

~ The Legacy of Lao Ma ~

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Content: This story depicts love/sexual relationships between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal where you live, please do not read it.

Summary: Ever wonder what really happened between Xena and Lao Ma? This short story retells the events of *The Debt I and II* from Lao Ma's perspective, specifically recounting her reasons for trying to heal Xena physically and spiritually.

"With shattered legs and crippled soul, I went east- to lose myself in vengeance- not against Caesar but the entire human race." -Xena, "The Debt"

"When there is no desire, all things are at peace." -Tao te Ching

Part I

Slowly breathing in and then out, I moved my steady fingers to the man's pressure point at that delicate spot where the neck meets the left shoulder. I massaged it briefly and watched his withered body stir on the bed. As his eyelids parted, his vacant eyes slowly came into focus on me. At this point, I always see a brief flicker of recognition in his eyes before he settles back into the coma.

I never get used to that part.

Pulling a blanket up to his neck, I cover his body. When we first married, he was quite strong. Now, his body is frail, his muscles slack with disuse.

I heard a knock at the door of the chambers.

"Enter," I said.

My assistant and policy advisor, Jiang, entered.

"Lao Ma," he greeted me with a slight bow.

Stepping away from the bed in the dimly-lit room, I met him near the door of the room.

"Have you gathered more information?" I asked.

"I have," Jiang said.

I waited for him to continue.

"The reports were accurate. An extremely violent warlord, she and her barbaric male companion are threatening the peace and stability of Chin. Borias, the man she travels with, is rumored to possess at least a modicum of honor. She, however, is said to take a cruel enjoyment in the terrorizing and murder of humans, even after they have surrendered."

"So it is true then," I said. "It is not surprising. Warriors who prefer death over dishonor would not fabricate such barbarians out of the air. Her name?"

"They call her Xena," Jiang continued. "And..." He shifted and looked away uneasily.

"Yes...?"

"And... she and Borias... they want to meet with you."

I turned my back and began pacing. I single-handedly and covertly removed my husband from power. I did this for one reason and one reason only. My hope for peace and stability in Chin.

"Lao Ma," Jiang asked after a few moments. "What shall I tell them?"

"I will go," I said. "Please send word. Tomorrow I will leave at first light. Have the carriage prepared."

"Yes, right away," he said. "And... how many bodyguards?"

I paused. It was standard for me to travel with guards, although I did not physically require them.

"Five," I said.

"Of course," Jiang agreed. "Not enough to intimidate her..."

"But enough to deter her from immediately resorting to violence against us," I said.

Jiang turned to leave, but before he did so, he turned back around.

"Of course, and if I may add. Xena and Borias, their purpose for meeting with political leaders is to turn them into pawns for their own power plays. We must be prepared for such trickery."

"Yes, Jiang. That's why I'm going to look into her soul and learn how to deal with her. Those

who have grown too large must be made small."

xxxx

It was Borias who I met first, upon reaching their camp. As I exited my carriage, I heard him speak.

"Borias extends the sincerest welcome to the head of the house of Lao."

He was dark with long hair and was handsome in a wild, dangerous way.

As he considered me, Xena thundered into camp on horseback. When she did, everyone in the camp stopped speaking and noted her arrival. She ignored them, passing her eyes over me and quickly surveying the men I had brought.

I gave Borias a slight bow that was intended for both of them.

"I'm Lao Ma, wife of the great Lao. Please forgive my husband for sending his insignificant wife to handle such difficult affairs of state. But he's very ill."

As I said this, Xena dismounted from her horse and made her way to Borias' side. Once there, I noticed that she, like Borias, was good-looking. She, in fact, more so. Although her face was fixed in a sneer, her skin was tan, her eyes were a deep blue, and she was quite muscular. Although my eyes were fixed on Borias, I could feel her presence out of the corner of my eyes.

Now that she was near us, my guards stiffened, preparing themselves. I had forewarned them that this woman was unpredictable.

After noting Xena's presence, Borias turned his attention back to me, responding to what I had said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You're very welcome, of course."

I heard Borias' words, but Xena had my full attention. I knew immediately that it was she who ran this operation. She had yet to extend me a welcome or to even acknowledge my presence before her.

She would be disappointed to learn that such petty slights to the ego did not offend me. If she wanted to play childish games, however, I would treat her like a child by only addressing the grown-ups present.

"I know you're a great warrior, Borias. But I've also heard that you're a man of honor," I said.

At this, Xena snickered.

When she did, for the first time I looked directly at her and she, at me. I was appalled at her cocky rebuff of civilized concepts of honor and I think my face failed to hide that from her. Images of men, dead and propped upon stakes, flashed through my head. I saw, too, decapitated bodies. Groups of soldiers tied together and then murdered. Crimes against humanity.

Seeing her smile, I knew that it was she who had been responsible for those actions. Mostly. I saw how Borias looked at her. That dangerous combination of lust, fear, and desire for power that prevented him from being the better person he could be.

Yet, when I looked into Xena's eyes, her cockiness was replaced by something that looked much like fear. Fear of what I do not know? Of my opinion of her? Perhaps, but doubtful. Nonetheless, I felt something unfamiliar making my heart race. It was visceral excitement plus the trembling of hatred and disgust of this woman. I used my breath to calm my body before I addressed her for the first time.

"You must be Xena," I said. I gave her a slight bow.

"Oh, you've heard of me," she said. That brief moment of humanity in her was quickly replaced by her familiar cockiness.

Without a doubt she would assume my bow to be a gesture of subservience rather than respect. In all likelihood, she had already assumed me to be weak and frightened of her.

The red heat of anger beginning to cloud my vision, I struggled to make my voice as calm as possible.

"Oh yes, they say you're a dangerous woman," I said.

"Well, they're right," Xena said, proudly.

As I looked at Xena, her wild hair flew about her face and she grinned without remorse about what she was. Although I did not believe in such incarnations of evil, I half expected her skin to peel away and reveal some sort of demon within her.

Easily, so easily, I could end her hateful existence before she knew it.

In.

Out.

Borias spoke again.

"You have nothing to fear Lao Ma. We will negotiate with honor, and with fairness. I hope we will find common ground on which to stand," he said, in a reassuring voice. He then looked at Xena, as if waiting for her confirmation.

Instead of doing so, Xena pushed past Borias and stepped toward me. Her body leaned to one side as she walked. She was supporting most of her weight on a cane. So it must be true, what the Romans had done to her.

I swallowed.

The guards next to me tensed as Xena approached, and I held an arm out to stop them from attacking.

"Yeah well, some are better at standing on common ground than others," Xena said, while arching an eyebrow in challenge.

I lowered my eyes. My heart was racing but my face was as blank as the moon.

"I wish you swift healing for your injuries," I said.

Jiang's report was that Caesar had broken Xena's legs and attempted to crucify her. I wondered if a person could come back from that. For the sake of countless other lives, I wondered if it would have been better if she had died on that cross.

I inhaled again.

"Healing?" she spat. "Not in this lifetime." She pushed past me and limped her way to her tent.

I exhaled and looked at Borias.

Looking embarrassed, he watched her leave before turning to me and smiling.

"Please, Lao Ma. Join us for dinner."

I nodded.

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At dinner that evening, Borias, while flirtatious, acted decently. I questioned his sincerity, as the purpose of this meeting was a proposal to build an alliance in order to defeat Ming. I was relieved, however, that he at least possessed the ability to act civil.

"Do you think your husband will heal from his illness?" he asked. Already sitting close to me, he leaned into me and poured us both more wine.

"Thank you," I nodded at the goblet. "I always hold out hope that those who are suffering will be able to heal, no matter how unlikely it appears they actually will."

Xena, who was sitting nearby in a corner of the tent, shifted. Ever since she stomped into the tent late for dinner, she had refused to engage with us.

"Interesting," Borias said.

I could see that he was intrigued by me. Many men were. Not that that got them what they wanted most from me.

Borias took a bite of his meat, and I tore off another piece of bread. I had been a vegetarian ever since I gained my freedom from being a courtesan. Once I could choose the content of my meals, I realized early on that I did not prefer the taste of meat.

"By accepting me into the house of Lao," I continued, "my husband freed me from bondage. I am indebted to him to hold out hope for his recovery."

What I left out was that in ceasing to be the property of one man, I had merely become the property of another.

"Of course," Borias said. "And if he doesn't recover, perhaps there will come a time when you would require... assistance, to maintain your power."

The bulk of my mental facilities remained aware of Xena's presence, and I gauged her reaction to this offer.

Arms crossed, still refusing to eat, her face remained fixed in a glare. She smoked her pipe in silence, stealing glances at us while pretending to ignore us. I wasn't fooled. She was brooding. Yet like a tiger, she looked ready to pounce at the slightest provocation.

"Perhaps. But I do hope there will come a time when a competent woman will be allowed to maintain her power in Chin without being united with a man," I said.

At this, Borias laughed at my affront to his offer. I laughed with him. I had guessed correctly that he appreciated irreverent women.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xena turn her head our way. She was now openly glaring at us, in the candlelight.

Subtly, I turned my head to look at her. My eyes caught hers. I again noticed the blue of her eyes. Despite their wildness, they were very beautiful. I quickly looked down. Pretending to have been looking for more food, I reached my hand out to grab another piece of bread.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the knife moving toward my hand. It was headed for my fingers. Using my will, I diverted it. It landed inches from my hand.

"That's my piece of meat you're reaching for," Xena said.

Such lack of restraint.

I looked at Borias, at the knife, and then back into Xena's blue eyes. I saw a slight furrow in her brow that was quickly replaced with rage. Before that quick transformation, I understood that while she may have known love many years ago, she no longer did. Not with Borias. Again, I felt a stirring within my heart. It was passionate and strong. Hatred would have been the obvious choice, but I felt undertones of something even more unsettling to me.

"You're wrong," I said. "I don't eat meat."

Xena swallowed and looked hurt before fixing her face into a scowl. Before she could change her mind about how angry she was, she hobbled to her feet and stomped away, leaving Borias and I alone, in the candlelight.

When I turned to Borias again, he looked mortified and angry. I had not met Xena's violence with the expected reaction of further violence. Nor had I run from the room in fear. I smiled at him to reassure him that I did not blame him.

"I have no control over what she chooses to do," he confessed.

"Perhaps there will come a time when men of honor will not require associating with those who lack self-control," I said.

Borias considered me, before speaking.

"Tell me, Lao Ma. You have probably heard things. What do they say? About me?"

I took a sip of wine.

"I will not insult you with dishonesty about this, Borias. Perhaps it is better if I do not answer your question..."

"Tell me. My reputation..."

"Is that your desires have corrupted your honor," I said.

He looked away and turned his attention to his meat. Cutting it forcefully, he did not speak.

