

~ Rooted Sorrow ~

by romansilence

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The story contains (graphic) depictions of a consensual sexual relationship between two adult women. If this kind of story bothers you, you're definitively on the wrong page. If it is illegal where you live: get the hell out of there. If you're not of legal age, please go away and come back when the time is right.

Timeline: Follows the show up to season three "The Deliverer" and creates an alternate universe from this point though there will be elements from "The Debt", pt. I + II, included.

Warnings: Hurt/Angst, Character Death, Violence (probably).

Pairing: Xena/Lao Ma (Xena/Gabrielle, remembered)

Thanks: Thanks go to my beta reader Pam who as usual saved me from snafus, typos and other catastrophes.

Summary: Three season cycles after Gabrielle's death in Britannia, Xena has found a new life and a new insight into herself with the help of an old friend.

The Roman Centurion was pacing the length of a sunlit balcony. He had been told that the Empress would join him there as soon as her current business was concluded.

The tall man could feel the sweat trickling down his spine under the shining armour and heavy wool tunic he had to wear as an official envoy of the Great Caesar. The more uncomfortable he felt under the uncompromising midday sun, the angrier he got.

She might be the unchallenged ruler of a land with thousands of years of history, but at the end of the day she is only a woman, nothing more but a weak woman in need of male protection. Yes, they are good at caring for a household and the very young children, but matters of state are far beyond the grasp of their feeble minds. And yet, here I am, ordered to play nice to the whims of a mere female.

His inner ranting abruptly stopped when one of these ridiculously dressed males he had seen scurrying around purposely strode towards him-well, sort of. *What else would one call the*

movements of a man wearing the long skirts of a woman?

The short man with the overly ornate clothing bowed deeply and said, "Venerable Emissary, the Crown of Wisdom welcomes the representative of the great Roman Empire in her humble abode. She is deeply honoured..."

The Centurion had a hard time suppressing a satisfied smirk. *So, this so-called Empress knew of his importance and seemed duly impressed by the glory of Rome. Things were definitively beginning to look up.* He almost missed the rest of the man's elaborate words over his musings.

"...will not be able to see personally to your needs and desires. So, she has awarded the great honour to be at your service to this humble servant. Please, tell me, o Epitome of Manhood, what is your master's desire?"

The Roman had his sword at the man's neck in the blink of an eye. Though he saw himself as a servant of Caesar's; he still was his own man, the heir of one of the oldest families in the Roman Empire.

He had expected the old man to react the way usual way, on reflex, out of fear. He wanted him to beg, but the older Chinese didn't even move a muscle at the sudden attack.

If Marcus Valerius, Centurion of Caesar's personal guard had been as good a warrior as he thought himself, he would have noticed the slight narrowing of the older man's eyes, and he would have taken it as what it was: a warning.

"You miserable cunt-licker! I have orders from Caesar himself to be delivered to the Empress and no one else. So, you can either lead me to where she is or die now."

Lao Ma's servant knew from experience that these Western barbarians with the strong body odour were easily provoked and prone to irrational acts and at the moment he didn't see the armoured stranger as any kind of threat. He still decided that the arrogant soldier needed a lesson in humility.

The proud Centurion suddenly found himself with his nose on the smooth ground and his sword arm at an odd angle from his body. The pain soaring through him told him clearly that his shoulder was dislocated.

All his instincts, his upbringing, his pride, and his faith in Roman supremacy screamed at him to retaliate, but instead he somehow managed to get back on his feet, look at the older man with the evidently impractical clothing and the slender build - and decide that he must have slipped.

So, he mumbled something about the servants having to learn how to take better care of this place and asked to see a healer.

Kao Su of the house of Lao showed the barbarian to one of the lesser palace healers. While he waited for the man to be treated, he thought back to the day when he had first laid eyes on one of

these strange barbarians from the far West.

She had been nothing more than a hunted beast in his eyes, and if he hadn't stopped long ago to ask why his friend and pupil did the things she did, he would have gone stir crazy these first few weeks after she had insisted on endangering the uneasy peace with the house of Ming by taking her in.

However, even then there had been a marked difference between the dark haired young woman and the Roman soldier. His arrogance came solely from the armour he was wearing and the orders he had been given. Hers had come directly from her skills, fighting skills won and maintained against almost impossible odds.

The Centurion had considerably calmed down when he left the healer's hut and let himself be led to the guest quarters housed in another building about a quarter candlemark's walk through the garden. While they walked in silence Kao Su became aware of another difference.

Though filled with anger and hate, and a great deal of cockiness, the young woman all those years ago couldn't help but be receptive to the beauty surrounding her. Behind all her posturing she had been eager to learn, but this Roman would never look at their world with anything but disdain.

Before the old man whom the Roman erroneously took for a simple courtier left him, he firmly reminded himself of the importance of his orders to keep up at least a semblance of courteousness and inquired about the possibility of another meeting with the Empress.

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Two candlemarks later the tall Roman was pacing his spacious room; he was seething: this so-called Empress really had had the audacity to send two old, wrinkled men in loincloths as his bath attendants. In Rome he would have had his pick of the most lovely and willing slave boys, or at least a plethora of beautiful women or girls. *It was an outrage to the Roman Empire*; so, he decided to go and find this impudent woman on his own to give her a piece of his mind. He donned his armour and weapons and stormed off.

Marcus Valerius was soon lost in a maze of intersecting pathways and though he could see the main palace he didn't get closer to it. After one and a half candlemarks, his anger had made place for exhaustion and his pace had slowed down to something resembling a casual walk.

The palace still seemed to be as far away as at the beginning but soon his nose picked up the distinct smell of horse manure and hay. He followed the scent, reasoning that someone at the stables could give him directions to the palace or at least the guest palace.

