



Bard... Priestess

By Kodi Wolf

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Wolf Moon Rising Productions

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Author's Notes

This story was inspired by two Madonna songs from her True Blue CD. The first one, *Open Your Heart*, I see as being completely from Gabrielle's point of view. The second one, *White Heat*, I see as mostly from Xena's point of view, with a few interjections from Gabrielle ("*Drop your weapons, you'd better come clean*" "*I'm not gonna hurt you, 'cause I'm not that kind*" "*I'm so good for you baby, here I come, I'm gonna get to you before the day is done*").

I also really wanted to play with an episode format, and I loved the idea of a Gabrielle 'double' plotline, since I thought it was so much fun on the show with all of Xena's 'doubles' (I loved Priestess Leah: "*Pwaise Hestia, Pwaise Hestia!*"). However, this story takes place before Xena and Gabrielle meet up with Xena's third double, so there's no mention of the Priestess. And like most of my Xena stories, this one starts up right after *Been There, Done That*. I've just found it to be a really good place for my first time stories. It's after they've been

traveling together for a long time and have become ‘best friends,’ but before the Rift and all that betrayal.

Though I personally really like the Rift, there’s not a lot of playing room after that without going completely beyond it. And since I was rather unhappy with Gabrielle going all lovey-dovey in the fourth season (I do think love is the way, but Gabrielle is a warrior, always has been, it just took her a little while to come into herself), I would have to go all the way to the fifth season, and quite frankly, as it stands now, subtext has become so maintext that the only thing that couple is missing is wedding rings. :)

Chapter One

Xena could see the edge of a town coming up from her vantage point atop Argo and looked down at the young woman, who was walking just a short ways ahead of her horse, swinging a staff, and planting it again, with each step of her left foot. Gabrielle had mentioned they were getting low on supplies, so she was probably going to ask to stop and shop in the upcoming village.

If they took the time to do that though, Xena knew she'd get cajoled into staying at the local inn for the night and she wasn't sure she was up for that right now. She'd started noticing Gabrielle's newfound maturity more and more lately. Especially after the Furies. Gabrielle had taken care of her and stood by her in a way Xena hadn't expected of the girl. And then their last little adventure had ended up having her spending day after repeating day with Gabrielle. That had given her a chance to just observe the young bard without having to think much about anything else because she already knew what was going to happen.

She'd come to the conclusion that Gabrielle had turned into a beautiful young woman at some point during their travels and now she wasn't quite sure how to deal with her. Sharing close quarters with Gabrielle at an inn right now just wasn't a good idea from her point of view.

She jumped down from Argo and threw the reins over the horse's head as they entered the town's outer limits. Gabrielle fell in step beside her.

"Hey, Xena? Maybe we could get some supplies here. And I need to pick up some more parchment and..."

"That's fine, Gabrielle. We can have lunch and then be on our way."

Xena noticed the expression on Gabrielle's face. She had definitely been hoping to sleep in a bed that night and now she was trying to figure out how to persuade Xena to rethink her decision about moving on so fast. Xena stood her ground and remained silent.

"All right. I'll, um, I'll go see what the local market's selling."

Gabrielle walked off, her head down in thought. Xena smiled to herself. Maybe she'd get out of here easier than she thought.

She headed to the inn and hitched Argo to the post out front. Hopefully, the promise of food would make Gabrielle hurry up her shopping.

The inn was dark, a few torches ensconced around the room doing little to brighten the interior. Xena walked up to the bar and ordered an ale. She laid a coin on the counter and received her drink. It was nice and cold and refreshed her parched throat. She glanced around at the other patrons, but no one seemed particularly interested in the newest customer, which was fine with her. She sat back and enjoyed her ale.

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Gabrielle looked at several bolts of cloth, feeling the textures and imagining the kinds of clothes that could be made from the materials. She shook her head. She wasn't in the market for new clothing and Xena had seemed impatient.

She moved on to the next stall and found dried meats and cheeses and haggled with the owner over the price of buying enough rations to last them for the next few weeks. She finally agreed to his price, which was considerably lower than his original asking price, and tucked the parcel under her arm.

Next was the scribe supplier's booth and she quickly wrangled a good deal on several blank scrolls, a new bottle of ink, and two new quills. She really wanted to browse around and see what else might pique her interest, but her arms were already full and she knew Xena was waiting for her.

She was just starting back to find the inn when a young woman put a hand on her arm and stopped her.

