"Well, we have a week's journey ahead of us. Start now."

What I most remember about my childhood was being in trouble a lot.

The man I considered my father, Octavius, was the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. Some saw him as Caesar's rightful successor, the next to rule Rome and her people. Others saw him and his uncle as traitors to the republic.

He was ready to rule and, as far as I could ever tell, genuinely believed in bringing Rome into a new era of excellence, away from the atrocities of its past. But much of Rome's people were not ready to accept him as emperor. He needed to convince them.

For the first ten years of my life, Octavious led the Roman army, gaining unprecedented respect amongst his soldiers steadily. When he wasn't with his troops, he was making allies in the senate, or socializing amongst the commoners to secure popular support. Though he wasn't Rome's official leader, he was a big name of her upper class.

I always felt a bit like royalty, spending most of my time in the care of nannies and private tutors, and quite a bit of that time running away from them. I wanted to explore the lands outside of Rome, or just climb some trees and ignore how a proper Roman noble was supposed to act. I would usually be caught by a guard and taken back to the villa, but it was a sort of game to see how far I could get before being dragged back in.

My sneaking skills improved with every attempted venture. One afternoon I managed to evade capture completely, traveling further outside of Rome than I had ever been. After leaving in the morning, shortly after breakfast, I walked long enough for the sun to set, then decided to head home.

Once inside the city limits, I was spotted by a guard. Before he could say anything, or grab me by the arm, as they always did, I waved my hand dismissively.

"I know, I know," I said. I was used to the lectures.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," the guard said. "That really was the last time, Livia."

I rolled my eyes. I had been told many times before that it was my "last time" breaking away from authority, and yet I always found a way around them.

I could tell that this day was different when we arrived back at the villa and Octavius was waiting for me.

"Livia," he said calmly, with the rising sun's light slowly filtering through the windows.

"I'm sorry, father," I said, though my flat tone suggested I didn't mean it. "Augustina usually uses the wooden paddle to punish me. I think it was left in the library last."

"This is serious, Livia," he said. "You can't just go running off whenever you want. You don't understand how vulnerable you are outside of these walls. There are people who would try to hurt you."

"But I'm so bored," I whined. "I want to do something exciting, not sit inside all day and learn politics and etiquette."

"Those lessons are important," he kneeled down and put his hands softly on my shoulders. He was so much gentler than those actually left to take care of me. "I don't love the politics either, but it's what I have to do to become emperor and lead this nation into peace. I need you to not cause any trouble while I do that."

He was trying to look me in the eyes but I looked to the ground, my arms crossed at my chest. The truth was, I wanted him to be around. If I was forced to stay within the confines of my nation's borders, surrounded by armed guards and trapped behind the dimly lit walls of

Rome's elite, the least he could do was stay with me, not place me in the custody of caretakers that never really cared. Hearing him explain why he had to be gone, and why I had to behave myself while he was away, annoyed me to no end.

"Soon," he continued. "This will be my empire. And as my child, it will be yours. Livia, you are the future of Rome. You are Rome."

He let go of my arms and stood back up, looking down on me again.

"Which is why I am sending you to the provinces," he said.

"What?" I said, confused more than anything.

"The women have had no luck teaching you to be a proper lady, so I'm having you trained as a soldier. Maybe that'll be a better fit for someone like you," He looked out the window. "I wish you would have been able to get more sleep but it's well past dawn now. You should get going. Quintos will take you to your new camp. Try to get some sleep on the way."

He hesitated for a moment, like he was unsure if he should hug me goodbye or just turn away.

"When will I see you again?" I said. Maybe it was just the sleep deprivation or the day's earned hunger amplifying my emotions, but I could feel my eyes brimming with tears. I wasn't upset about the training, in fact I knew I would enjoy it. As much as I hated being told what to do, I loved physical challenges and often wished I could pick up a weapon of my own, which was frowned upon as the daughter of an aristocrat. But I was sure that I was being sent away not for how I would flourish in the military, but for how troublesome I would be to keep around. The man I thought of as a father did care about me, he just had no intention of raising me.

Octavious took a deep breath before answering my question, then finally said, "When I'm emperor."

"I take it you did well in the training camps," Varia said.

"Very well."

"That's not surprising. You've got Xena's blood in your veins."

"It wasn't just that. I was so angry at Octavius for sending me away, I had to channel it somewhere. Plus, there were no women in the Roman army, and we all knew why I was there. My father was powerful and had enough allies to do as he wanted. All the men assumed I didn't have what it took to be a Roman soldier, so I had to prove that I did. I worked harder than all of them."

“Sounds rough.”