I sat with him for several moments before I touched him gently on the shoulder and left the tent.

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In the tent Borias had graciously lent to me for sleeping, I prepared for my nightly meditation.

As I knelt on a pillow, I felt a sharp pain in my temple. My eyes, suddenly sensitive even to the candlelight, teared up. My vision blurred and, before me, a scene seemed to unfold, as though I was a spectator to one of Rome's famous gladiator games. Yet, instead of an arena, behind the throbbing in my head, I saw the blurry vision of a woman on a cross. As the view came into focus, I seemed to be mere feet from her.

In front of the woman, a Roman soldier was wielding a sledgehammer. Hitching it over his shoulder, he prepared to swing it forward. Speaking in time with each pound in my temple, I heard another man's voice- from above?- yelling, "Break. Her. Legs."

I didn't hear anything after that. So as to not actually see the sledgehammer make contact with her legs, I looked up, and found myself staring into two blue, tear-stained eyes. They were eyes that I had looked into only moments before.

My body jerked and the throbbing in my head began to dull. The past faded and dissolved into the present, yet strangely I seemed to have a view of the world outside of my tent. It was as though my mind was floating outside of my body, which was down below. From above, I saw Xena stormily approaching my tent. Her anger was loud like red.

I shook my head, and the inside of the tent slowly came back into focus. Taking a deep breath, I prepared to meet the approaching, hobbling Xena.

She entered the tent.

"I don't know if you people pray to the gods, but if you don't, now'd be a great time to start," she said, wild-eyed and full of rage.

I turned my back on her and grabbed a hairbrush, feeling her rage increase.

With a futile motion, she hurled two knives at me.

I felt blinding pain behind my eyes as time seemed to slow down. Before the knives could reach my back, I reached my arm behind me and caught the knives in the hairbrush just before they entered my body. I felt the energy blend with my own. I captured it, preparing to redirect it. Stepping on one end of a burning ember and using it like a lever, I used my will to direct it toward Xena. As the heat flew past Xena, I turned and directed the two knives right back at her. Even though I wondered if Borias would even miss her, I did not send the knives close enough to hit her, but only close enough to give me some space. I wanted to process the vision I had just had.

Surprised, the crazed woman fell backwards.

"Xena," I said, "if you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading."

"I like where I'm heading."

"Of course you do. Rage and violence make you feel powerful," I said.

"I *am* powerful," she said.

"No, Xena, you're not. You desire power very much. But you do not possess it."

Her face red with spittle and tears, she stood up and began making her way toward me again. Her anger was now pulsing off of her in waves.

I caught her energy and used my will to send her shooting backwards again.

I then walked over to where her crippled body was slumped on the floor. From her hair, I removed a hairpin and flicked it at a jug of water that was above her. As water splashed in her face, I put the hairpin in my pocket.

She opened her eyes then and I saw another rare spark of humanity in them. Satisfied with that, I whispered in her ear.

"Fill yourself with desire and see only illusion. Empty yourself of desire and understand the great mystery of things."

She sat against the floor, then, stunned. She had not easily defeated me like she had assumed she would. She had tried to indulge in her desire to act out her rage. She had tried to convince me, and also herself, that she was satisfied with her current path in life.

On all counts, she had failed.

Seeds planted in both Xena and Borias, it was time for me to leave them be. I was confident that Xena's lack of control and Borias' guilty conscious would be enough to sever their dangerous, powerful alliance. Once separated, they could be dealt with separately.

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After informing Borias that negotiations would be inappropriate in light of Xena's attempted attack on me, Jiang prepared the carriage and we departed the camp.

"Do you think he will come after us?" Jiang asked, as we sat in the moving carriage.

"No. He is very angry and disappointed. Mostly at himself."

Jiang paused.

"Do you think...."

"No, Jiang," I said. "*She* will not come after us either."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

I closed my eyes, then, and tried to get some rest.

In my sleep, I dreamed of Xena. I imagined myself creeping through the woods, into her camp at night, clutching a knife. I floated to her tent, my feet not touching the ground, and came upon her sleeping body. I raised my hand above her and noticed that the knife was missing. When I looked back down at her, lifeless blue eyes were staring up at me. A hairpin was lodged in her temple.

I awoke with a start. It was not like me to have nightmares. Or strange visions of the past. Perhaps I would consult with the healer when I returned home.

The carriage had stopped. I heard voices outside. Taking a breath, I stuck my head outside and saw one of Ming's guards.

"Lao Ma," he said, noticing me, "She has taken the boy."

Interesting. That was a bold move on her part.

"Ming Tien. Xena has kidnapped him. She will kill him," the guard said.

"I have no doubt of that," I said.

"She must be stopped," the guard continued. "The House of Ming requests an alliance with the House of Lao."

Now this was an interesting proposition. Perhaps Xena would succeed, however unintentionally, in fostering peace and stability in Chin.

"What is the proposal?"

"Xena must die," the guard said.

"What does she want?" I said.

"Gold."

"Give it to her," I said.

"But..."

"The House of Lao will supply it for the House of Ming," I said. "Just ensure that harm does not befall the boy."

"And after we get him back?" the guard asked. "What about Xena?"

"Ban her from Chin. Have your men escort her to the borders," I said. I bowed and re-entered my carriage. We continued back to the estate.

Sitting inside the carriage, Jiang looked at me.

"Your restraint, as usual, is admirable," he said.

"I am doubting my restraint," I said.

"Had it been *my* son and had I the power to authorize a contingent of guards to kill Xena," Jiang said, "I would have."

"I am not certain they won't..."

In fact, knowing Ming as I did, I was quite certain he would order his guards to kill her. Ming needed an heir and it would not do to let one as notorious as Xena jeopardize his son's life and live to tell the tale. With admirable restraint, I would not interfere.

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Several hours later, as we approached Lao territory, my carriage stopped again. It was Ming Tzu this time, and a caravan of guards and dogs. Trailing in back was a cage on wheels holding some sort of animal. Beside Ming Tzu was the boy, my son. He was safe. I remembered the handkerchief I had made for him. I carried it with me, as a reminder. My fingers touched it in my pocket.

"Welcome Lao Ma," Ming Tzu said, upon seeing me. "I hope you don't mind us hunting so close to Lao territory. But the terrain here is perfect."

"Perfect for what?" I said.

I looked at the cage. The animal within it was scratching at its head.

"Her- the woman who succeeded in doing what a hundred diplomats could not do. Make an alliance between our kingdoms." Ming Tzu pointed at the cage.

No.

The animal looked up at me. Blue eyes fixed on my own.

They had not killed her immediately, then. Her hair disheveled, she was filthy and they had clothed her in some sort of burlap sack. She was now a game to Ming. A prize.

I concealed my horror.

"You plan to hunt her?"

"Yes," Ming Tzu said, "We're going to enjoy this, aren't we, Ming Tien?" He ruffled the hair of the boy, who smiled.

I was appalled. Both at Ming Tzu's cruelty and at the violence he was teaching Ming Tien. Perhaps I should have ended her misery quickly, at the camp. Didn't these men understand? If Xena escaped, they will have succeeded only in making her more violent, more angry, and full of even more hatred than she already possessed.

I could not look away from her and I felt anger rising within me. I was angry at Xena and at these men, with their unskillful, foolish ways of dealing with problems. Even more, I was angry at myself. I was implicated in this as well.

Making my face blank, I spoke again.

"Well, please do not hesitate to use Lao land for your pleasure." Then, turning to Ming Tien, I said, "I brought something for you, Ming Tien. I made it myself." I handed him the handkerchief with the green dragon on it, as if that piece of cloth mattered greatly to me. As if I were more interested in what the boy thought about that trinket than I was in what they were about to do to the human being within that cage.

With hate in his eyes, the boy threw it to the ground without looking at it.

I mustered up a hurt look that I hoped was convincing, but I remained focused on Xena. I saw the cruelty in Ming Tzu and Ming Tien's eyes. In punishing Xena, Ming Tzu was becoming the very evil he was condemning, and Ming Tien was learning that.

I couldn't help myself, I spoke, betraying my disgust.

"A beaten, half-dead cripple. Doesn't sound very sporting, Ming Tzu."

"No, but it will be entertaining," he said, with a chuckle. It was the same chuckle Xena had given me earlier when bragging about her dangerous reputation.

I feigned disinterest.

"I must go," I said. "Enjoy your entertainment."

I bowed and walked back to my carriage. Before entering it, I looked at Xena one last time. In her eyes, I saw a mixture of fear and desperation.

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After leaving Ming Tzu and his hunting party, I ordered my guards to return to the Lao estate on horseback without me.

"Are you sure it's safe?" my head guard asked.

"Yes, if Ming doesn't shoot her quickly, she is crippled and hurt. She cannot hurt me," I said. "I assure you, the guards of Lao have better things to do than watch me collect medicinal herbs."

Satisfied, the guards galloped off, leaving Jiang and me behind.

"Are we looking for anything in particular?" Jiang asked, once they had left.

"Yes," I said. "Ming's prey."

"Is that a newly discovered...? Oh...."

He looked at me as it registered.

"Lao Ma, I know better than to question your wisdom, but..." Jiang began.

"I cannot let Ming do this to her," I said.

"I don't understand....?"

"I can't explain it right now."

How could I? I couldn't even explain my visions or my feelings to myself yet.

Unsure, Jiang steered the carriage off the path and deeper into the forest.

From afar, I heard dogs barking. They had released her.

"Wait here for me," I said. "When she comes, stay here. I don't want to scare her off."

I began walking back toward the path.

"Are you sure she will come?" Jiang asked.

I stopped walking and closed my eyes. Steadying my breath, I felt her wild presence within this forest. In this moment, she existed as pure fear. Like a beacon, I was directing her to me. She just did not have the presence of mind to consciously realize it.

"Yes," I said and continued walking.

After crunching through the forest, I reached the path. Once there, I felt her presence more strongly. Desperate, relying only on pure survival instinct, she was approaching.

In the distance, I saw a hunched figure limping along the path with a cane. As she drew closer, I heard her loud, ragged breathing.

I did not go to her. I found myself unable to move, as I watched her form grow larger as she lumbered her way to me like an animal. Concentrating only on putting one foot in front of the other, she did not look up. I still had time to retreat, make my way back to my carriage, before she saw me.

My breath quickened and I remained planted on the path, briefly wondering if she would run into me.

She didn't.

When she reached my location on the path, she saw my feet and looked up at me.

Gone was the arrogance in her eyes. Fear had taken care of that. With her head cocked, she considered me. Then, her eyes began darting as if plotting an escape.

As I stood above her, I noticed how small she seemed. Filthy, her brows furrowed in pain and concentration. Finally, her eyes became human again as they settled on my own.

"Come with me if you wish your freedom," I said.