The building he soon faced had no resemblance whatsoever with what he associated with stables. There were a lot of pillars and colonnades, making it look like a temple or a gymnasium. He shook his head in amusement over the obvious foolishness of these people.

The animals in the spacious individual boxes were well groomed and beautiful. He wouldn't mind calling a few of them his own.

It was late afternoon and the stables were quiet, too quiet. *There should be at least a dozen slaves preparing the beasts for their masters' evening rides*, Marcus Valerius thought. A cruel smile curled his lips when he imagined finding those lazy bastards and making them dance to the tip of his sword. *Yes, such a workout would drastically improve my mood*, he thought. He followed the broad walkway between the boxes and fervently regretted having left his whip in his room.

At the end of the row was one single box, much bigger than the others. It held the largest horse he had ever seen. It had a shining black mane and an equally black coat. The walls of the stall consisted of delicate looking metal bars, and on the right side, on top, sat a boy of about six or seven years. The Roman unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief at seeing another human being. Nevertheless, he didn't even try to be polite.

"Hey boy, show me the way to the palace. Now!"

The child looked at him and answered with a stream of incomprehensible babbling.

"Just show me to the palace, you piece of garbage, or I'll teach you how to obey." Marcus Valerius growled and began to open the door to the stall.

Another wave of the barbaric language reached his ears, but it was not the boy speaking. The voice was deeper, confident, and sensual in a way he until then had never heard. *Spoken like this it would be calming to listen to all day*. When the voice stopped, the boy jumped from the bars, dashed past him and was gone.

Then the voice was back and he jumped back two paces when he was addressed in his own language, "I would back off if I were you. Shaitan doesn't like strangers, and you really don't want to see him angry, Centurion."

"Who are you? Show yourself. In the name of the Great Caesar!"

A tall black and white clad form came from behind the horse and easily jumped over the almost man-high bars.

Marcus Valerius took another couple of steps back and drew his sword. He knew the woman standing in front of him; she was the reason he had been sent to this gods' forsaken place. Caesar wanted her to face Roman justice for crimes against the Roman Empire.

The Centurion sensed the chance to get this mission over with a single stroke of his sword. Caesar would be more than just thankful if he brought her head back to Rome.

"In the name of the Roman Empire, you are under arrest for crimes committed against the person of Gaius Julius Caesar, Pontifex Maximus, and the sanctity of the Roman Empire. Surrender or

die!"

The woman looked at him with expressionless eyes and answered quietly. "Go back to your room, Roman. Go straight ahead when you leave the stables. Take the third pathway on your right and then the fifth on your left and you'll stand in front of the guest palace."

She began to turn around, and he made the mistake of poking his sword in her side in an attempt to keep control of the situation. He had seen her fight in Britannia; he should have known better. Though unarmed, she still was more dangerous than he and all of Caesar's guards combined.

She slowly turned back; her right arm shot forwards with her palm facing him and he was thrown through the air and found himself three body lengths from her, sitting slightly dazed on the ground. He could have sworn that she hadn't touched him.

Marcus Valerius scrambled back to his feet. *I am the representative of Rome; this is more than just an outrage - it is an insult of immense proportions and as a true Roman I can't let this go unanswered.*

Brandishing his weapon he stormed forward, ignoring the tiny voice of reason that told him to act with caution. The tip of his short sword was only a hair's breath away from her mid-section when she sidestepped and he ran face first into the bars of the horse's box. He had to blink a few times to clear his vision.

"As I said, Roman, leave the stables; go back to your room, and return to your master."

"Not without your head as my tribute to the Great Caesar." He snarled and climbed back to his feet.

Valerius attacked again and the woman caught the blade of his weapon between the flat of her hands. He tried to yank it free with all his strength, but it didn't move even a quarter of an inch. Sweat trickled down the side of his face, and he slowly became aware that the hilt of his sword was getting hot. He finally couldn't stand it any longer and let go. While he still looked dumbly at his burned palm, the weapon fell to the ground and broke in two as if it had been sliced through by something mightier than the sword.

He stared at her, and for the blink of an eye there was fear written all over his face. He quickly got himself back under control and bent down as if to examine his damaged weapon. Valerius took hold of his boot dagger and launched himself towards her with a burst of strength to put an end to this humiliating fight. The tall woman lightly hopped back. He heard a familiar war cry and the side of his head met a leather clad foot. It felt as if he had been hit by an anvil. He was propelled to the ground and this time had the good sense to stay down.

A melodic voice suddenly drifted to his ears, and the thorn in Caesar's flesh, the woman who had cost him his due victory in Britannia more than three season cycles ago, this woman bowed. He turned his head to find out what or who could bring about such a momentous change. He saw the old man and the boy flanking a dark haired woman dressed in a deceptively simple silk gown.

"I'm sorry to disrupt your time of study and reflection, Empress Lao Ma." The tall woman said.

"Please speak a language our Roman guest is able to understand. It's a question of hospitality, my warmaster."

"Yes, Empress, your wish is my command."

She then bowed to the old man.

"Venerable Kao Su, my apologies also extend to you."

A third bow was directed towards the boy.

"You did well, young Kao Lin. Thank you," she repeated her words in Chinese and the child beamed with pride.

"Please rise, Marcus Valerius, and follow us to the audience room where we can speak with more dignity."

The Centurion was too stunned to realise that he was following the orders of a mere woman.

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Half a candlemark later Lao Ma took her seat on a dais in one of the smaller audience rooms. The taller woman knelt to her left and slightly behind her while the old man stood at the door. The boy had disappeared.