“No, I loved it,” I could feel a small smile creep onto my face. Since following Eli, I rarely looked back at my past in Rome with any fondness, but I couldn’t deny that my childhood training was one of the first fulfilling experiences of my life. “I mean, I hated being told what to do, and at first a lot of the boys were mean to me, but I got to kick their asses in one-on-one training. And I was out in the world. Yes, it was just the outer provinces of Rome, but it wasn’t the villa.

“And I had some special treatment, which I loved,” I chuckled. “I didn’t have to stay in the quarters of the others. I had a guarded tent all to myself, and Octavius sent out the finest tutors to continue my education. None of the boys had that.”

“Sound like an ego trip.”

“Yeah, I guess I was pretty spoiled.”

“Do you ever miss it?”

“Yes.” It was maybe the first time I admitted that. My followers knew I had denounced my past, but I never spoke of how entrenched the first twenty-five years of my life still were in me. Parts of me very much wanted what the monster in me once indulged in, even if I hated that part of myself. “Transitioning from being the rich brat of a Roman emperor into some supposedly virtuous messenger of peace isn’t easy. But I could never go back to being that person.”

“Yeah, I hope not. Or I’m in big trouble.” She smiled at me and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Thank you for coming with me,” I said, placing my hand on her lower arm.

“Of course,” she placed her hand on top of mine and let it linger for a moment. Then her smile faded and she pulled her hand away, looking off into the distance before continuing. “I mean, I came as a leader for the Amazon nation. If Rome is responsible for this attack on my sisters, I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

I took my hand off her arm and she stood.

“We should get some sleep,” she walked toward our bedrolls, not looking back at me once before covering herself in a blanket on the ground and turning onto her side. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Octavius made good on his promise. It was nearly five years after being sent to the provinces that I saw him again, though he kept in touch through letters and spontaneous gifts delivered by messengers. When he finally came to me in person, he was emperor officially.

I was barely fifteen at the time and preparing for my first battle. Octavius had been emperor for at least a year, probably a few months before word even got to me. I didn't know when he would visit, if ever, until the day I watched a parade of luxurious carriages being pulled toward my camp. The second I realized it must be him, my stomach dropped.

Part of me wanted so badly to see him, to jump into his arms like a little girl and call him father once more. Another part of me wondered if that was appropriate. Did girls that hadn't seen their fathers in five years jump into their arms, knowing their fathers had pushed them out of their lives on purpose?

Though I had spent so much of our five years apart angry at him for sending me away, as he stepped out of his coach, I wanted to pretend none of those feelings existed. I wanted to be his daughter again.

"Father," I greeted him. I considered for a moment whether I should have called him Augustus or Caesar, as many now did, but I couldn't allow myself to become just another one of his subjects, instead of his family. Keeping my face as stern as I could, I watched closely to see how he would approach me.

"Livia," he nodded and paused for a moment before holding his arms out widely for me to step closer and put mine around him.

I could tell neither of us knew how to act. I had wanted a warm embrace, one where he held me tight and acted like I was his family; but our bodies barely touched before our hug ended.

"I was told you're joining your first battle soon," he said.

"Yes," I said, feeling my bitterness toward him returning. "Is that why you came to see me? Think this could be your last chance if I meet an untimely death?"

"I'm not worried about that," a small smile crept onto his lips. "I've heard from all your teachers that you're one of the most gifted fighters they've ever seen."

His eyes drifted from mine to the rest of my body, looking especially to my arms and placing his hands on my shoulders, as he used to when I was a child but with a firmer grip this time.

"I can see you are remarkably strong for your age," his smile widened.

I could sense that he was proud of me, but I fought a smile of my own. Despite my involuntary feelings, I wouldn't allow myself to wish for the approval of someone that was never there for me.

"I should be," I said. "All I've done for the last five years is train."

He noticed my cold tone and softened his own.

"Livia," he pleaded. "I know you may not understand why I sent you here, but it was for your own good. I couldn't give you the focus you deserved but you got that here."

I remained silent, not knowing whether to forgive him or punch him in the face.

“Did you not have everything you needed?” He said. I could feel his eyes burning into me as I looked away. “I got you the best trainers, the best tutors. You have your own private sleeping quarters. Do any of the boys here have that?”

“You get these things because I have taken care of you,” he continued, then paused for a moment before adding his final point. “And what about all those gifts I’ve sent you? Everything you could have wanted. Jewelry, clothing, new weapons, new armor. All made custom for you.”

“You can’t buy my love,” I said.

“And yet you never sent any of my gifts back,” he said.

I went silent. Even before he was emperor, Octavius was one of the richest and most powerful men in the state, yet he couldn’t take the time to visit me once in the five years that I was away. All he could do was have someone else, presumably, decide on an extravagant gift every couple of months, then arrange for a messenger deliver it with some bullshit letter about how he missed me and would be able to visit soon. I rolled my eyes at every single one of his gifts, but of course, never refused them. Octavius was my only family. And he was using his gifts against me.