She looked at me, my words not seeming to register. She then hobbled to her feet, unsteady. In the distance, a dog was approaching. With each of its barks, she winced and glanced behind her.

The dog reached us, instinctively barking at its prey. Snarling, its fangs dripped with saliva and its eyes remained fixated on Xena.

Putting myself between Xena and the dog, I re-directed its own aggressive energy back toward it. Wimping, the dog limped away from us in the direction from which it had come.

"Hurry, he'll be back on the scent soon," I said.

Her eyes cleared.

"Why are you doing this?" she demanded.

"I have been blessed- or cursed- with the ability to see into the souls of others," I began. "You don't know it yet, Xena, but you're a remarkable woman. Capable of greatness."

What? If I said it aloud did it somehow make it true?

"Come quick," I continued. "We'll take refuge in my home."

She squinted her eyes and looked at me with suspicion. Yet, after a pause, she followed me, without a word.

I helped her to her feet and, hitching her arm around my shoulder, I let her lean on me as we made our way back to Jiang and the carriage. As we walked off the path and through the woods, little moans of pain escaped from her that she unsuccessfully tried to stifle. With the arm that was around her waist, I clutched her and bore most of her weight. Her body pressing into mine, I was almost completely carrying her. Despite her lack of appropriate clothing, a surprising heat emanated from her body.

I called out to Jiang as we approached the carriage, hidden behind the trees.

"We must hurry," I said.

Jiang saw us and hesitated.

I nodded to assure him and he ran to meet us.

He went to Xena's other side.

"It's okay," I said, encouraging him.

He gently slung her other arm around his shoulder and bore part of her weight.

Xena's body went completely limp then and her eyes rolled back into her head.

"Lao Ma..." Jiang started, worried.

"The pain," I explained.

She had been holding onto consciousness only because of the fear pumping through her veins. Feeling safe, she had let go.

Delicately, we loaded Xena into the carriage.

"Take the back way to the estate," I said, turning to Jiang. "It's a bit longer, but it's off the main trail."

Jiang nodded and took control of the carriage.

I sat in back with Xena. With a tentative hand, I smoothed a strand of tangled hair from her face, which was wet and clammy. Pushing to one shoulder the garment she was wearing, I massaged a point near collarbone to ease her pain and then another to help her remain sleeping. Her eyes

moved back and forth underneath her eyelids and then became still. Her breathing calmed and a slight, healthy flush entered her face.

Sitting with her, my head's previous throbbing had become a dull, consistent ache. I would have to get this checked out.

After covering Xena with a blanket, I half-closed my eyes and began meditating. With the ache in my head, a thought continued to nag at me. As we traveled along the back, bumpy, hidden roads of Lao land, I was troubled by a growing awareness that Xena's problem wasn't that she needed to be made small. No. Too many people had already done that, effectively turning her into the wild being that she now was.

My task was to somehow help her recover her own humanity.

As I watched the steady rhythm of Xena's breath, I willed myself to believe that might actually be possible.

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Upon reaching the estate, Jiang steered the carriage directly to my quarters. I did not want even my own guards to have knowledge of the cargo I was carrying. I couldn't risk them, in their fear and hatred of Xena, revealing her presence to Ming Tzu, who would eventually follow the trail to my quarters.

"She will remain with me," I told Jiang. "No one is to enter, except for you."

"Of course," Jiang said.

He helped me lift Xena's sleeping body and we carried her into my quarters.

"On the bed," I said, nodding toward my large bed.

After we gently rested Xena on top of the blankets, Jiang bowed and left the room.

Exhausted, I sat down next to Xena's sleeping body. Turning toward her, I watched her chest rise and fall with her breath. Eyebrows relaxed, she seemed to be a quite different person when her face wasn't fixed in a scowl or a cocky grin. My eyes traveled down her body. Her arms and legs were covered in small scratches that were slightly bleeding. Her feet and ankles were encrusted with dirt and blood. Crumbles of mud had gathered on the blanket at her feet.

Surprising myself, my hand reached toward her forehead. Unsure, I lightly caressed it.

She stirred.

My hand traveled down her cheek and rested at the pressure point at the back of her neck. I massaged it, gently bringing Xena back to consciousness.

She opened her eyes, then. Her eyes still unfocused, a faint smile formed at her mouth and she moved her head as if nuzzling deeper into my hand at her neck.

I swallowed.

She looked at me then, and seemed to realize that it was my hand that was touching her.

Her body became very rigid, but she did not pull away. Instead, she fixed her blue eyes upon mine and looked at me with curiosity.

I looked away, then, and quickly removed my hand from her neck.

"It's going to be painful, but we must heal your wounds," I said. "In the bath."

Better to get down to business.

Wincing, she tried to sit up, but failed. Her face flushed and she looked away, angrily.

"So you actually believe it, then," she said. "What you said to me."

I wasn't entirely sure.

"*You* don't believe it?" I asked her.

Xena chuckled.

"Would a 'remarkable woman' let herself turn into this?" she said, gesturing at her filthy, ragged, beaten body.

"That's the question that you need to answer."

I stood, then, and walked to my dresser. On it, sat jars of medicinal herbs. I grabbed two of them and carried them to the hot, steaming tub.

Xena sat up in the bed and watched me.

I twisted off the lid of the jars. Pinching a handful of goji berries, I sprinkled them into the tub. Judging by the amount of opium Xena had smoked the previous night, I gathered that she was addicted. In addition to their healing affects, the goji berries would ease her withdrawal symptoms by speeding the removal of toxins from her body.

Xena slid to the edge of the bed and inched a leg toward the ground, grimacing.

I twisted the lid off of the other jar and began stirring some of the cinnamon-ginseng elixir into the water. This would restore her energy and cleanse her wounds. I inhaled as the aroma rose up in tendrils of steam. Xena had to heal physically, before she could heal spiritually.

Xena stood now, tottering on shaky legs at the edge of the bed. As I stirred the water, I sensed that she was about to stumble. She took a step forward and wobbled. A moan of pain escaped her, despite her efforts to stifle it.

Instantly, I willed myself to her side, looping my arm around her back and steadying her.

Her hand grazed mine at her side, and she pulled it away, not knowing whether to make contact. Inhaling, she then let her hand rest on mine as she leaned into my body, accepting my assistance.

"Thanks," she said, quietly.

Carefully, I walked her to the tub. Helping lower her body, I let go of her when she sat herself at the edge. She let her legs dangle in the water, inhaling sharply as her feet were engulfed in the steam. Wincing, she began trying to remove the garment that Ming's men had put on her.

I turned away from her, preserving her modesty, and continued stirring the water. I heard her sigh and then she whispered.

"I..."

I looked at her. She could not raise the garment over her head. It was stuck at her neck, her arms unable to lift it further.

"Of course."

I stepped forward and knelt behind her.

"Ready?" I asked, so as not to startle her with my touch.

She nodded.

I placed my hands at her side, just under her breasts.

She slightly shivered when my hands made contact with her skin.

Delicately, I lifted the garment over her head. I inhaled when I saw her skin. Her back, while quite muscular, was covered in brown smudges of filth and green-blue shades of bruises. I let my hand linger at her back before removing it.

From beyond the door of my chambers, I heard the faint sound of dogs barking.

Xena turned and looked at me with fear in her eyes.

My heart began pounding, and that surprised me. My fear seemed to mirror Xena's.

"Ming," I said, confirming it. "He found your trail quicker than I expected he would."

A knock rapped at the door. It was Jiang's signal.

Xena's eyes widened.

"It's okay," I said. "It's only my assistant."

I went to the door and opened it. Jiang stood in the entryway, looking flushed.

"Ming is approaching," he said. "What shall I tell him?"

I paused and looked back at Xena, who was sitting naked at the edge of the tub.

"There's no time to get her out of here," I said. I looked back at Jiang.

He met my eyes, but not before I noticed that he had also been looking at Xena.

Red crept into my cheeks.

"I..." I began.

"You do not answer to me," he said.

I knew that. And still, I wanted to explain. Explain what, I did not know. I paused, unsure of what to say.

"Stall as long as you can," I said, finally.

"As you wish." Jiang turned from the room to meet Ming and his men.

As I walked to where Xena remained sitting at the edge of the tub, she grabbed the garment from the floor and tried to rise to her feet.

I placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Get in," I said, nodding toward the tub.

"I have to get out of h-"

"Get. In."

My hand gripped her shoulder more forcefully.

Xena slid into the tub, sighing as her body eased into the warmth.

I sat behind her, cross-legged, outside of the tub. I picked up a bowl and filled it with water. My heart pounding in my chest, I knew I had to calm myself before Ming arrived.

"This really the best time for a bath?" Xena said, some of her fire beginning to return.

"Close your eyes," I said. "And breathe."

She shook her head, but did so anyway. She had no other options.

I poured the warm water over her head, preparing her for what was to come.

Despite her anxiety, she leaned her head back, seeming to enjoy the warmth running over her.

I admired the lines of her neck, which was arched in pleasure. I knew I should look away, but I was captivated. Earlier in this long day, I would have doubted that this woman could reveal such beauty.

I heard footsteps outside the door. Already, they had arrived.

I gently placed a hand on Xena's head and, as Ming Tzu entered with his guards, I dunked her head under the water and pretended to be cleaning myself.

"Lao Ma, my hounds have followed Xena's trail here," Ming Tzu said. He barged through the doorway, not bothering to ask for permission to enter.

"They're probably just hungry," I said.

He turned to his guards.

"Search the room."

Seeing me at my bath, the guards hesitated but nonetheless entered my quarters.

I stole a glance into the tub. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw air bubbles rising to the surface, and Xena's blurry form underneath the surface.

Seconds seemed to turn to minutes as the guards canvassed my room. My heart pounding, I watched a guard peer under my bed. Another one walked past the tub and looked in my closet.

I stole another glance into the tub. The bubbles from underneath the water were becoming less frequent. I had to get these men out of here.

A different guard looked under the bed again, just to make sure.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xena's form underwater. She was now shaking her head as if in pain.

Finally, mercifully, the guards returned to Ming's side, shrugging.

"Now, if you'll respect my privacy," I said.

No more bubbles.

Ming and his guards quietly conferred and then turned to leave.

As he was leaving the room, I inhaled. Perhaps what I was about to do was unnecessary, as the men were stepping out the door. But in the panicked desperation of that moment, it seemed to be the only thing that would save her.

Bending down from my seated position, I dipped my head into the water. As I dipped my head under the warm, wet surface, Xena seemed to be waiting for me.

Instantly, I felt her mouth on my own, sucking. Inhaling. Her mouth was surprisingly soft. I lingered there, once my breath had left me, savoring what it was like to have this sort of contact with another person again.

Slowly, out of breath, I began to pull away.

Xena pulled me back to her mouth with a surprising gentleness, using one of her hands. She held me there.