Before Marcus Valerius had a chance to adapt to the situation, the Empress spoke. "Marcus Valerius, envoy of Caesar of Rome, you insulted my chief councillor and attacked my warmaster. Would you be so kind to explain your actions?"

The woman's Greek was flawless, much more so than his own, and her voice so soft that he completely missed the core of steel it held. He puffed out his chest and answered in a bark.

"The bitch resisted arrest. The Great Caesar himself ordered me to bring her back in chains to face Roman justice." He fished a small scroll out of his bracer. "These are his demands to hand over Xena of Amphipolis, enemy of Rome, in my custody."

"What are the charges?" Xena asked from behind. That earned her a disapproving glare from Lao Ma.

"You know the charges, you traitorous bitch. You allied yourself with the rebel forces of Boudica and fought the Legions of Rome. You will end your life as entertainment in the Coliseum."

The kneeling woman visibly wanted to answer his accusations but thought better of it when she sensed the unfamiliar tension emanating from the Empress.

"Give her to me, Empress, and Caesar's Rome will be in your debt for decades to come," he added with the oily inflection seemingly so successful with the concubines of Rome.

Lao Ma's face remained impassive.

"Tell Caesar of Rome that we regret that the people of Chin is in no position to comply with his wishes. Boudica is the sovereign of the free people of Britannia. It is her right and her duty to defend her land and her people against foreign intruders, and it is her right and her duty to accept any help she can get to do so. Request denied."

Xena suppressed a smirk. A few years ago the Empress of Chin never would have spoken this way to a foreign dignitary. She would have chosen a more diplomatic way to get what she wanted, but she had learned to accept that some people tended to misunderstand the message if not delivered in a language and in a way akin to their own. Xena also suspected that she didn't want to deal with the offensive man longer than necessary.

"Besides, Xena is a free woman. She can leave whenever she wants after she has fulfilled her duty as the warmaster of the Empire of Chin." The slender woman turned to the side. "Xena, do you want to return to the Roman Empire?"

The warrior woman wanted to add a good amount of venom to her answer to make her disdain for everything Roman crystal clear, but she knew that Lao Ma expected an honest and truthful answer from her pupil, regardless of the audience. If she had wanted a politically correct answer, she would have used her title and not her name.

"You restored my will to live when all I wanted to do was to give up and let myself be consumed by pain and sorrow, Lao Ma. You filled my soul with peace and a purpose. I have no reason to leave, expect for you to send me away, venerable teacher."

The Chinese woman smiled at her but didn't miss the look of surprise in the Roman's eyes. Suddenly, he started to smile and pulled another scroll out of his other bracer. He had been ordered to place it secretly in Xena's room should Caesar's request be denied but he decided that this was an even better way.

"Yes, you clueless bitch, there is a reason to leave here. Read and you will beg Caesar to pass judgement on you."

He let it sail through the air and Lao Ma caught it before Xena's fingertips reached it. She read it. Without commentary she passed it to the slightly taller woman.

Marcus Valerius' eyes were riveted to Xena's face. He saw her go pale and was certain that in the end Caesar and Rome would win. Xena's moment of surprise passed quickly and she studied the

scroll with all the objectivity she could muster. After a few candledrops she rolled it close and threw it back.

"Tell Caesar that the next time he intends to forge one of Gabrielle's scrolls, he has to do better. This is not her writing style, and it's not in her hand. It's not worth the parchment on which it is written."

Before the Centurion could answer, the Empress said. "Venerable Kao Su, would you be so kind to escort the Emissary of Rome back to his quarters, please? Give orders that he is well provisioned for his return journey and have a scroll prepared for the Senate of Rome and its Leader, detailing what happened today and reassuring them of Chin's continued friendship because we regard this whole mission as some kind of misunderstanding. And please make sure that they understand that trading routes could suffer if something like this ever happens again."

Yes, Xena thought, definitively different than a few years ago. She almost smirked when the impact and possible consequences of the Empress' words began to register on Marcus Valerius' face. The old man bowed to her and the Centurion followed him numbly.

"Were you finished with your horse when he interrupted, Xena?"

"No, Lao Ma."

"Then return to your duty. You know that today is my day of fasting; so we will see each other after your evening meal. Come to my room; we have to talk."

Xena wordlessly bowed almost to the ground, rose, and left the room. She returned to the stables and resumed grooming the black stallion. Usually the repetitive movement set her soul free and allowed her to relax in a way close to the effects of deep meditation. This time, however, her mind was stuck in a loop. There were two images constantly repeating itself in her mind's eye.

The moment her war cry burst from her throat and her foot hit the Roman's temple in a precise roundhouse kick; and the sight of Gabrielle's body burned almost beyond recognition in the ruins of the strange temple.

Over the years she had learned not to drown in the onslaught of the emotions this memory always evoked, but she also knew that she couldn't just will them to go away. So, she quickly finished with Shaitan, made a detour to the bathroom, changed, and went to the Empress' quarters to wait for her mentor.

Unfortunately, she was too agitated to sit down and meditate. A few years ago she would have resorted to sword drills, but the time with the Chinese ruler had taught her other ways to deal with excess energy and emotional overload. She slipped out of her thick silk robe and stood naked in the middle of the room.

The dark haired woman started with slow motions, following her morning routine. Her body soon wanted to go faster and faster, but she didn't give in. She slowed down, considerably, and

her mind once again wandered back to this fatal day in Britannia, three years, four moons, and seventeen days ago.

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[Flashback]

The battle against Caesar's troops was going according to plan and Gabrielle was out of harm's way in the temple on top of the hill. Out of the clear blue sky a bolt of lightning hit the temple, a big column of dark smoke rose upwards.

