

"Who pulled Argo's tail?"

Xena spun. "Where have you been?"

"You're scowling. Not your most attractive look. Still...there's a certain allure."

"I thought you'd managed to find some trouble."

"Hmm. Sounds as though you're forgetting again."

"Hmm?"

"I'm not that same little girl you couldn't trust out of your sight. And I didn't find the trouble-- at least not all of the time--it came looking for me. I've learned a lot since then."

"All grown up, huh?"

"Try me."

Xena knew that look, it spelled both promise and oblivion. If Xena gave into it; there goes the whole rest of the day... She fingered her moneybag in what she hoped was a surreptitious gesture, but Gabrielle's green eyes, especially vivid today, danced with mischief and expectation. Couldn't keep anything from her these days. 'She knows me too damn well.' So be it.

"Nearest inn?" Xena asked.

"Oh...we passed a quiet little place just as we took the road into town--"

"You didn't hear me...nearest."

"Now?" Gabrielle's eyes were brimful with merriment.

"Right now. Right here. If you don't start moving."

"Maybe the smith would rent out his hayloft," she teased.

Xena was almost ready to take her up on that. She could see herself tossed aloft, over the tall woman's sturdy shoulder and carried ignominiously to her blissful doom. Not that she wouldn't enjoy that-- But there were limits. Of decorum. Weren't there? Play with fire, risk the consequences. She'd learned that long ago, especially when it came to tempting her warrior. And today the burning bright fire in Xena's eyes, in the promise of her touch as she took Gabrielle's forearm, turned her round and compelled her to walk forward would surely engulf her in its all-consuming flames.

She thought for a moment of stopping short, tipping Xena into the nearest horse trough.

Uh...no, that wouldn't play well with the W.P. That would only piss her off and a p.o.'d princess warrior was something to behold. Gabrielle thought of Xena in angry sex mode and trembled, shivering with delight. Maybe...that wouldn't be such a bad thing after all. It would've been so simple if she'd had her staff... She felt a not unfamiliar pang of regret at giving up the weapon at which she'd become so accomplished. Xena had even paid her the highest compliment upon occasion, actually suggesting and allowing her to think, whether true or no, that she'd surpassed even Xena in that fine defensive art.

"Gabby..." Xena's tone was roughly insinuating. She never called her that...unless--

"Yes?" Not looking back, the young woman's voice croaked.

"You know about how long it takes to boil a hen's egg?"

Odd question.

"Because that's how long you've got to find us a bed before I drag you into the nearest alley and have my way with you."

"Oh." Not that she would've minded all that much, but she knew she was likely to be the one up against the wall, getting her fine silks soiled, if not torn. She'd already been forced to repair more than one ripped seam. Sometimes even the Warrior Princess did not know her own strength. Gabrielle made a beeline for a small alehouse.

"Any rooms?" she breathlessly inquired.

The surly one-eyed barkeep looked them literally up then down with his one good, a questionable judgement call, eye, red-rimmed and jaundiced, not an enchanting combination at all.