"Priestess Daphne! What are you doing out here? And in those clothes?"

Gabrielle turned to see who had grabbed her arm and found a group of young women gathering around her.

"What? I'm sorry. You must have me confused with someone else." Gabrielle tried to turn away.

"You can't be out in public like this. Come on. We have to get you back to the temple."

The young woman began pulling her along and the other women swarmed around her, encouraging her forward movement and commenting on her inappropriate attire. Gabrielle looked around to see if anyone was watching them who might come to her rescue. No one was paying them any attention.

"Look. My name is Gabrielle. I'm not a priestess." No one seemed to have heard her. "Um, listen, I don't know who you are, but I need to get back to my friend. She's waiting for me."

"You should be at the temple, not gallivanting around in the marketplace. What were you thinking?" The girl looked at her with a frown and then turned back to watch where she was going. The others nodded and offered their agreement.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and sighed.

Chapter Two

Xena nursed her third ale. Gabrielle should have been back by now. Xena knew Gabrielle had a tendency to get sidetracked when she went shopping, but this was ridiculous. She'd been waiting for almost two hours and even she was starting to get hungry, so she knew the bard must be starving.

Xena downed the last of her mug and set the cup down on the bar. She flipped another coin to the barkeep and walked out into the sunlight. Another couple hours and the sun would be down. At this rate, they wouldn't have any travel time and she'd be stuck getting a room for the two of them for the night.

Xena's eyebrows lowered. If Gabrielle had done this on purpose, just so they had to stay overnight, she was going to be pissed. Gabrielle had never tried to manipulate her like that before, so Xena was a little puzzled. There was, of course, a much more probable explanation for Gabrielle's tardiness. She'd found trouble, or more likely trouble had found her, and now she was in need of a little rescuing, something the ex-warlord had unwillingly become an expert at over the last couple of years.

Xena left Argo tethered to the hitching post outside the inn and headed towards the market.

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“Listen, really. My name is Gabrielle. I’m a bard. I travel with Xena, the Warrior Princess. Ever heard of her? She gets really upset when people kidnap me.”

The acolytes continued to separate her from her clothing and pushed her gently towards a bathtub. They began bathing her with sponges and added flower blossoms to the water.

“She carries a really big sword. And she has this thing called a chakram? It’s really sharp and...” Gabrielle trailed off as they continued to ignore her protests.

Xena was going to be so pissed. How had she gotten into this one? She’d just been minding her own business and then, bam, here she was being taken for a priestess of Aphrodite. Well, maybe Xena would get a good laugh out of the whole thing.

She was led from the wooden tub and dried off. Oil was rubbed into her skin all over her body and she blushed as certain parts of her started to tingle from the intimate contact. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about what they were doing. Then it was over and the acolytes wrapped her in a gauzy bolt of white cloth that went around her body at least a dozen times. They backed away and bowed out of the room, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Gabrielle looked down at herself and sighed. How was she going to explain this to Xena? Xena didn’t even know where she was and was probably still waiting for her at the inn and wondering what was taking so long.

Gabrielle walked towards the door the acolytes had exited through and reached for the handle. It turned and opened before she could touch it and she looked up to see who it was.

Her first thought was that a doorway was a strange place for a mirror. She backed up, but her reflection continued to stand there. Gabrielle raised her right arm tentatively, but the

reflection's arm remained at her side. That's when Gabrielle realized she wasn't looking at a mirror, but another person.

"Who are you?"

Gabrielle started at the voice she knew as her own.

"I'm, um, Gabrielle. I'm guessing you're Priestess Daphne?"

"Yes. What are you doing in my chambers?"

"Oh. Well, uh, some of your acolytes thought I was you and brought me here and then dressed me up."

"You must have been sent by Aphrodite. It's the only explanation for your arrival during such a crisis."

The priestess shut the door behind her and moved to her dresser on the far wall.

"Crisis? No, I was just in the market, shopping. I need to get back to my friend. She must be worried about me by now."

"I'm sure your friend can do without you for a little while. The affairs of Aphrodite are much more important. Love itself is in jeopardy!"

"Love? What do you mean?" Gabrielle just couldn't help herself. She was a sucker for romance.

"Yes. A match that was made by Aphrodite herself is being torn apart at this very moment and if that happens, Aphrodite has sworn to remove love from the world altogether."

"I don't understand. What does that have to do with me?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure that's why you're here. You're a sign from Aphrodite. You must be. This can't be just a coincidence."