I could have drawn away. What had begun as a way to keep her alive was ending a bit less innocently. I let her kiss me. I kissed her back.

And then somehow, I remembered Ming.

Breathless, yet feeling a new heat in my body, I whipped my head upward and out of the water, my hair landing at my back.

Ming Tzu heard the splashing and poked his head back into the room.

"You had better not be hiding her," he said with a sneer.

"My lord, I would never hide what is yours," I said, as innocently as I could. Above the surface of the water, my face felt a lonely coldness.

"When I arranged your marriage to Lao, I expected you to show more loyalty to me," Ming said.

I had to laugh inside. Powerful men were so clueless, stupidly believing that a former slave

would remain forever grateful for so kindly selling her to some other powerful man.

He couldn't touch me now, though. Even if he tried. I wanted him to know that.

"I was a courtesan, and you sold me. You expect loyalty?"

"What a strange woman, Lao Ma. Soft and hard at the same time."

Yes. Yin and yang. Perhaps Xena and I had something in common. I thought of her kiss. What it had done to my body.

"Like water. Nothing is as soft as water, yet who can withstand the raging flood?"

Like the dullard he was, Ming looked puzzled before leaving the room in a huff.

When I heard his footsteps fade away, I dunked my hand under the water and touched Xena's cheek.

She rose from the water, gasping for breath.

I searched her eyes, I saw something new in them before she turned her face away, avoiding me. My face was red, and I felt a new awkwardness between us.

"Let me know when you're ready," I said, "to get out of the water."

Xena nodded and proceeded to bathe.

I rose and stepped out of the room, giving her privacy.

xxxx

The bath seemed to reinvigorate her. When I returned to the room, I saw that she had risen from the tub and wrapped herself in the robes I had left for her. She was slowly pacing.

I carried with me a tray with a pot of herbal tea, two mugs, and a bowl of soup. I placed the tray on the table near the window and knelt on a cushion.

Unsure, Xena walked toward me.

"You must be hungry," I said.

She gave a slight shrug, but continued walking toward me. When she reached the other cushion she paused. She looked at how I was kneeling and then looked at her injured legs.

"Please," I said. "Sit how you are comfortable."

She nodded and made her way down the ground, sitting cross-legged on the cushion.

"This tea will help heal your body," I said, picking up the pot and pouring her a cup. "The soup, you can drink. It will cleanse you. Tomorrow you should have something more substantial."

My cup sat empty.

"So, what am I now?" Xena said. "*Your* prisoner?" Her voice was quiet, and I noticed a tremble in her hands as she brought the soup to her mouth.

It was a fair question she asked, considering her past. I knew all too well how being the property of another could break the strongest of souls.

"Of course not, Xena. You are free to leave at any time."

She picked up the tea, then, inhaling the steam. Still, she refused to look at me.

"And if you don't like the results of your Save Xena Experiment?" she asked. An edge was returning to her voice.

She began to sip the tea.

I chuckled, but inside, my heart began to race. That kiss had not been not part of this- this... whatever I was doing with her.

"Your own freedom will always be your choice. And," I said, "it is my hope that you will choose to become who you could be."

Xena finished her tea. Avoiding my eyes, she set down her mug, picked up the bowl of soup, and began slurping it again. The tremble in her hand had gotten worse. Her face looked clammy and a sweat had broken out on her forehead. The trembling continued to worsen, causing her to spill some of the soup she was drinking. She placed down her bowl, with a worried look.

"You haven't got a pipe, have you?" she asked.

"No."

She took a deep breath.

"If I could just get a pipe..." her hands began fidgeting.

"Xena, the toxins are leaving your body. You can choose to leave here, or you can choose to stay and endure the pain."

Xena inhaled deeply and brought a shaky hand to her temple, rubbing it.

"Should you stay, tonight you will feel the worst of it. But it will pass. Whatever you choose, I want you to know that you are making a choice and not blindly giving into your body's desires," I said.

I looked away from her eyes then, to give her some mental space.

After a few moments, her shaking hand reached across the table, picked up the pot of tea, and filled my cup.

I smiled and then, together, we drank our tea in silence.

The tea began to calm my body. Xena looked both weary and agitated. The effects of a warm bath and the tea would have undoubtedly prepared her for sleep. I wondered if she had too much pride to admit that she was exhausted.

"I am quite tired," I said. What I said next surprised me. "My bed is large. It will suffice for both of us." It was true. Of course, it was also true that Jiang could have brought a mat in for her to use. I tried to tell myself that that option would have roused too much suspicion among the guards.

Xena nodded and looked away.

I rose from the table.

"I will get you a night dress, for sleeping."

I walked across the room to the armoire and inspected my garments. For myself, I chose a white silk gown. Quickly, I removed my robes. As I did, I felt the chill in the air. When I slipped the gown over my head, it made my contact with my nipples, which had hardened.

I chose a red gown for Xena. When I turned, she was standing near the bed, looking at me. My heart beginning to race again, I stepped toward her.

"You must be weary," I said. My mouth felt dry.

She began untying her robe.

"I hope you will find this comfortable," I said, holding the gown.

She removed a pin from her hair and let it fall around her neck. It was still damp from earlier and retained the fragrance of the bath.

As I reached her, she let the robe fall from her body.

I swallowed and made a conscious effort not to run my eyes over her body, although my eyes wanted to feast. Only because her blue eyes were even more alluring than the idea of what was below, was I able to keep my eyes fixed above her neck.

Before I could give her the gown, she crawled into the bed naked, covering herself with the soft blankets.

I slowly exhaled, realizing that I had been holding my breath. After folding the gown and placing it on the nightstand, I placed a bowl of cold water next to it, blew out the candles in the room, and crawled into bed as well.

Lying on my back, I tried to calm my breathing. If the people of Lao knew, how appalled they would be that I was sharing a bed with this brutal barbarian warlord. Perhaps worse, I was healing her body.

Although I was very tired, I did not immediately fall asleep. I felt Xena fall in and out of consciousness with violent, shaking jerks. As I lay inches from her, I felt the heat radiating off of her. I periodically dabbed her lips and forehead with a cold, wet cloth when she let the rare moan escape. Despite her obvious pain, she endured it mostly in silence.

Hours later, her body settled down and she slipped into sleep. Eventually, so did I.

I only awoke when I felt a sudden movement, a flurry of energy, next to me. Sensing her approaching, I did not stop her.

Quickly, her body was atop mine and she had pinned my arms above my head. With the light of the moon shining in through the window, I looked into her eyes, which seemed to be unfocused and vacant. One of her knees pressed between my legs and I could feel the heat pulsing off of her. Her skin was slippery with sweat.

"Caesar, we'd make an unstoppable team," she whispered into my ear. I wasn't expecting hallucinations. Her addiction must have been stronger than I had believed it to be. I was speechless. I could have thrown her across the room, but I didn't. I was not uncomfortable beneath her.

I felt her mouth, hot, slide from my ear down to my neck. She licked it slowly, pulling away with a bite.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" she asked.

It was.

Then, her mouth was above my own, hovering inches away.

I craved feeling it again.

"I wondered if we would ever see each other again," she said.

I could have stopped her, but I didn't, convincing myself that she needed to get this out of her.

She kissed me. Hard at first, it softened, yet stayed urgent. She pulled away slowly, biting my lip hard.

I opened my eyes and saw that she was scowling.

"We were going to conquer the world together," she hissed.

Her hands on my wrists gripped harder, and her voice deepened as she commanded, "Break her legs!"

"Break her legs!" she repeated, in a quieter voice. Her eyes were glassy, with unshed tears.

From below her, I felt the pressure on my wrists increase. I didn't want to use force against her. Not while she was in this state of mind, but I began to fear that she would break my arms.

"Xena," I whispered into her ear.

On top of me, Xena's body began shaking, and she loosened her grip

"Break... her legs," she whispered, as tears streamed down her face.

"Xena," I whispered again.

She cried out in pain then, as though re-imagining the day Caesar took that hammer to her legs. Her body went limp on top of me.

I caught her and held her to me, caressing the back of her head.

She fell into a deep sleep after that. Sometime before dawn, when the last of her tremors had passed, I gently rolled her off of me, placed her on the other side of the bed, and finally managed to fall asleep myself.

xxxx

Many hours after dawn, I woke before Xena. Letting her sleep, I met Jiang in the kitchen. We ate together and then proceeded to prepare Xena a breakfast of fresh fruit. As we cut and peeled strawberries, mangoes, papaya, and berries, my headache seemed to return.

"How is she doing?" Jiang asked. His words pounded in my head.

"She is incredibly damaged," I said, trying not to wince. "It was a difficult night."

He paused, his knife stopping halfway through a strawberry.

"Do you really think it's possible? For her to be healed?"

The headache sharpened and seemed to move instantly behind the orbs of my eyes. Closing my eyes, I seemed to travel to another location. Instead of seeing the fruit, I appeared to be peering down as if from the ceiling of an armory. Below me, a woman with blonde hair and green eyes was lying in a bed of straw. Her skin was pale and clammy. She was wheezing and coughing.

Next to her, I saw a larger figure hunched over the smaller, sick woman. They were holding hands.

I felt another throb in my head, and then I seemed to be inside the body of the blonde woman. I felt hot, my lungs full of liquid. I blinked, trying to focus my vision. When the figure before me came into view, I was looking into familiar, tear-stained blue eyes.

Her eyes looked to be a few years older, but in them, I saw that I was loved. I was convulsed with more coughs, trying desperately to expel the liquid that was slowly drowning me.

Frightened, Xena placed a hand on my forehead.

I had to tell her I knew her. That it was me. Yet, when I felt myself speaking, it was in a voice unlike my own.

"You've got to take me with you-- teach me everything you know. You can't leave me here in Poteidaia. I want to go with you. I've studied the stars--spoken with philosophers-- and I have the gift of prophecy. I can be very valuable to you. Take me with you. I want so much to be like you."

More tears fell from Xena's eyes. I felt the intensity of her love.

"And I want to be like you," she said.

To me. I had to tell her.

Her blue eyes suddenly turned brown. Shaking my head, I saw only white and then, Jiang's familiar face.

"Lao Ma," he said, concerned. "Are you okay?"

I looked down. I was holding a knife and a papaya. Jiang's arm was on my cutting hand, steadying me.

"You were saying something. Something about a prophecy...?"

"I...I have been having headaches," I said. The rest of the kitchen slowly came into focus.

"You are very pale," he said. "Why don't you sit. Let me finish this."

"I'm fine, Jiang. I will speak to Mei about it."

Jiang nodded, but looked skeptical.

"Jiang, it is already passing." And, it was. I was feeling better. "As we were saying..."

"I was asking... Do you really think Xena can be healed?"