“What did you say back?” Varia said as we finished packing our bedrolls and headed out to continue our journey.

“I just told him I had to go train,” I said.

“That was it?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I was so close to crying but I didn’t want him to see me that way. I knew if I spoke too much he would hear my voice shaking, and if I stood there too long he may actually see tears. He hugged me one more time and then left. I got back to my training and a few days went off for my first battle. Probably put all of my rage into that.”

“How much later until you saw him again?”

“Two years,” I said.

“Wow,” Varia raised her eyebrows.

“That was kind of my fault though,” I said. “After that day, I decided I didn’t want to see Octavius again. My training was essentially over, but whenever I finished a battle, I’d go to the other training camps throughout the provinces and help train new recruits. Eventually, I became a commander and started making battle plans of my own. I was always conquering new lands for Rome because as long as I was doing that, I didn’t have to go home.”

“By the time I actually got back to Rome, proper,” I continued. “I was 17. And I was a woman.”

I felt nauseous thinking about what I was about to tell Varia, recounting the story that I had never told anyone.

“I was already sort of,” I said. “Experienced. I was kind of a party girl even in the military. We kept a bunch of booze at our camps and would celebrate every time we won a battle. And if I was in command, we were usually winning battles.”

I smiled. It had been a long time since I considered how fucking good I had been at commanding an army.

“There were always some prostitutes,” I continued. “Or girls from the neighboring villages that would come to entertain the soldiers, but since I was the only girl in the military, I always got my pick of whoever I wanted to come into my private chambers by the end of the night. There were so many men that-”

“Ok,” Varia interrupted. “I know we have plenty of time, but do I need to hear this part of the story?”

“Sorry,” I said. “What I was getting to was that on the night I came back to Rome, when I saw Octavius again, I could tell that something was different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” I began.

I came riding into Rome on horseback, eager to allow Rome’s people to look upon my face and bask in my glory. I was already known as one of the fiercest commanders in Rome’s history, and as I made my way through the city, the townspeople shouted my name, sometimes erupting in impassioned chants of “Livia! Livia!” I reveled in their praise, but kept my face stone-cold, hiding the smile that wanted to stretch across my lips in order to keep up my vicious facade.

Hiding a smile became less of a problem as my men lead me closer to Palatine, the palace Octavius had built above the forums upon becoming emperor. When Octavius finally came into view, I felt as if something had fallen to the pit of my stomach.

“Livia,” he smiled, greeting me alongside his guards as I dismounted my horse.

“Octavius,” I said.

He reached out his arms and I let him embrace me. I had never forgotten the sting of our last encounter or the fact that he had barely made an effort to see me in all the time I had been

away; and still, I wanted his embrace. I wanted to pretend none of it had ever happened. Maybe now that I had proven myself as a commander, he would finally want me by his side.

“Come inside,” he said, and lead me into the palace. “The guards will escort you to your bedroom, where I’ve laid out a dress for you to wear. I would like for you to get dressed and join me in the dining room.”

The bedroom I was brought to was lavish, as was the rest of the palace. Every part was intricately designed, from the pattern on the walls, to the bedframe, to the sheets. Even growing up in the villa, surrounded by the gaudy wealth of the Roman elite, I had never seen a bedroom so beautiful as in the palace of the emperor. I couldn’t believe it was mine, but I wouldn’t allow myself to be so taken by its grandeur. Octavius had disappointed me too many times to not be skeptical of his gifts.

“So how many others have slept in this guest room before Octavius made it my bedroom?” I said to the guards upon entering.

“None, your grace,” he said. “Augustus made this room for you when the palace was built. No one but the maids have stepped into it. It is the largest in the palace, aside from Augustus’ of course.”

“Oh,” I said, and couldn’t help but crack a small smile. Thankfully, my back was to the guards so no one but me could know I was pleased. “Now leave so I can get changed. I’m sure you don’t want to keep Augustus waiting.”

“Of course, your grace,” one of the guards said, then both exited the room.

I was happy to see that the dress Octavius left for me was not made of the pure white fabric many elite Roman women wore. White was never my color, and I knew if we were to have dinner, the possibility of me spilling food onto myself was not low. Instead, my dress was black, with red detailing. It fit snugly over me, with a long slit cut up the legs and a neckline that plunged low enough to barely cover my nipples. My breasts were nearly spilling out the top of it.

I considered that Octavius had not realized how tightly the dress would fit. He hadn’t seen me for two years, right before my body filled out into its more traditional womanly shape. He must not have known how I had grown.

I didn’t mind much. My own armor did little to cover my cleavage, and outside of battle, I wasn’t shy about showing off my legs. Modesty just wasn’t my thing.