Gabrielle stared at her twin. Xena was going to kill her for this one. But it technically wasn't her fault. The problem had existed before she'd even come along. So, Xena couldn't really blame her, could she?

Chapter Three

Xena walked around the marketplace. There was no sign of Gabrielle, so she decided it was time to start asking around. She went to the first likely place that Gabrielle would have gone to and gave her friend's description.

"She's about this high, red hair down to here, blue-green eyes, and she haggles like a miser."

The man shuffled a few blank scrolls around and resettled the quills in their canister.

"Yeah, I remember her. Gave her a good deal on some scrolls. Why, you lookin' to buy some? I got 'em real cheap and you won't find better quality for miles."

"No, I don't write. Did you happen to see where she went to?"

"Yeah, I seen her headed back to town, but then those girls came up and took her off to the temple. Didn't know she was a priestess. She certainly didn't look like one in them clothes, but I guess her bein' one of Aphrodite's makes sense."

The man leered, but Xena was too busy cursing Gabrielle's penchant for trouble to notice. She started jogging in the

direction the seller had pointed in and came up to the temple steps in only a few minutes. She walked inside and a young girl offered her assistance.

“Welcome to the temple of Aphrodite. Priestess Daphne has just returned from her pilgrimage to the main temple in Athens and will be available for counsel again shortly. Is there something I can help you with?”

“I’m looking for a friend. She was brought in here an hour or so ago. Her name is Gabrielle and she’s about this tall and has red hair and blue-green eyes and...”

“I’m sorry, the only one around here who fits that description is the priestess herself. Perhaps you’d like to wait to speak with her?”

Xena scowled. She really didn’t want to talk to any priestesses. But, maybe she’d have a better idea of where Gabrielle had been taken.

“All right. How soon will she be back?”

“She should be here in just a few...”

A door at the back of the temple opened and Xena looked up to see Gabrielle walking through it. She strode purposely forward.

“What happened this time?”

“Excuse me?”

“Come on. You can tell me later. We might as well go and get an early dinner and then stay at that inn. We can leave first thing in the morning.”

Xena turned and started walking back to the main doors, but she stopped when she didn’t hear Gabrielle’s footsteps behind her.

“What’s wrong? Come on. And what are you wearing?”

Suddenly, Xena had a sinking feeling at the look of confusion on her friend’s face.

“These are the traditional robes of a High Priestess of Aphrodite. And who are you?”

The door was pushed open further and a duplicate of the woman standing in front of her spoke before Xena could answer.

“That’s Xena, the woman I was telling you about.”

Gabrielle stepped around in front of Daphne and tried to smile up at her warrior friend.

“Sorry. They thought I was Priestess Daphne and carted me off before I could do anything about it.” Gabrielle turned back to the priestess. “Priestess Daphne, meet Xena, Warrior Princess. Xena, this is Daphne, High Priestess to Aphrodite.”

Xena scowled on the outside, but she was smirking on the inside. Her look-alikes were a princess and a prostitute. It seemed fitting that Gabrielle’s be a priestess, but she wasn’t quite sure what to make of it being one of Aphrodite’s.

“It’s nice to meet you. Aphrodite must have sent you as well,” the Priestess greeted the warrior in an exact duplicate of Gabrielle’s voice.

Xena looked to the bard for an explanation.

“One of Aphrodite’s matches seems to be in danger of being broken up and she’s decreed that all love will be removed from the world if that happens. Daphne believes we were sent by Aphrodite to help.” Gabrielle looked at her with an innocent expression firmly in place.

“No.”

“But Xena...”

“No.”

“But...”

“Do you remember what we went through when Bliss got loose with Cupid’s arrows? That was only her grandson. And what about what she did to Joxer when she thought a few of her temples were going to be taken down? Why should we help her?”

“We wouldn’t be helping Aphrodite. Not really. We’d be helping to keep true love alive.”

“And how are we suppose to do that? If they don’t want to be together anymore, I can’t just hold them at sword point and tell them to stay in love. Love can’t be forced. At least, not true love.”

“You’re right,” said Daphne. It was very strange carrying on a conversation with her friend and someone who looked so much like her as to be indistinguishable from the bard. “True love is a sacred thing that must be protected and cherished above all others. Princess Calandria and Jason truly love each other, but the King hopes to marry his daughter to someone higher born than Jason, who is just a blacksmith. I believe the goddess has

set this test before us, so that we may learn how truly valuable love is and not waste it.”