Xena jumped on a horse and raced to her friend; the building had collapsed on itself, and Gabrielle's badly burned body was half buried under the debris. Her face no longer was recognisable but the boots and the tiny scar on the left side of her right knee were. From the way the limbs were splayed on the ground, she had been fighting when the roof caved in.

Xena sat for hours next to the lifeless body, hoping against hope that everything was only a dream, nothing but a dream. But when the sun set, her best friend, her lover was still dead.

Gabrielle had been killed because her hatred for Caesar had overridden her better judgement. It was as if she had killed her herself. She no longer wanted to live; she no longer deserved to live.

However, there were a few things she had to do before she could allow Celesta to take her to Tartarus.

Gabrielle deserved a funeral worthy of an Amazon Queen. All of Boudica's warriors were present when Xena sang the dirge. She wasn't aware of the tears running down her cheeks or of the tight grip she had on the saddlebag containing the bard's scrolls.

The next morning she began what she thought would be the last journey of her life.

Her first destination was the Amazon village. She brought them her ashes and her scrolls. Ephiny and her other friends tried to get her to stay. They tried to convince her that it had been nothing but an unfortunate accident, just like Boudica had, but the tall warrior knew better.

Xena knew who was responsible for her lover's death, and didn't offer any resistance when Herodotus tried to kill her with her own sword. His wife stopped him.

She said, "I want her to live. I want her to suffer for the rest of her life. I want her to live with the knowledge that her selfishness killed everything that was good in her life; that she murdered the purest soul who ever walked this world."

She left Poteidaia and went to tell her mother about Gabrielle's death. Cyrene also wanted her to believe that she had done everything in her power to keep the bard safe, especially after stealing her right from under Caesar's nose only the day before, but Xena knew better.

She began the three day trek to the cave where they had made love for the first time. She just wanted to go back there, to wait for her body to stop working.

Two days later a Chinese soldier found her and gave her the cryptic message about the Green Dragon.

"I was sent by the weak one who is soft as the water and hard as the raging flood. I bring a message to you: the Green Dragon has become too large. It must be made small again."

[End of Flashback]

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Xena forcibly brought her thoughts back to the present. Her restlessness had been stilled by the slow, yet intricate movements. She sat down, folded her long legs into the lotus position and closed her eyes.

According to the scroll Gabrielle had never reached the temple and the ashes buried on Amazon ground belonged to someone else. The parchment told the story of her lover's capture by Caesar's soldiers. It told about being sold into slavery, about her escape, and recapture a season cycle later. The scroll ended with the words that Gabrielle had written her story down to make sure that she would not be forgotten.

Gabrielle never would have written something like that. These thoughts, however, couldn't hinder a tiny sliver of doubt creeping up in her soul. So, she forced herself to replay the events leading to her lover's death once again in her mind's eye. She wanted to make absolutely sure that Caesar's soldiers didn't have the opportunity to get their hands on Gabrielle.

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[Flashback]

As every day, she had opened her eyes shortly before dawn; and as every day, she had revelled in the feeling of Gabrielle's body snuggled against her own and the innocence of her relaxed features.

[End of Flashback]

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No, Xena, stop it; don't go there. Stick with the facts.

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[Flashback]

Gabrielle had helped with the infirmary, and then had gone with Kraftstar and his friends. Their path led them away from the battle field, and they should have well been out of sight of the Roman troops and scouts. When they had reached the temple, Gabrielle had given the arranged signal with a small piece of polished metal. She had seen the sparkling coming from the temple; and no one else had known about it.

[End of Flashback]

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No, there was no way that Gabrielle could have been abducted by Caesar's men. She is dead. My love is gone and no amount of wishful thinking will ever bring her back.

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Xena opened her eyes, once again calm and composed. She turned her head and found Lao Ma waiting on the bed. The Greek woman joined her and allowed herself to be held. It had been an emotionally exhausting day, and in her arms she felt safe.

Finally, she said, "I wanted it to be genuine."

"I know Xena. You love her; you always will. I understand."

"Gabrielle is dead. I love you, Lao Ma."

The Empress knew that it would be useless to continue this discussion; they had had it often enough, and one day Xena would understand. She would understand that Gabrielle would always be a part of her, that she would always love the bard. It had been hard for the Chinese woman not to be jealous of the blonde's ghost, but she also was thankful to her. She had played an essential role in Xena's life as her lover and as her moral compass. The tall Greek was only as receptive to her teachings as she was now because of the changes Gabrielle had helped to bring about. Yes, when they had first met, Xena had listened, but she had not tried to really understand. So, she slightly changed topic.

"What would Caesar gain by making you believe that Gabrielle is still alive?"

"Lure me back to where he can more easily get his hands on me. Give me hope and crush me by destroying it. It's... it's no longer important. I can't deny that I would not mourn him but I never again will let hatred dictate my steps. I know you're disappointed," Xena answered.

"One has to have expectations to feel disappointment. And you have come farther than I ever would have thought possible. You conquered your fear without transforming it in anger and violence. You transformed your violence to strength. You left the darkness and stepped into the light."

"And yet, I failed you. Will you send me to the monks for losing my temper with the Centurion?"

"Did you lose your temper, Xena?"

"Not at first," Xena answered without moving out of the protective circle of her teacher's arms. "I allowed the situation to escalate. I played with him and I enjoyed the look on his face when his sword broke in two. However, there was no need to hurt him. Yes, venerable teacher, I lost my temper, and I think it never would have happened had it been anyone else but a Roman soldier. I will apologise to Marcus Valerius before he leaves tomorrow," she added softly.

"Go to sleep, Xena."

"You will not send me to the monks of as punishment?" She was puzzled, and that was clear in the tone of her voice.