When I arrived to the dining room, I saw a long table set out with the most food I had ever seen in one place. It looked as if a feast for twenty was to be held, but only Octavius was seated, to my relief.

“Livia,” he said, and stood to greet me. “Please, have a seat wherever you’d like.”

I choose a seat on the end, both because it was opposite to him and I still wanted to act like I didn’t crave his closeness, and because all my life the most important people sat at the end of

dining tables and I was important now.

The only people in the room were Octavius, myself, and a servant to keep our wine glasses filled the entire night.

I can't say the evening didn't go well at first. We were seated as far away from each other as possible, but we talked the whole time. I told him of my sieges on foreign lands, how well each battle went, even the ones we lost, and he told me of all his business within Rome's borders. Though as a child I had found the politics of Rome too boring to understand, hearing Octavius discuss his dealings with the senate as an adult was riveting. I couldn't believe the amount of control he exercised over his lands. If he had so much power as emperor, I must have substantial power of my own as both a commander of the army and daughter of the emperor. The thought was intoxicating.

Toward the end of the night, we were noticeably tipsy, our glasses being emptied and refilled more often than I could count. I couldn't even recall what we talked about in the last hour, but I know we spent a good amount of our time laughing as the conversations turned more personal. It felt like we were making a real human connection for the first time since I was a child.

In the midst of one of our giggle fits, Octavius got up from his seat and walked drunkenly over to mine, finding a seat right next to me.

"I could barely see you from the other side of the table," he said, looking me up and down. I could feel the smile on my lips fading as his eyes wandered over my body, lingering slightly at my fully grown breasts.

He said nothing for a moment and didn't allow himself to stare at one body part too egregiously long, but he may as well have licked his lips. I had been with enough men to recognize how and why he was looking at me, and I squirmed in my seat at the thought of my father seeing me that way.

"This dress fits you perfectly," he said. "I took the measurements you sent last time and gave them to a seamstress to make this for you. She did a great job."

Suddenly, I wanted to vomit. The dress wasn't too tight because he hadn't realized how my body had grown. I had been sending my measurements via messenger for years for Octavius to have custom armor made for me. Had he looked at the measurements himself and gotten excited by my new figure? Did he instruct his seamstress to make a dress that would fit my body as tightly as it could? To let the neckline plunge so deeply?

In that moment there was only one thing I knew: I needed another drink.

I reached for my wine glass, ready to finish off my cup and demand it to be filled again, but my hands trembled as I brought it to my lips, spilling the contents onto my chest and down my dress before I could even take a sip.

I put the glass down immediately and reached for some cloth to wipe myself off. Before I could, Octavius was already waving my hand away.

“Don’t worry about that Liva,” he said, grabbing his own cloth off the table and patting it down on the top of my breasts. “I got it.”

“No, no,” I said, grabbing the cloth from him and pushing his hands off of me. “I can do it. I spill food on myself all the time.” I laughed nervously. “Really I’m surprised this is the first time I’ve done it tonight.”

“Even so,” he said, grabbing another cloth from the table like he was insistent on touching my body somehow tonight. “It’s only the gentleman thing to do to help you clean yourself off.”

“Really father, it’s fine,” I said, trying to cover as much ground with my own cloth so he wouldn’t have any way to help me, but immediately he paused and sat back.

“You don’t,” he said cautiously, trying to figure out how to phrase what he was about to say. “Have to call me father anymore.”

I stopped rubbing the booze off my chest and looked up at him, stunned by what he was saying.

“We’re not blood-related,” he continued. “I took you in as an infant because you had no other family, but I was still something of a child myself. I don’t know that I was really ready to be a father, and you know very well that I was somewhat of an absent one. I mean, we haven’t even seen each other in person in years, so it’s not like I’ve really been a great dad to you.”

He was right, he had been a shitty father, but hearing him want to remove himself from that role completely broke my heart. I may have been a bratty daughter, but I still thought of myself as a daughter; as his daughter. If he didn’t want to be my family, that meant I had no family.

“Maybe,” he said. “Now that you’re back, you can fulfill a different role in this empire. Other than just being the daughter of an emperor.”

“Well, I,” I stammered but tried not to let on how upset I truly was. “I guess I’ve been more successful as a commander than a daughter. Perhaps you’re right.”

I pushed my seat back and stood up, though I could suddenly feel how tipsy I really was.

“I think I’ve had a lot to drink,” I said, realizing how slurred my speech was and probably had been for a while. “I’m going to go to my room to lie down for a while.”

“Let me assist you,” Octavius said, beginning to stand.

“No,” I said quickly and firmly, practically yelling before regaining my calm. “I can get there on my own.”

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