“And let me guess. Aphrodite has a personal interest in this because the boy is a smith? Like Hephaestus?”

“All love matters to the goddess,” Daphne intoned.

Gabrielle looked at Xena again putting on her best pleading face. Xena frowned. She already knew she’d lost this argument. She couldn’t just walk away and let love be taken from the world all on a goddess’ whim. She didn’t know what she could do about it, but she had to at least try.

“What kind of deadline are we working against?” Xena noticed the smile that practically beamed on Gabrielle’s face.

“All must be set right by the next full moon,” Daphne told her.

“That gives us less than a week.”

“Then I guess we should get to work. Right, Xena?” Gabrielle waited for her approval.

Xena grudgingly gave it with a nod of her dark head.

Chapter Four

They all sat at the table in Daphne's quarters and ate from the trays that had been brought in for them. The priestess had convinced the two women to stay at the temple, citing the need for continued discussion about how they could help the lovers be together to avoid Aphrodite's wrath. The fact that Gabrielle's clothing couldn't be found helped to persuade the warrior, too.

Xena got all the information she could out of the priestess and then stayed quiet during the rest of the meal as she thought over possible plans of action. It was difficult though because she kept being distracted by hearing the same voice coming from two different people.

The hungry bard had long since demolished the food and Xena could tell her friend was getting tired. Xena decided a little nudge would be all it took to get the woman headed off to bed.

"I'm going to go get Argo stabled. I'll be back in an hour."

"Oh, sure, Xena. Daphne put us in the room at the end of the hall." Gabrielle yawned and tried to cover her mouth. "Oh,

excuse me. It's been a long day. I think I'll go check out the room, if you don't mind."

"By all means. May Aphrodite bless the dreams you receive from Morpheus."

Gabrielle looked at her for a moment and then shook her head. She wasn't sure what the priestess was implying, but she had a hint from the look on Xena's face and she mumbled a goodnight before leaving to hide her blush.

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Xena walked quietly back through the main area of the temple on her way back from the stables. Argo's coat was shining and she'd been appeased with an apple for waiting so long outside the inn.

"Xena?"

Xena stopped and turned towards the voice.

"Gabrielle?"

"No, it's Daphne. I wanted to speak with you."

"About?"

"Tomorrow, you will go to speak with King Pericles. Perhaps it is best that you go alone. You are a warrior and if something should go wrong..."

"Gabrielle's the talker. If she doesn't go, there's really no point in me going at all. I'm just going to be there to back her up. And Gabrielle's a pretty good fighter, too. She can handle a lot."

"I see."

"Good."

"Oh, one more thing..."

"Hmm?"

"I am a high priestess to the goddess Aphrodite. Should you need to talk to me about anything, I'm here to help."

Daphne turned around and left before Xena could reply. Not that she had any idea what she would have said. Why would she need to talk to...? Oh. That. Damn.

Xena scowled to herself and continued on her previous course to the room at the end of the hall. Gabrielle's soft sighs of

sleeping greeted her as she opened the door to their room. She discarded her boots and armor and then shrugged her shoulders and got rid of the leather bodice, too. They were inside, it was a sacred temple to the goddess of love, and her brown shift was a lot more comfortable to sleep in.

Chapter Five

The ride out to Pericles' castle was short and uneventful. They were allowed into the courtyard and Xena requested a meeting with the king. A few well-placed glares got the right people moving and she and Gabrielle, who was still wearing the robes of the priestess, were escorted into the king's throne room.

"Ah, Priestess Daphne. Have you come to bless my daughter's engagement already? I haven't even sent out the invitations."

"Engagement?"

"Yes. Prince Boris has proven to be a worthy suitor to my little Calandria and I've agreed to give him my daughter's hand in marriage. Isn't that wonderful?"

They'd agreed that it was too much of a hassle to try to explain to everyone that Gabrielle wasn't the Priestess and that Xena would just be there for backup. At the moment, though, Gabrielle seemed to be struggling with a direction to take. Xena jumped in.

"I'd heard the Princess was in love with someone named Jason."

“The blacksmith? She couldn’t possibly love someone so beneath her station. And who are you?”

“Xena.”

“The Warrior Princess?”

“The one and only.”

“What are you doing here?”

“The Priestess here asked me to come along and help you see reason.”

“What are you talking about?”

Gabrielle finally seemed to find her voice.

“Your Highness, I think you should let your daughter decide for herself who she will marry. The goddess herself is married to a smith. Are you saying he’s beneath her?”