"When I asked you to spend some time with them, I didn't do it to punish you. I wanted to give you a chance to think this whole thing through before I became more to you than your friend and teacher. I wanted you to be sure; that's why we had to be apart for some time. Try to sleep now, my warmaster."

The tips of Lao Ma's index and middle fingers began to massage her temples, and the tall woman soon fell in a deep undisturbed sleep. Lao Ma knew that for her sleep would probably be rather elusive this night and she allowed her mind to revisit the events which had brought Xena back in her life.

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[Flashback]

They called it the "death of the thousand blades", a technique that combined torture and execution, designed to inflict the most possible pain before finally killing the victim. Ming Tien knew that she would not defend herself if he did it himself; he knew that she would never do anything to harm her only child. He had laughed when he had told her about it, savouring his victory in advance, but he had not entered her cell and made sure that she would be physically weak by starving her. When the day of her death had come she was barely strong enough to walk

unattended, but she took her place on the bloodstained wooden platform with quiet dignity. All the members of Ming Tien's court had been present, some of them barely concealing their disgust at the savagery the young man was about to commit.

She felt the iron shackles close around her ankles and wrists, a thick strip of leather holding her at the waist. That was when she had first felt her presence, and she fervently hoped that the Greek woman would not be foolish enough to try to save her. She was too weak and there were too many guards posted in the room and throughout the whole palace to make an escape even a remote possibility.

"Your cries of pain will be music to my ears, Mother. Today the world will learn that the whore of LaoTsu is not all powerful. Today the world will see you as what you ..."

Every word had been accompanied by a small cut to her arms and chest, but before he could finish his last sentence a dagger almost too fast to see sped over her head and hit him straight in the heart. He looked down at the hilt protruding from his chest, the dark stain growing on his embroidered vest, disbelief written on his face. Then he fell and was gone from her field of vision.

A whirling sound was heard and the five guards closest to the door leading to the private chambers fell to the ground with their throats cut by Xena's chakram. The courtiers panicked and tried to leave the audience hall, one of the guards raised an alarm, and soldiers began to pour in from every direction.

Suddenly Xena was standing in front of the torture table. She took off the cloak that had been hiding her weapons and draped it gently over her still bound body, protecting her from wandering eyes. For the fraction of a heartbeat the tall warrior woman smiled at her but even then she saw that there was no life in her eyes.

Xena turned around and faced Ming Tien's soldiers. The two closest to her were immediately run through by her blade. She used her chakram as a shield of sorts, deflecting the weapons of her attackers while her own sword held a bloody harvest among the soldiers trying to get to Ming Tien's body. Archers appeared at the other end of the room, a command was given to get out of the way, but before they could release their arrows the chakram cut through the bowstrings.

A young officer exploited Xena's slight distraction and aimed a blow at her side. His blade hit her waist where her armour didn't reach. Blood spurted from the wound, but the man's triumph didn't last when Xena cut his head off with a single sweep of her own blade. It was at that moment that the Greek warrior stopped simply defending herself and her charge, and it was also at that moment that she understood that Xena did not want to survive this fight.

[End of Flashback]

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Lao Ma's fingertips traced the faint scar at her lover's waist that still told of the battle. On that day Xena had killed twenty-six soldiers and officers. She had shown them no mercy and the carnage had only stopped after one of the servants had freed Lao Ma from the torture table. Taking the signet ring from her dead son's hand, she had ordered them to lay down their weapons, and they had.

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[Flashback]

"Xena, it's over. I'm safe now; we are safe."

The dark haired warrior had turned around and looked at her as if waking from a dream. She bent down, furtively cleaned the blade of her weapon on Ming Tien's robe and sheathed it. Her wound had stopped bleeding and she was extremely pale but quickly rose again, bowed, turned around and walked away.

Lao Ma tried to follow her but her own wounds made it impossible to even stand without leaning against the torture block. She focused all the energy she had left in one thought and sent it to her.

"Don't leave. I need you."

Xena stopped in mid-step and slowly turned around. "I have nothing left to give, Lao Ma," she answered the plea only she had heard.

"Then I will take nothing."

[End of Flashback]

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That had not been true in any sense of the word. Xena had given her a lot, aside from reinstating her as the lone ruler of Chin and defending her reign against dangers from without and within. The woman who had saved her life was only a shell of the young warlord she had known years ago. Lao Ma had easily sensed her soul-cutting pain, but she also had immediately felt the other woman's inner strength. It had been this strength that had pulled her through the sword wound and the following infection almost despite herself. It had been this strength that had slowly brought her back. It had been this strength that had turned the calm mind of the Chinese woman in a raging flood. It had been this strength that bit by bit had shattered a lifetime of serenity without even trying. And it had also been this strength that had reawakened the heart of the strong Greek. It had been this inherent power, this strength that continued to change her every day.

Xena turned in her sleep and for the millionth time since the taller woman had come back into her life she marvelled at the serene beauty of her sleeping face. With her eyes closed the vibrant intensity by which her waking hours were marked took on another dimension. Her friend Kao Su had once called it the force of a sleeping jungle cat and there was much truth in his observation but to her it had always been more though it probably would need someone with more skill to put the feeling into words. At the moment her even, deep breath spoke of the hard-won inner peace Xena had achieved over the last three years.

~*~

The tall woman as usual woke in the hour before dawn and found herself in her customary position, lying on her side with Lao Ma's backside tightly pressed against her front and her own arm draped over Lao Ma's slender waist. To her surprise she found the other woman still asleep and decided to take advantage of the rare opportunity.

She inhaled the scent of the other woman's hair, savouring it like one would a rare perfume. It smelled of sandalwood and jasmine. Xena raised her head and kissed the pale skin of Lao Ma's throat, right at the point where the jugular vein was pulsing. She revelled in the trust the older woman showed her by allowing the caress.