"Her body has been abused, from years of battle and intoxicants. Her spirit has been broken. And yet..." I said. "She remains human. Weak, but human."

Jiang raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

"Yes, weak," I said. "She could defeat almost any human in a battle, but she has little control over her own will. Over her own desires."

"And you think she can learn?"

"Right now, she is very scared. For many years, she has been using violence to hide her fear."

Jiang considered this, and continued chopping.

"She hurts others so others cannot hurt her," I continued. "Again."

He stopped chopping the fruit and looked at me, somewhat appalled.

"So because Caesar tortured her, she isn't responsible for her atrocities?" he said, his voice rising.

"Of course she is responsible," I said, placing a hand on Jiang's arm to calm him. "We are all responsible for our own actions. No matter what others have done to us."

"Yes..." Jiang said, waiting for me to continue.

"Being loved can give a person courage," I said. "To be better."

Jiang paused.

"Love?" he said.

I was surprised I had said it too. Who was that young woman with the green eyes?

I arranged the fruit on the platter in front of me while Jiang sat looking stunned.

"She is a human being," I said, finally. "Worthy of and capable of love like any other."

A few moments passed in silence. In that young woman, perhaps lie Xena's capacity for great love.

"If I may speak freely..." Jiang said.

My heart began pounding in my chest. I looked at my wrists and saw that they were bruised with Xena's finger indentations from the previous night. Quickly, I hid my arms in my robes.

"Of course."

He inhaled, preparing himself for what he was about to say.

"Sometimes our own... desires can prevent us from seeing reality as it is."

I felt the heat in my cheeks.

"You doubt that she can be healed," I said.

"She is very beautiful," he said. "She has been using that to her advantage, turning people into her pawns, for a long time. That is well-known about her. I urge you... be careful."

Jiang's words stung.

He was not telling me anything I did not already know. Furthermore, it wasn't me she was destined to love. I felt sure of that now. And still, I thought of Xena on top of me last night in bed. I was beginning to realize that I wanted more from Xena than to be one of her conquests.

"If you will excuse me, Jiang," I said, making my face blank. Picking up the tray of fruit, I turned to leave.

"Lao Ma..."

"Our guest is going to wake hungry."

I left the kitchen. My hands shook and as I carried the tray, I wondered what exactly I thought I was doing with this woman.

[xxxx To be continued xxxx](#)

~ The Legacy of Lao Ma ~

by Annazon Fox

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Disclaimer: I have intended no copyright infringement in the writing of this fan fiction story that contains characters, names, title, and backstory found in the syndicated television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

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Content: This story depicts love/sexual relationships between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal where you live, please do not read it.

Summary: Ever wonder what really happened between Xena and Lao Ma? This short story retells the events of *The Debt I and II* from Lao Ma's perspective, specifically recounting her reasons for trying to heal Xena physically and spiritually.

When I entered my chambers, Xena was still asleep. I was not surprised. Her body needed sleep in order to heal. I left the tray of fruit on the stand near her side of the bed, and left the room to meet with my policy advisors for the rest of the day.

I did not return to the chambers until nightfall. When I returned, Xena was up, slowly pacing the floor, wincing with every step. She was wearing the red robe I had left for her. The room was dark, except for a few candles that she had lit. The tray beside the bed was empty as though she had devoured the fruit upon waking.

"Good evening, Xena. How are you feeling?"

She looked up at me.

"Like someone took a sledgehammer to my legs," she muttered.

I wondered if she remembered last night.

"Would you like me to alleviate some of your pain?"

She stopped pacing and looked at me.

"You can do that?"

I nodded.

"Sit by the bath."

She slowly walked over to the tub. As she did, I noticed that already her limp was better than it had been yesterday.

I met her at the tub and rolled out a mat for her to lie on.

"Good," I said. "Sit here and lie back."

She slowly did so.

As I knelt before her legs, I noticed that her eyes remained wide open, alert.

"Relax, Xena."

She breathed deeply, but kept her eyes open.

Gently at first, my hands made contact with her legs just below the knee. As my hands became more engaged with touching her, I felt the knots in her muscles and the small calcified bumps in her bones. I made my way down her legs and then I came to her feet. I massaged the part of her soles that corresponded with the pain centers in her legs.

"My legs..." Xena whispered. "I can't feel them."

"Yes. The symptoms are gone, but they're not healed."

She sat up, placing her hands on her legs.

"You should get into the bath again," I said. "The water and herbs will help with your healing."

Xena paused.

"Can I... stand up first?"

I smiled.

"Of course," I said. "But be careful. Your legs are still fragile, even though they feel better."

She quickly rose to her feet. As she did, the furrow in her brows disappeared and a smile appeared on her face. After briefly stretching, she laughed and jump-kicked surprisingly high into the air.

"Xena!" I said, smiling despite my concern.

Grinning, she ran across the room and jumped onto the bed with gleeful abandon.

I laughed along with her, catching glimpses of the woman she perhaps used to be. Or could have been. Or, still could become.

She hopped off the bed and ran back to me, standing by the bath.

"Someone is going to be very sore tomorrow," I said. "If she does not get into that tub."

Still smiling, she stripped off her robe.

I immediately averted my eyes, feeling self-conscious. I turned to leave.

She grabbed my arm, so I turned to face her, willing myself to keep looking into her eyes and not at her naked body.

"Stay," she said, her face becoming serious. "Please."

I nodded.

She slid into the steaming tub, moaning with pleasure as the warm water enveloped her body.

Sitting outside of the tub, behind her cross-legged, I let her relish it for a few minutes. I remembered last night, how she had pulled me to her for that exquisite kiss. I studied her as she sat in the warm water with her eyes closed.

Shaking my head, I filled a bowl with warm water. When she heard my splashing, she waded her way toward me, the top of her breasts glimmering halfway out of the water.

I smiled at her and she turned around so as to let me wash her hair.

I poured the water over her head and, this time, I reached out and ran my fingers through her hair to get it wetter.

At my touch, her breath quickened and she closed her eyes. Her chest moved up and down.

From above her, my eyes followed the trails of water down the tan skin at her forehead and all the way down her neck. Further down, her nipples peaked above the water each time she inhaled.

My hands on her head began to massage. Her scalp was wet and warm and she relaxed into my touch, slowly moving her head around to meet my hands.

"How do you feel?" I said, after a few minutes.

She pulled away, then, and turned to face me, slowly opening her eyes. I was struck by the intensity I saw in them. Gone was the lightness, the humor.

"Ready for bed," she said, raising an eyebrow.

Her innuendo was obvious. And, it would be an understatement to say that I was also ready. In my current state of arousal, I would not have protested had she pulled me into the hot tub with her and taken me right there.

And yet, Jiang's words echoed in my head. I was not ready to trust my desire of her. And she was not yet ready for great love.

"Xena..." I said. "Get out. Let me brush your hair."

I saw a brief flicker of something in her eyes. Whether it was hurt or anger, or both, I could not say. Nonetheless, she waded to the other edge of the tub and pulled herself out of it. After drying off, she wrapped herself in a robe and walked over to where I sat. She lowered herself and sat with her back to me.

As I gently brushed the tangles from her hair, I thought of my rebuff of her advances. I was proud of my ability to quiet my desire, but that desire remained, nonetheless, taunting me each time I made contact with her.

Xena, for her part, remained silent. As I brushed her hair, she periodically glanced back at me with alternating looks of suspicion and pleasure.

Finally, she turned and spoke.

"Why are you serving me like this? Without wanting anything in return?"

I looked at the brush in my hands. I wasn't sure I had a clear answer to that anymore.

"As I told you," I said. "I see a great woman in you, waiting to come out."

At this, she turned her body completely around to face me. The robe had fallen open a bit and I could see the barest hint of her breasts within. Her hair, wet, was at her shoulders.

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"Yes."

Her face was flushed, and she looked boldly into my eyes.

"And, was I mistaken then," she said. "In reading your preference for women?"

I looked away. It was a desire that, like all of my desires, I had learned to quiet.

"I see," Xena said. "A married woman in your position has appearances to keep up to the outside world."

I looked at her sharply.

"Conforming with the ways of the world is of no interest to me," I said. "I believe you and I have that in common."

I stood then, and extended a hand to help her up.

She accepted my assistance and our hands made contact. She pulled herself up and when she was standing, kept hold of my hand. I tried, weakly, to free myself, but she held on. I didn't try hard to pull away.

Instead, my hand went to her cheek. I had to know. What was this to her? Who was this "her"? The brutal warlord, the scared child, or the woman capable of great love who was buried beneath those layers?

"You didn't answer me," she said. She then pulled me closer to her, still holding my hand, and put her arm around my waist.

I felt safe in her embrace, and so I let her hold me. My body pressed against hers. From my center I felt a warmth and, between my legs, I felt my desire. My body was ready for her. It ached for her.

She brought her lips to mine. I had time to pull away, I certainly had the strength, but I did not have the will. I closed my eyes and felt her lips, wet, pressed upon mine. It was quite different from the previous night's kiss in bed. It was more hesitant, less violent. When I didn't refuse her, she used her tongue to seek entrance to my mouth, which I granted. I heard a moan and realized that it came from me. My hands, one grasping hers, and the other at her waist, began exploring.

Untying her robe, she took my hands and placed them on her bare skin, at her waist. I ran my hands over her muscular back as her mouth began exploring my neck. Her hands were at the opening of my robe, fumbling to get inside. Not ready for that, I grabbed her wrists, which resisted at first, and put her arms around my neck.

Our mouths met again, and this time I used my tongue to open her mouth wider. My hands entered her robe again and continued exploring her body.

"Gods..." she said.

As we kissed, I felt my desire beginning to drip down my thighs. This passion, both hers and mine, was unlike anything I had let myself experience before. The intensity of it was exciting, out of control, and, for that reason, frightening. I had to stop it, somehow. Yet, before I could, one of her hands grabbed one of mine and placed it between her thighs, every so barely out of reach of the wetness within. I could feel the heat emanating from her.

I had to do this. I had to know her in this way.

"Lao Ma...." she whispered into my ear. "Please."

I paused, my indecisive hand suddenly trapped in a contest between desire and restraint.

Xena's desire won out and, as she thrust her hips forward, I found myself buried in her wetness. She was slippery and warm and I easily found her swollen center. Her hips began rocking, although that was unnecessary, my hand having already started its own rhythm, causing her to moan.

Somehow, I remembered my conversation with Jiang, earlier in the day.

"You doubt that she can be healed," I had asked him.

"She is very beautiful," he had said. "She has been using that to her advantage, turning people into her pawns, for a long time. That is well-known about her. I urge you... be careful."

I inhaled sharply, feeling the delicious warmth of Xena surrounding my hand. What was I doing? I was the leader of the land of Lao, jeopardizing my people with my desires.