Brushing aside strands of long hair she kissed her way to the back of the neck and down the woman's spine. She was careful not to leave any marks on the ivory pale skin. The trail of kisses wandered down to the small of her back and then to the side. When her mouth had reached the hip Lao Ma rolled on her back and opened her legs in invitation, but Xena didn't immediately comply. She took her time kissing her hip and thigh before she repositioned herself between her lover's legs.

Xena could see the wetness glistening between her nether lips and the faint but visible pulsing of her clit. She longed to enter the moist folds and feel muscles clenching around her fingers. The way Lao Ma arched her back told Xena that she wanted the same.

The back of her fingers gently caressed the tender inside of Lao Ma's thighs. The legs opened wider and Xena kissed her gently just above the mons. Her tongue began to draw tiny circles and wandered over the depilated skin to her target. Her lips touched the clit and Lao Ma's hips bucked.

Xena pressed her back down and held her immobile. She once again kissed the sensitive nub, this time allowing a short contact with the tip of her tongue. Lao Ma once again arched into her caress, her hips still firmly held by Xena's strong hands.

Lao Ma was usually so controlled, always master of her reactions. Only when they made love did she allow herself to loosen the tight reigns she had on her emotions and reactions.

The tip of Xena's tongue for the second time touched her almost painfully engorged clit but this time she didn't lose contact. The pressure was intensified until the whole tongue was pressed flat

against her centre. She tried to rub herself against the sturdy muscle but Xena held on tight. Suddenly the younger woman's touch was gone, totally gone. Lao Ma groaned in disappointment and Xena acted on her heart's desire.

Xena entered the dripping centre with her tongue, eagerly lapping up all the wetness. One hand gently kneaded the clit while the thumb and index finger of the other hand were busy rolling one of Lao Ma's nipples. She could feel the tension rising in the smaller body and thrust her tongue in as far as she could. The tip just barely brushed a very special spot and her lover exploded.

When they had started making love Lao Ma had barely made a sound during an orgasm, but now she shouted Xena's name. Xena waited for the tremors to subside and then kissed her way back up to Lao Ma's head.

She smiled at Lao Ma and whispered in her ear, "Good morning, my love."

"Good morning to you, too. Thank you for letting me greet it this way."

"Your pleasure is mine, o great Empress," Xena answered with a smile. "I better get dressed to be in time to see our guest off."

"Don't be too humble in your apology, and when you've finished come and join my in the bath chamber."

~*~

Just as expected Marcus Valerius took Xena's barely courteous apology as a sign of weakness. He taunted and insulted her but didn't get the reaction for which he had hoped. The only external sign she allowed herself was a deep and controlled exhale of breath.

Her teacher saw it as a sign of her growing maturity and so, Kao Su said, "You have come a long way, Warrior. People like this Roman will never understand. Your apology said nothing about him, his abilities or his status, but it said a lot about you. You make your teachers very proud."

"Thank you, venerable Kao Su, but I'm not deserving of your praise. I should never have let it go this far," Xena answered with a deep bow.

The old man laughed and then said in a more serious tone, "For a warrior there's such a thing as taking everything too seriously, Xena. Your little altercation with this Roman is not worth fretting over. He never stood a chance and you saw to it that no one got really hurt. I know you had fun playing with him and it's his loss that he didn't take the chance to learn from you and enjoy himself in the process."

"I'll think about it, my teacher and friend. It might all be a question of perspective."

"Don't think too much. Let's rather meet for a sparring session this afternoon."

"It would be my pleasure," Xena answered, knowing from experience that regardless of how much she already had learned, the sly old man always had another trick up his sleeve and would give her a real challenge.

Xena returned to the main palace and joined Lao Ma in the bathroom where the roles from their pre-dawn tryst were quickly reversed. Lao Ma ordered her to strip and Xena gave her the show for which she had hoped.

When the younger woman wanted to join her in the steaming tub she said, "No, Xena, not yet. I want you kneel outside and wash my hair."

Xena not only loved the scent of her lover's hair but also its silky texture and the way she reacted to her fingers massaging her scalp. Xena gently removed the single hairpin holding Lao Ma's long tresses in place and put it in her own.

She combed the long strands with her fingers before scooping up some bath water with her hands 'til the hair was thoroughly soaked. Only a few drops of Lao Ma's special mixture were needed to create enough lather to do the job. She worked it in, making sure to touch every square inch of her skin in the process.

Usually, Lao Ma gave herself up to the soothing rhythm but today she stayed alert. She didn't want to miss the right moment, the moment when she felt her younger lover losing herself in the gentle ministrations. She turned around and Xena opened her half-closed eyes and drank in the fire of arousal in her counterpart's dark orbs.

"Come in with me, my warrior."

Xena didn't need a second invitation but when she wanted to take Lao Ma in her arms she was stopped by another command.

"Put your hands on the rim of the tub and don't let go. You know, I thought about this morning, and how you ran away before I could give you release. So, now it's my turn. Will you come for me, my warrior?"

"Yes love," Xena whispered.

"Spread your legs. I want to feel your body against mine."

Lao Ma took Xena's head between both of her hands and kissed her, exploring the cavity of her mouth as if it were the first time, without giving her the chance to respond. Xena's arousal which had been newly stirred by the sensual experience of washing her lover's hair was put up a notch at the feeling of Lao Ma's tongue filling her mouth, and another notch at her rarely displayed aggressiveness. Her eyes began to close in surrender.

"No, Xena, keep your eyes open. I want you to look at me. I want you to look into my eyes."