I pulled my hand away from her.

"What...?" Xena said, opening her eyes.

"I'm sorry Xena. I can't."

"You can't? You just *were*."

She came at me again, as if to kiss me. I put a hand at her hip, stopping her.

"I am sorry for misleading you," I said. "But the greatest worth is self-mastery."

Her face was red and her eyes seemed to be a deeper shade of blue. She shook her head, and angrily shut her robe.

"It's late," I said. "You are welcome to join me in my bed. If you do not think you can master your desire tonight, Jiang can bring a mat for you to sleep on."

Xena laughed, angrily. I deserved it.

"Like an animal?"

I thought of her in Ming's cage, just yesterday.

"It's up to you, Xena."

Without making further eye contact with her, I walked to my armoire. Pulling my robe off, I slipped a lighter one over my head. Walking to the basin, I placed my hands in the clean water and drew my hands to my face. I could still smell her on me. After some breaths to calm my mind, I got into bed.

Xena paced in the room for some time. Eventually, she blew out the candles and joined me.

I don't think either of us slept much during the night. Still aroused, I spent much of the night fighting the urge to relieve the tension that had built in my body. How could I sleep, with her lying inches from me?

xxxx

The next morning, after a night of successfully quieting both our wills, I decided that Xena was ready to further the lesson. After we breakfast, I took her to my meditation room.

As expected, her legs were quite sore from the previous day's exertions and her limp had returned. Nonetheless, she proceeded to proudly smash one of my vases with her foot in a demonstration of her power. As she stood there smiling amidst the shattered pieces, I think she relieved some of the tension we were still carrying from the previous night.

Better to pick up those pieces than the shattered pieces of the land of Lao.

"Put up another bottle," I said. I wanted to show her what more disciplined energy could do.

She turned and limped to where the other two vases sat, a couple of feet away. She picked one of them up, placed it on the table, and stepped away.

I bowed slightly in the direction of the vase, beginning to harness the energy coursing through my body. After staring at the vase for a few moments, I felt the energy flow through me. Instantly, the vase shattered.

Xena jumped and then began admiring the pieces of the vase lying on the floor.

"Teach me to do that."

"Well, try it."

Quickly, Xena limped over to where the remaining intact vase sat and carried it to the table. She carefully placed it on the table and backed away. She shook out her hands, as if preparing herself. Closing her eyes and then half-opening them, she began making various scowling faces at the vase. A few moments passed and nothing happened. Her body became more tense and her scowling increased. Still, nothing happened. Tilting her head sideways, as if that would help, her frustration became more apparent.

Because she was so earnest in her attempt, I smiled and then, not able to stifle it, I laughed aloud.

Upon hearing me, Xena shot her scowl in my direction. I felt the intensity of it, although it was quite scattered.

"I'm sorry, Xena," I said, laughing. "You're trying to attack the bottle with your will."

"What else is there?" Xena said, exasperated.

"Exactly."

"What?!"

"The entire world is driven by will," I said. "Blind and ruthless. In order to transcend the limitations of that world, you need to stop willing. Stop desiring. Stop hating."

"How do *I* do that?" Xena asked, with doubt.

"Heaven endures and the earth lasts a long time because they do not live for themselves. Therefore, she who would live a long time, should live for others. Serve others."

Xena's face softened.

"I could serve you, if that's what you mean," she said.

She seemed close to tears.

"Of course you can," I said. "It's easy to serve someone you love. You feel that it will make them love you more. It's like a good business investment. But that's not what I'm talking about."

Love? I had said it aloud. Why had I assumed? I remembered the woman with green eyes.

Xena took a step forward, nervous.

"You mean that I should serve someone who hates me?"

"More than that," I said. "You need to serve someone *you* hate. Ming Tzu."

"Ming Tzu." Xena's face tightened in anger.

"Yes," I said. "The man who had you hunted like an animal. He comes here tomorrow with his son."

Xena's anger had by now turned into rage. I felt it coursing off of her.

"Serve Ming," she said. "I'd rather die."

"You've been a dead woman for a long time now, Xena. I'm offering you the chance to live."

I looked into her eyes one last time, turned my back on her, and walked out of the room. Before I exited, I felt her at my back.

She grabbed my arm and spun me towards her.

"*You* have been serving *me*," she said.

I saw where this could go and I wanted to stop it before it got there.

"Xena," I said. "Please let go of me."

"Tell me." She kept hold of my arm.

"Xena..." I shook my head.

"Why? Why have you been serving me like this?"

I didn't want to lie to her. But telling her the truth would be worse.

"Do you... hate me?" she asked,

I swallowed.

"No." I looked into her eyes. "No," I repeated, more firmly.

She looked down, took a breath, and then asked what I feared she would.

"*Did* you," she said. "Hate me?"

I inhaled and tried to calm my pounding heart. Her hand on my arm gripped tighter. I wanted to tell her how beautiful I thought she was. I wanted to pull her into my arms and smell her, whisper into her ear. Instead, I told her the truth that would hurt her.

"Yes. At first."

She released my arm, throwing it back at me.

"Go to Hades," she said.

"Xena..."

She turned her back on me and, this time, it was me who caught her arm.

"By serving you, Xena, I have learned what it feels to live again." And love, I thought.

"Well," she said. "Glad I could help you learn how to feel *something*."

"I feel many things. The lesson is that we don't always have to act out everything we feel."

"Doesn't seem to be much of a point to living if you don't act on *anything* you feel," Xena said.

I looked away.

"If you don't feel that you are ready for this next lesson, let me know before Ming Tzu arrives tomorrow night."

xxxx

Xena ended up deciding to serve Ming Tzu. In a way, her stubbornness served her well. She seemed set on proving to me that she wasn't an animal.

So, dressed in servant robes and wearing heavy makeup on her face, she served him. Never an observant man, he didn't even notice that it was she, the "stupid thug" he despised, who served him food and tea. I felt her hatred of Ming Tzu pulsing off of her the whole time. Yet, she did not attack him and, at the end of the night, I was quite proud of her.

"All right, Lao Ma," she said to me, after he left, "I did the whole servant bit, and it accomplished nothing."

"You're wrong," I said. "For a few hours, you actually silenced your will. It's a beginning."

"A beginning to what, huh? I should have just sliced that pig's throat."

"To conquer others is to have power; to conquer yourself is to know the way. Come with me Xena."

From the dining area, we walked through the doorway and entered the corridor. In doing so, I instinctively held my hand out and captured Xena's hand in my own. She caught up to me and we walked side-by-side.

"You did well," I said. I stopped walking and, before I could convince myself not to, I turned to her and placed a light kiss on her lips.

When I pulled away, I saw the hint of a blush at Xena's cheeks.

"Well," she said. "That's a beginning, too. For you."

I smiled and continued walking again, with her hand in mine. I noticed that her limp had improved.

"So, where are we going?"

I stopped in front of a door.

"To see my husband."

Xena raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"Oh joy."

xxxx

Later that evening, after revealing to her my secret, that I intentionally kept my husband in a coma, Xena and I shared a meal of rice and vegetables in my chambers. After leaving my husband's bedside, a silence had overtaken Xena. I thought I knew why.

Sitting across from me, as she quietly focused on using chopsticks, I placed a hand over her fumbling fingers.

"Xena," I said. "I know that you didn't know."

She met my eyes and shook her head.

"My son, Ming Tien, has always been raised by his father, Ming Tzu," I explained. "Instead of me."

"I..." Xena began.

"Yes...?" I encouraged her. I had learned quickly that for her to speak openly and copiously was a rare thing.

"I would like to sit here and tell you that I wouldn't have kidnapped him had I know he was your son," she said. "But I owe you the truth, and the truth is, I would've. Then, anyway. I... I hated you... too."

I knew she spoke the truth, and for that, at least, she had my admiration.

I nodded.

"Thank you for your honesty," I said.

Xena nodded. After a couple of minutes of silence, Xena spoke again.

"What happened, with you and Ming Tzu? Were you married to him, first?"

I inhaled.

"I was Ming Tzu's courtesan. His slave."

"But...you are so powerful...?" Xena furrowed her brows in anger and disbelief.

"Yes, I am." I said. "I wasn't always."

"What happened?"

"I was born a peasant, sold by traders to Ming Tzu. I was the first of his courtesans to bear him a son, his heir, which is all he wanted a woman for. He killed the other women but I was given the 'honor' of being sold to Lao, who wanted a wife," I said. "Fortunately for me, Lao was a man too busy with violent, ruthless affairs of state to remain attentive to his new wife. On my own time, which was ample, I lost myself in the estate's vast library. I learned how to heal. I learned pressure points."

Here, I showed Xena two fingers and raised an eyebrow.

"I could expand your knowledge of the art."

Xena nodded.

"I applied my knowledge of pressure points to my husband, as you saw, keeping him in a coma. And, I began meditating. It was during these times, alone, when I became aware of deeper truths about the human condition. The flow of energy through our bodies reflects the flow of energy throughout the universe. To maintain well-being, we have to maintain balance. Remove blockages."

I picked up my tea and took a sip, giving Xena the space to process this.

"But, weren't you angry? Angry at how they treated you? Angry at being someone else's property?"

"Oh yes, Xena. I was very angry. And, I was hurt and scared."

"What changed?"

"First, I came to know myself. And then I conquered myself," I said. "My desires. My emotions. My will. If we do not hold on to who we are, we are capable of great change."

"But... you could use your powers to stop Ming Tzu," she said. "You could have used them to stop Borias and I."

I smiled and remained silent.

After a moment of consideration, Xena blushed slightly as it registered.

"Oh."

"The power I exercise, Xena, is in restraining myself from inflicting violence on political opponents. It's the same power you have, as you demonstrated today by serving Ming Tzu. You silenced that hatred, that aggression. That takes great power."

Our tea and soup empty, I was ready to give Xena her final gift.

"How are your legs today?"

Xena looked at me, surprised at my change of subject.

"Still broken..."

"Tomorrow is your final lesson." I said. "Restoring your physical health will help aid your transformation. I will heal your legs."

xxxx

In the morning, after breakfast, I excused myself and met Jiang in the conference room.

"She has made progress," I told him. "Her body is healing. She is controlling her will. She is smiling again."

Jiang paused, the hint of a smile at his lips.

"As are you, Lao Ma."

I smiled, but did not confirm what he seemed to want me to admit.

"I did not think it was possible for her to be human," he said. "Perhaps it was foolish of me to underestimate your powers."

"It has taken an extraordinary amount of will, on my part," I said.

I blushed slightly, thinking if he only knew. I changed the subject.

"What is the status of Borias?" I asked.

"As expected, he has been roaming Chin's lands with his army. It appears to be growing. He has yet to form an alliance with Ming, however."

I nodded.