For the next few candle drops she did nothing but massage Xena's shoulders; their locked eyes, however, let Xena's need grow considerably. Lao Ma's fingers trailed down to her breasts and circled the aureoles. She could feel her nipples getting harder with every breath she took. They were painfully hard without having been touched.

Xena's legs were pushed wider apart and a pubic bone just barely touched her own. Xena longed to take control or at least rock her hips but experience had taught her that it would be more rewarding to let her lover have her way. Lao Ma could be creative in a way that put even her vast experience to shame. The light contact with her centre was intensified as if their locked eyes allowed her to read Xena's mind.

Suddenly, both of her nipples were pinched and she groaned. She was more than ready to come but the need to please her lover was stronger and let her keep eye contact. Lao Ma now was cupping her breasts, the palms of her hands unnecessarily supporting her firm globes while fingers were kneading them.

Xena knew that she deliberately avoided following a recognisable rhythm to keep her from losing herself in the touch. Lao Ma's hips began to thrust against her, slowly, sensuously. The movement created a counterpoint to the motion of Lao Ma's hands, and ripped another groan from her throat.

Lao Ma smiled. She knew that all her lover needed was signal, a tiny sign but she wanted to savour the situation a bit longer. Xena was never more beautiful than when she commanded her body to head to her mind.

A simple caress would have been enough to bring her over the edge from the moment she had entered the bathroom and seen her in the tub. In the years they had been apart the raw animal sensuality that had driven Borias to distraction and had shaken her to her very core was still there but it was tempered and controlled. It no longer was purely destructive and thus more dangerous.

Lao Ma was the ruler of countless millions of people; she had the power of life and death over them, but the power she relished most was the power she had over a certain raven-haired Greek warrior woman, a power given willingly and from the depths of her heart. Her hands slowly adapted to the rhythm of her hips and Xena's breath grew ragged. They still held eye contact.

Lao Ma whispered, "Come for me, my warrior. Come with me. Be mine."

Xena's legs closed around the Lao Ma's hips and she drew her closer until she was tightly pressed against her body.

"Kiss me," the younger woman whispered back. "I want to seal it with a kiss."

Her smouldering blue orbs seemed to burn right through Lao Ma and when their tongues and lips once again touched they both cried out the other's name.

It took them more than just a few candledrops to regain their composure, and only when they had mutually dried themselves did they call the attendants to help with the more complicated parts of dressing. A delegation from one of the provinces in the south had been scheduled for an audience and Xena as the warmaster of the Empress was expected to attend. She hated these court functions but had learned to accept that they were necessary.

~*~

Lao Ma was, as she had experienced first-hand, well able to defend herself but for her own peace of mind she insisted on being armed. The Empress, however, did not want her to openly display her weapons. So, she and one of the palace's seamstresses had come up with a special kind of robe. The seams had been specially prepared to allow her to burst them and slip out of the cumbersome and confining garment in less than the blink of an eye. A sword and her chakram were in a custom designed sheath at her back. It had taken her half of forever, at least in her opinion, to master its use.

Lao Ma had smiled this small, superior smile of hers when she had come up with the idea and clearly had only indulged her whim. A few moons later, however, Xena's precaution had paid off when the delegation from one of Ming Tien's relatives turned out to be entirely composed of assassins.

Today, she probably would not need to take action. It likely would be nothing more than routine: village representatives from the southern coast come to pay their taxes and complain about them, or so she presumed. As it turned out it was more interesting than that. They had had trouble with marauders since a land slide had cut off their most important trading route to the east.

Xena could feel the possibility of a military campaign at the tip of her fingers, and she didn't know if she should be appalled by her reaction or greet it like an old friend. Since rejoining Lao Ma she had had a few opportunities to show off her tactical and strategic skills as the Empress' warmaster, as always and against Chinese tradition she had fought on the front lines together with her men instead of simply giving orders from behind. Regional tyrants and intruders from the Steppes now had a much harder time.

These efforts had stabilised Lao Ma's rule and strengthened the people's belief that she only worked for the good of all of them. All these times, she had done what had to be done, but the feeling of joyous anticipation she now felt coursing through her veins had been missing.

The Empress told the delegation that they would hear her decision the next morning.

When they were finally gone, Xena excused herself and changed into her workout clothes to meet with Kao Su. She knew that Lao Ma now would retire to her meditation room and they would talk about what to do in the evening, after dinner. It was never easy for the peace-loving woman to send her soldiers to war and possible death.

Kao Su had been Lao Ma's teacher when he still was a young man and she a small curious child.

Now, he was her most trusted adviser though he keenly felt that this particular student had long left his teachings behind and surpassed in almost every way. However, there was one carefully honed aspect of his expertise she never had really embraced: physical combat. When she had to defend herself she did it with the power of her mind alone. It wasn't as draining as using her spiritual power for healing, but in his opinion also not the best way to deal with physical assault.

When his former pupil and friend had first asked him to also teach the tall Greek woman, he had been skeptical. He still saw Xena as the untamed barbarian she had been when they first had met. But the woman had surprised him, with her sense of honour, her discipline, and her willingness to learn. They slowly formed a friendship based on mutual respect, a friendship that enabled him now to see that something was bothering her. So, they stopped their sparring after only a few candle-drops and he coaxed her to take a walk through the garden.

"Talk to me, warrior," he said when they had reached a bench next to a Koi pond.

"You heard about the marauders at the southern coast, venerable Kao Su?" He nodded. "I want to fight them. I'm looking forward to killing them. I can almost smell the scent of their blood on my sword."

"That's what warriors do, Xena. They fight and kill and die, so that other people don't have to suffer."

"I know, but where does the violence end? Where is the point when we start to become like those we fight? When do we start to destroy what we want to protect? I was there once; I don't want to go there again." Xena looked at the old man's kind eyes. "A few years ago I almost lost my humanity when fighting the Horde. It was Gabrielle who forced me to see beyond the surface. I can't do it without her."