"That is good news. However, we must ensure such an alliance does not happen. I believe now is an auspicious time for us to try for an alliance. I have a plan."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I need you to send a message to Borias. Find out if he is willing to entertain the possibility of a three-way alliance between his army, Ming, and Lao. If he is, he is welcome to come here immediately to negotiate."

Jiang paused.

"And, her? Xena...?"

"I anticipate that she will be joining the House of Lao."

Jiang swallowed.

"In what capacity, may I ask? As your...?"

I stopped. I did not know what to say or how to explain it.

"As my warrior princess," I said. I did not yet know what that would entail.

Jiang waited for me to continue, eyebrows raised.

"I know you do not think highly of her. But this is something I have to try. I think she is better than she has shown."

Jiang smiled.

"If that is your opinion of her, then I hope it works out. For your sake, as well as the sake of Chin."

Before I could fully process that, Jiang had left the room, having gone to send for Borias.

I placed a hand at my temple and massaged it lightly. Although I did not yet have a headache, I fully anticipated one at any moment. I needed to believe that I was doing the right thing by healing her legs. I wanted to believe I was not putting a sharpened sword back in the hands of a dangerous, violent woman.

Returning to my chambers, I found Xena seated on a cushion looking out the window. I extended a hand to her.

"Come with me, Xena."

With furrowed brow, Xena took my hand.

"Another bath?"

"No," I said.

I led her to the healing table in my chambers.

"Lie down," I said. "Make your mind still, while I prepare."

Xena did as instructed as I walked throughout the room blowing out candles. I left a few of them lit, near the healing table, but wanted as minimal distractions as possible. I began to clear my mind, preparing myself for the energy this endeavor would require. When I felt ready, I walked to the table and looked down at Xena, who was lying on her back, quite still.

With my eyes, I first began scanning her robed body. Her energy was like a raging flood that was trying to find its path. As I placed my hands over her, without touching, it was confirmed that her life force was out of balance. She had too much yang, too much aggression and desire. The energy was still incredibly strong, despite her having spent the past few days with me, learning to quiet her will.

My hands traveled down her torso, past her waist, and down to her damaged legs. Instantly, I felt an enormous blockage of energy there, trapped. Moving my hands in a circular motion, I urged the energy to circulate and dissipate. Yielding to her energy, I let my hands receive it. Gradually, through various pathways, the absorbed heat traveled throughout my body.

Like a sponge, I took in her dissipating energy.

After hours of this, my headache returned, turning into what was becoming a familiar dull pounding.

Upon sensing a balance within her, I stood then, feeling that it was complete. I stepped away from Xena's body.

"Come to me, Xena. Now."

She slowly opened her eyes and sat up. As she drew her legs over the side of the table, she winced out of habit. As if stepping into a pool of cold water, she began slowly shifting her weight onto her legs. Her eyes widened when she realized she did not feel pain. Smiling, she stood and ran to the other end of the room, ran up a wall, and did a flip, much like she did a few

days ago, except now, her legs were physically healed.

Whether it was another vision, I almost could not tell, but Xena's energy lightened and we floated in the air together. Our legs not touching the ground, we twirled and danced and laughed in the air. Although chaste, our energy seemed to be combined in an intimate way. Indeed, a part of our energy would be linked forever, as a whole greater than the sum of its parts. She had filled me with heat, where I had previously been cold. It was very much like lovemaking. As we embraced a final time, Xena removed her hairpin and slid it into my hair.

I felt his energy before I saw him stride into the room. Nonetheless, I kept my eyes fixed on Xena. I could not give it away.

Twirling in the air with Xena, I saw her eyes slowly move to the doorway. I saw her face slowly form into a scowl, where before it had been peaceful and happy. She fell to the ground with a thud. With a growl, she lunged at Borias with two punches, who fell backwards with a groan.

Before Xena could knock him senseless, I ran to them and placed myself between the two.

"Xena, stop. Control yourself. He's here because I sent for him."

A hurt look passed over her face. Before I could explain, she jumped over my head with a flip and delivered a roundhouse kick to Borias' face. He fell onto his back, nose bloodied. Still, Xena stalked over to where he lay.

I ran over to him and shielded his body with my own.

"Xena, just stop. Stop willing, stop desiring, stop hating."

As I said this, her face turned from disgusted to hurt.

I thought maybe I had reached her.

I was wrong.

In the safe harbor of my chambers, Xena had been untested. She was not ready for this lesson. She was not ready for Borias. I saw that now.

With wild eyes, she found Borias again and ran to him, butting him in the head with her own. She began beating him then, punching him in the stomach, striking his neck, kicking him in the face when he was down on his knees.

Appalled, I could only look on, regretting my decision to bring him here.

Feeling heat in my body building, I brought an arm back and thrust it forward at Xena, sending her flying, tumbling through the air.

"Alright, we'll do this a different way."

xxxx

With Borias and Xena sitting across from each other on their knees, I told them how this was going to work.

"We're going to have peace in this land, and the two of you are going to help bring it about."

"You've gotta be kidding," Xena said.

"Tomorrow, Ming Tzu comes here to talk to Borias and me. We're going to include him in a three-way alliance."

"If you think I'm playing servant girl to these two, you've got another thing-"

"Quiet Xena. I plan to inform Ming Tzu of your presence. He has to accept that. You're going to help me run the kingdom of Lao. You'll be my warrior princess. Tomorrow you'll ask for Ming's forgiveness. Today you're going to learn how to deal with Borias. Xena's capable of profound loyalty Borias, she just doesn't know it yet. I'm going to leave the two of you alone. It serves both your interests to get along. If you kill each other, so be it."

I saw the glimmer of something in Xena's eyes. As she looked at Borias, she still had the wild look she had when she attacked him. She looked like an animal, ready to pounce on him- in one way or another- as soon as I left the room.

Angry, I turned and abruptly left, wondering if I was leaving not only Xena's body behind, but also, her soul.

xxxx

While Xena and Borias reunited, I waited in my chambers alone. After the daylight faded into evening, I heard a knock. I tried not to let my disappointment show when I saw that it was Jiang, and not Xena.

"Come in," I said.

"How do you think their reunion is going?"

"I hope that she has decided to let go of her desires. Her hatred. Her anger. Or else," I said. "She is likely to kill him."

"Among other things..."

I inhaled.

"Yes. Or that."

I tried not to look hurt. Technically, I had no claim on Xena.

"And, what if Ming Tzu does not forgive Xena? Would you surrender her to him?"

"She is not mine to surrender, Jiang. But if he does not forgive her, she will still be welcome in the land of Lao."

"That could threaten the treaty with Ming..."

"And to surrender Xena to him would be to condone slavery. She is her own person."

"Even if she chooses to leave with Borias?" Jiang asked.

My heart skipped a beat, but I kept my voice calm.

"Yes, Jiang," I said. "Even then."

"Very well," Jiang said, shortly. He turned to leave.

I touched his arm, and he paused.

"You are angry..." I said.

He inhaled.

"No, Lao Ma."

"Then what?"

"You devote your life to denying your desires, for the sake of Chin," he said. "I am not wise. Not like you are. But maybe if you were honest with yourself about feeling desire at all, more options would make themselves available. To you and to Xena."

I paused.

"Jiang, what are you saying?"

"I know you Lao Ma. And, I also know that a person can only be rejected so many times before they choose an easier path that presents itself."

My heart began racing.

After Jiang left, I lay awake in bed for much of the night. My thoughts were of Xena and Borias alone together in my meditation room.

xxxx

When Ming Tzu arrived the next morning, he was quite angry that I had been harboring Xena. Instead of letting go of his anger, he refused to forgive Xena for kidnapping Ming Tien. As he turned to leave, Xena proposed a game of chance. The winner would get Xena and the body part of each of the losers. It was absurd, yet feeling defeated, I did not stop it.

Xena, Borias, Ming Tzu, and I sat together in a small circle. Xena was shaking the dice in the cup. Unsettled, I wondered how I had let this negotiation happen so fast and go so wrong. As soon as Xena proposed it, I knew that the game of chance had been their idea, Xena and Borias', and that they had made it together.

Xena had made a choice to hang on to her anger and hatred. That much was very clear. So now, I sat with them in this circle, speechless, wondering how to control all of this damage.

Then, Xena slammed down the cup. We all peered into the middle of the circle as she raised it.

Damn.

"I win!" Xena said. "Pay up."

"This is ridiculous," I said.

Xena ignored me and looked at Ming Tzu.

"I want a piece of him," she said.

"You're crazy," Ming Tzu said.

"Then you're not going to pay up?" Borias asked, amused.

"Are you?" Ming Tzu asked.

"Yes," Borias said. He looked at Xena, with an evil grin. "I give you my heart."

My own heart began to race and my body began to feel hot. I tried not to look appalled, but I believe I failed.

"I accept," Xena said.

Something inside of me snapped, then. Like a flood of raging red. In fragmented moments of time, I saw Xena rushing toward Ming Tzu, something about collecting her winnings. She killed him, easily, and turned toward Ming Tien who stood wide-eyed and full of fear. I heard Borias chuckling in the background.

I managed to speak.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"Now we can wipe out the entire line. Then it'll just be the house of Lao. We can rule the whole kingdom of Chin together. You can do all your noble stuff, and Borias and I'll keep the peace. We'll have some laughs along the way."

I wanted to laugh inside. Xena looked and sounded as wild as I felt on the inside. I had something in me that needed to get out. Borias sticking around would not do. Damn her.

While little Ming Tien looked on, I threw my arm in Xena's direction, directing a powerful burst of energy at her. She flew backwards. I did the same in Borias' direction, without really looking at him. I heard the thud of his body hitting a wall across the room, and then the sound of another thud as he hit the ground. His laughing had stopped immediately.

I walked toward Xena and used this energy to throw her into a wall. Damn her. I did it again and again until she was lying on the floor, like Borias, in a heap.

And still, that wasn't enough.

I walked to where she was lying. Her lip was puffy and bloody and her eyes were closed.

As I stood over her, I heard a noise at the door.

"Lao Ma...?" It was Jiang, looking around in disbelief at the three bodies lying on the floor.

"Get the boy out of here," I said in a voice I hardly recognized. "Get them all out of here."

I stood over Xena's body and barely registered the frenzied motions of my guards whisking Ming Tien away and dragging Borias' unconscious body and Ming Tzu's dead body out of the room. When one of the guards bent over to pick up Xena's feet to drag her away, I put a hand on his chest, without looking at him.

"No," I said. "Leave her."

The guard looked at me, confused.

"Leave," I said.

"Lao Ma...?" Jiang said.

"Leave," I said it loudly and forcefully this time.

Jiang and the guards scrambled out of the room.

Once I heard the door close, I bent down near Xena's face. Silently, I watched her struggle to regain consciousness.

After a few moments, her eyelids began fluttering. As soon as her eyes opened and focused on me, I spoke.

"Why did you do it?"

"Kill Ming Tzu? He was scum."

"Not that," I said. "His heart. Why did you accept it?"

"Borias'?" Xena laughed.

She sat up, wincing, and tried to rise. I pushed her back down.

"Answer," I said.

"You weren't the only one with a plan. I had one too."

"You thought it would be acceptable to have a romance with him and also be my warrior princess?"

"A romance?" she spat. "I didn't offer him *my heart*, in case you forgot that part."

"So you used sex as a weapon last night, to trick Borias?"

I felt that dark energy building within me, urging me to release it.

Xena laughed angrily.

"Not last night. I stopped it before it got to that. And what's it to *you*, anyway?" She wiped blood away from her lips and looked down at the red on her hand.

My heart raced and I felt close to tears.

"I made you an offer," I said, angrily. "Chin could have had peace. But now that is not possible because of you. You've ruined it with your desire for power and your anger and your hatred-"

"I have?" Xena demanded, struggling to rise. "I didn't know you wanted me-"

Before she could finish, I was grabbing her by the front of her robe, my mouth crushing her own. I tasted the blood on her lips and still, despite her pain, she did not pull away. My arms around her neck, I used my body to prod her backwards and she gave in. Our bodies crashed to the floor, with me on top of her. For a brief second, I worried about hurting her, but she was frantically pulling at my robes, tearing them off of me.

This time, I let her. Helping her, I slid my arms out of the robe and threw it to the side. I opened hers and then pinned her wrists above her head, staring openly at her body. She was so beautiful. Healed, she had regained her color and her magnetism. Her breasts were rising and falling with her rapid breath.

I felt light-headed, out of control. Reigning myself in was unthinkable.

Feeling the wetness between my legs, I remembered my purpose. Using a knee to open her legs, I slid a thigh between hers and straddled her upper thigh. I let go of her wrists and she immediately wrapped her arms around me, pulling me to her. We rocked together, both of us sweating. I felt my pleasure building, as I slid across her wet thigh.

I needed more than this. I needed more of her.

Sliding down her body, I licked both of her nipples and bit one of them as I slid lower. She moaned as I planted my head between her legs. Her back arched, inviting me to explore her body further. My hand stopped just out of reach of her wetness. Using two fingers, I opened her and entered her. As I did this, I moved my tongue slowly across her delicious swollen center. It had been many years since I had done this, but the intensity of my desire brought everything back to me. The tastes, the smells. The slippery, constricting feeling. By her moans, I could tell the pleasure was building in her.

Impatiently, Xena pulled me up to her, kissing me. She easily flipped me onto my back and began kissing me. This time, at her pacing, the kisses were slower, softer. Each time my tongue asked for more, she pulled her head away, teasing. With our thighs intertwined, we were rocking, slowly. I felt her hand move down my body, stopping at my hip.

When she pulled her head away, I found myself looking into two kind, blue eyes silently asking permission.

In that moment, despite what had happened today, I knew she was going to be okay.

I wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her back to my lips. As our lips made contact again, she expertly slid two fingers inside me and began slowly sliding them in and out while her palm pressed against my center. As she did this, she slid across my thigh.

I let go then. I let go of everything I was trying to be and everything I was trying to control. Whatever was going to happen, was going to happen. Moments later it did, both of us crying out.

Xena collapsed onto me, and I pulled her to me. On the floor of my chambers, we breathed together, silently.

I caressed her hair, softly running my fingers through the dark strands. Our bodies were sweaty, scratched, and bloody.

Finally, I spoke.

"I love you Xena."

I smiled, hearing her heartbeat increase. She didn't respond. That was okay.

"But you have to leave here," I said.

She swallowed.

I thought again of the green-eyed woman.

"You are capable of incredible love. But that has to be with someone else. In your own time, when you're ready."

I thought of my headaches.

"I have the gift of prophecy, Xena. And I see great things in your future."

Things that don't involve Borias. Things that don't involve me.

"But it's up to you to find that future," I said.

Xena breathed slowly.

"What about you?"

I smiled.

"I have to pick up the pieces of Chin," I said. "And I cannot do that with you here."

"Lao Ma...." Xena began to protest.

"Xena, no," I said, kissing her again lightly. "Ming Tien will never forget what you have done today to his father."

After a pause, she nodded.

"I will never forget you," she said. "What you have done for me."

I smiled.

"And I will never forget," I said. "What you tried to give me."

Love. She had offered me love and it had been me who was not ready to receive it.

xxxx

The way that is the true way cannot be expressed. Before I met Xena, I wrote often of desire and the way that it causes suffering. It wasn't until I met her that I fully understood my own teachings. I had to experience desire in order to truly understand its power.

It has been many years since I last saw Xena in person. My scouts and messengers periodically brought news of her whereabouts and adventures, knowing, without perhaps understanding why, I was drawn to news of her. At first, the news was expected. She and Borias, not surprisingly, had fled Chin. She did that for me, of that I am sure. Later, I heard that they were getting into trouble with the Amazons and Centaurs, a misadventure that got Borias killed.

Eventually though, the news changed. She had begun helping people, instead of terrorizing them. She had met a man, called Hercules, who also saw the goodness in her heart. I had wondered if I had been wrong about the green-eyed woman. Perhaps Xena was destined to live with this Hercules, doing good.

Later though, the reports said she had begun traveling with a female companion. A young blonde woman, spiritual and good. Enough distance had passed between my time with Xena to make me happy for them. I knew that they loved each other very much. I remember feeling the power of it.

I took solace in knowing that I had not, after all, been wrong about her.

In the months after Xena left, my headaches grew worse. When I finally sought the healing services of Mei, she said that the tumor was untreatable. I spent the next few years ruling the land of Lao, hiding my illness from the citizenry and most of my staff.

The House of Ming slowly regrouped from Ming Tzu's murder, with Ming advisors running the affairs of state while pretending that the boy, Ming Tien, was in charge. Eventually, he asserted his rightful place as actual head of state. Whether due to his own insecurity or Xena's violent example from his youth, he quickly became known for being ruthless, aggressive, and violent.

Having encroached upon Lao land many months ago, he had recently ordered my execution. I was the last obstacle to his total domination of Chin.

When I first heard of his order, I thought immediately of Xena. My mind can no longer adequately distinguish the past from the present from the future. My heart is all that I have left to trust, and in it I know that Xena will play a role in this.

I heard a quiet knock at the door of my chambers.

"Enter," I said.

Jiang, loyal Jiang, entered with a slight bow. What we had developed over the years had never been passion, but it was love, and that was enough. Sometimes, family was created without sex or blood.

Stepping away from the bed in the dimly-lit room, I walked to where he stood, by the door.

"Have you gathered more information?" I asked.

"I have," Jiang said. I remained quiet, waiting for him to proceed.

"Your execution is to take place tomorrow."

"I see."

"There is time still, for us to flee."

"Fleeing will not stop him. He is a violent, ruthless warlord. He takes a cruel enjoyment in the torture and terrorizing of humans," I said.

"What do you propose then?"

"Jiang, I do not have much time left here, anyway..."

He looked away, nodding.

"I know."

"I have one last request of you. You are free to refuse it."

Jiang nodded.

"I ask that you deliver a message," I said. "To Xena."

"Xena....?" He sounded surprised.

I placed an arm on his shoulder.

"You were right about her. Back then, " I said. "But now..."

"Now," Jiang said. "They say she is a hero."

I smiled.

"Perhaps," I said.

"If she is," he said. "It is because of you."

He smiled.

"Of course I will do it. What is the message?" he asked. Tears were in his eyes, threatening to spill down his cheeks.

"Thank you. Tell her, 'The Green Dragon has become too large, and must be made small.'"

Jiang paused.

"Will she come...?"

I nodded.

"She believes she has a debt to repay."

"Then I will go to her," he said.

I walked to Jiang and embraced him. His arms, stiff at first, softened and embraced me.

"Thank you, Jiang. For everything."

"That sounds like goodbye..."

"Travel safely, friend."

xxxx

Wearing white robes, Ming's guards led me to the execution room of the Lao estate. It had not gotten use during my reign, as I did not believe in execution. That irony did not escape me as I let the guards strap me to the cross.

The executioner approached. He was wearing black garb and, although his face was hidden by a mask, I knew it was Ming Tien.

"I have a final request," I said, as he selected his weapon of choice.

The guards stepped forward, putting hands on sword handles, readying themselves for a fight.

Ming Tien held up a hand, to stop them.

"I will consider it," he said.

"My hairpin," I said, gesturing with my head. "I want Xena to have it."

Ming Tien laughed, and his guards followed suit.

"*That bitch?*" he said. "She forgot about you a long time ago. This last gift will mean nothing to her." He laughed.

"Please" I said, ignoring his callous tone. "I want *you* to give it to her."

"You always did rule like a *woman*, Lao Ma," Ming Tien spat. "If this is how you wish to be remembered, so be it." He then removed the hair pin from my hair and placed it in a pocket of his robe.

I then began to breathe deeply and time began to slow. My head throbbed and the present faded, again, with the past.

As Ming Tien walked to the tray of weapons to choose his murder weapon, I saw that day with Xena, when I had tried to teach how to harness her energy. She would need that lesson in the days to come.

I had placed the vase on the small table and had taken a step back, waiting to see what Xena would do.

Xena, standing across from me, watched me, with a grin on her face. Not even two seconds passed before her grin turned into a scowl. She clumsily raised a booted leg and then let it crash into the vase, smashing it. She then placed her hands on her hips, proudly grinning at her accomplishment.

I looked into her bold, challenging eyes for a moment before speaking.

"Would you kill a mosquito with an ax?"

I stepped toward her then. As I raised my hands to remove one of the pins from her hair, she flinched slightly.

"This is very beautiful," I said, holding the hairpin. I then walked to the other side of the table.

Xena was fixated on my every movement.

As I examined the pin in my hand, I put my energy into it, condensed. Then, gracefully spinning, I used the force of my rotation to direct the pin into the table that had previously been holding the vase. The pin lodged into the table, like a dart.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xena's eyes widen. She walked to the table and pulled the hairpin loose.

"That's good." she said, with admiration in her voice.

"That could be a very useful weapon, if thrown at the right body part," I said.

"You could kill someone using a hair broach," Xena said, nodding.

I walked to her and took the pin from her hand.

"If necessary," I said, sliding the pin back into her hair. "I don't like to kill, however."

"Everyone has their preferences," she said, as I walked away from her. "I happen to like a good kill."

I was counting on that, as I saw the gleam of Ming Tien's blade above head.

Strapped on the execution table, I looked into his eyes.

In this moment, I was at peace. I knew how this ended.

xxxx The End xxxx

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