"You can, as long as she lives on in your soul you will always have your guiding light. And as for your questions, as long as you ask these questions everything will be alright, my friend. You don't have many opportunities to do what you do best, living here in the palace. You were born to fight for the Greater Good; and the threat of these marauders is as good a chance as any to do this. See it as a chance to combine your duties as a warmaster with your calling as a warrior. You just have to keep in mind that there always has to be a balance."

"Balance, I know it's the essence of everything, but it doesn't help me to understand why I'm suddenly once again looking forward to killing. Where does this eagerness come from? To me it seems like the first step to lose everything I tried to regain after killing the Green Dragon. Why do I have these feelings, Kao Su? Why now? These marauders sound like a minor problem compared to what I had to deal with since my return. Why now?"

"What do you think?"

Xena gave him a rueful smile. She should have known that this was one of those questions that either didn't have an answer or one of those to which she had to find the answer on her own. Sometimes it drove her crazy but she also had learned that it helped her search when she talked

about her thoughts and this case her feelings.

Being open with her thoughts and feelings, as least to a chosen few, had been part of the slow process of returning to the world of the living after she had reinstated Lao Ma as the ruler of Chin and head of the houses Lao and Ming. It had been hard and painful, and more often than not she had wanted to hide somewhere, never to be seen again. But in the end, one could not hide from oneself.

"To me these feelings are as familiar as the hilt of my sword. They are a part of me; they made me what I am. From the first moment I held a sword they were there, and it had nothing to do with pride in my skills. I enjoyed the feeling of power.

"The first time I killed in battle; it was a feeling like I never felt before. Energy was pulsing through me. I felt invincible. In part this feeling is what makes me a good fighter. It enables me to go against the odds. I came to rely on it, but somewhere along the line I no longer allowed myself to enjoy the feeling. I was afraid that if I enjoyed it like I did when I was still a warlord, I would lose something more important."

"Do you still feel this way?"

"I'm not sure." Xena fell silent.

"Let's resume our sparring."

"Yes Kao Su. It may help me to order my thoughts."

"Allow yourself to also feel, warrior."

They started with a simple warm-up routine but quickly their movements became too fast to follow with an untrained eye. They had spent hundreds of candlemarks doing such drills. On this day, however, something was different. At first it was almost intangible, but it soon got stronger with every passing candlemark.

She always enjoyed her sparring sessions with the old man, but this time she could feel joy bubbling up inside. Kao Su was a real match for her skills, and he probably always would be. So, she could go all out without fearing to hurt or injure him. They settled into a rhythm. For the first time in three season cycles, she felt a laugh coming; for the first time in what seemed like an eternity she enjoyed a fight just for the sake of fighting. When they finally slowed down Xena felt a strange sense of peace.

They once again sat down next to the Koi pond. "So, warrior, do you still feel this way?"

"No, I don't. Gabrielle called it my darkness and she was afraid of it. At the time I didn't want to believe that it really is a part of me. I tried to suppress it, and sometimes it broke through. Now, I know better; and the knowledge alone will help me to control it, the knowledge and everything I still learn from you and Lao Ma."

The old teacher smiled at Xena; a smile she over time had learned to read as approval.

~*~

Three moons later Chin's warmaster returned from the campaign to the Southern province. The marauders had been nothing but a bunch of starving villagers and had been easy to overpower. The landslide had been harder to deal with; and Xena finally made a judgement call and used the black powder to blast the biggest of the boulders away. Without this aid it probably would have taken the villagers more than just a few cycles to clear the way on their own. Many, many cycles ago the then emperor had outlawed the use of the black powder in war; since then it had only been used for entertainment, but Xena was confident that she could justify her decision with the Empress.

Xena greeted the Empress like any other Chin dignitary would. She entered the room, knelt about ten paces from her and touched the floor with her forehead.

"Report, my warmaster!" Lao Ma's voice held warmth.

Xena repeated the written report she had sent ahead with a messenger and added some personal observations.

"You did well, my warmaster. You made the right call to use the black powder to help my people. Welcome back home, Xena."

Lao Ma left her seat and embraced the tall woman. "It's good to be back, my empress. I missed you."

"I missed you too. Are you up for visitors? A few friends of yours arrived about half a moon ago."

"Friends?"

"Kao Su, please, lead them in." Lao Ma ordered.

The big doors leading to the audience room opened. Kao Su entered and then stepped aside. Three women came in, one slightly ahead of the others; Xena instinctively stepped forward, ready to greet them. She stopped halfway across the room; suddenly struck by a wave of guilt.

The woman in the middle, a curly-haired blonde almost ran towards her and engulfed her in what would have to be called a bear hug.

"We missed you, Xena."

"What are you doing here? Greece is a bit far away for a social call." Xena said with a touch of

humour in her voice.

"It's not a social call, my friend," Ephiny said. "In a nutshell: life in Greece was getting too uncomfortable and dangerous. So, we decided to relocate to another place where Rome can't reach us. Chin seemed to be far enough away from Roman influence; and rumours said that we'd find the Consort of our former Queen here.

"The Amazon Nation asked the Empress of Chin for asylum on Chin soil, and in return we offered to work with her army. The Empress told us that the final decision would be up to her warmaster. So, what's the verdict? And before you bring it up: no, you didn't get Gabrielle killed, and yes, she died doing what she wanted to do. And yes, she would have wished for you to find happiness again."

"Do you really have to ask, Queen Ephiny? Chin would gain much from an alliance with the Amazons." Xena cast a questioning glance at the empress. "Welcome to your new home."

T H E E N D

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