“Only when he’s lucky,” Xena mumbled under her breath. She didn’t like Aphrodite, but she had to admit, the goddess was beautiful.

Gabrielle blushed slightly and glared at her partner. She really didn’t need that image in her mind right now. King Pericles was oblivious to the side conversation going on in front of him and took the question at face value.

“No, no, of course not. But we mortals aren’t like the gods. We live by different rules. My daughter must marry a prince.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s the law.”

“But why is that the law?”

“Well, it ensures that whoever marries the princess has been raised to be king when his time comes. I won’t live forever and I must think about the future of my kingdom.”

“What makes a good king?”

“A good king must be fair to his people and have a good heart. He must be able to rule with compassion, but also be strong and able to administer the laws of his people with a firm hand.”

“So a good king is a man who is fair, compassionate, just, strong, and has a good heart. You didn’t say anything about him having to be a prince.”

Gabrielle grinned at the open fish mouth movements the king was making. Xena kept her smirk firmly in check. Someone should have warned the king about verbally sparring with a bard. Especially her bard. Damn. Gotta stop that.

The king collected himself and studied Gabrielle.

"I must think about what you've said, Priestess. Please, stay tonight and have dinner in my court. You're welcome to stay as well, Xena."

Xena nodded and the two women were escorted out of the main hall. The attendant led them through the castle and stopped outside a pair of heavy wooden doors. He pushed them open and then stood to the side to allow the women entry.

"Thank you," Gabrielle told the young man.

"Dinner will be served in the King's court after sundown. I will return for you then," he said, and then left them to inspect their room.

Gabrielle looked around at the finery that covered all of the furniture in the large room and hummed her approval.

"This is amazing. King Pericles must really be rich to be able to afford so much luxury."

"Yeah, I wonder if his people know they paid for all this," Xena criticized.

It took a moment for Gabrielle to realize what Xena meant. King Pericles hadn't worked for his opulence; it was a part of his station and had been created from taxes levied against his people. The money that went to furnishing his extravagant home could just as easily have been used to feed and clothe the people the money had been taken from.

Gabrielle thought about what they could do to change things, but then shook her head. No one seemed unhappy with their King's rule and Gabrielle had to admit that things could have been much worse. At least he appeared to be open to Gabrielle's ideas concerning his daughter's right to choose her own husband.

Gabrielle opened the first door she came to in her explorations and turned around to look at Xena with a full grin on her face.

"Well, we shouldn't let all that hard-earned money go to waste. What do you say to a real bath?"

Gabrielle moved aside to give Xena an unobstructed view of the massive marble tub she'd found waiting for them in the bathroom.

"You go ahead, Gabrielle. I think I'm going to take a nap."

Gabrielle frowned. That wasn't like Xena. Xena was one of the cleanest people she knew and never turned down a chance to

bathe, especially in hot water because it helped ease her normally tense muscles.

“Are you all right, Xena?” Gabrielle said as she walked over to place the back of her hand at Xena’s forehead.

Xena gave an indulgent smile.

“I’m fine, Gabrielle. Go enjoy your bath.”

Gabrielle looked less than convinced, but went back to the bathroom anyway. Maybe by the time the bath was ready, Xena would change her mind.

Gabrielle took a torch down from the wall and lit the logs that were housed to the side of the tub underneath where the rainwater had been stored in a reservoir built specifically for the bath. She pattered about the room for an hour, studying the tapestries that covered the walls and marveling at the incredible talent the weavers must have had in order to create something so beautiful, while she waited for the water to heat up.

Finally, she went back to the bathroom and pulled the plug that stopped the cistern and heard a rumble as the water moved behind the stone wall and poured into the large tub. When it was almost full, she tried to push the plug back in, but the water pressure was too great for her.

“Xena? I need your help,” Gabrielle called out.

Xena was at her side in an instant.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“I can’t get the stopper back in the hole and it’s about to flood the place,” Gabrielle said, a tinge of panic in her voice.

Xena smirked.

“Give me that.”

Xena took the plug and held it in front of the rushing water with one hand and used her other fist as a hammer to slam the thing back in place. The water ceased its attempts at escape and Gabrielle heaved a sigh of relief.

“Thanks, Xena.”

Gabrielle looked down at Xena’s body and realized she was soaked from the water that had been racing out of the hole in the wall.

“Still sure you don’t want to take a bath?” Gabrielle grinned.

Xena looked down at her soaked leathers and grimaced. It would take several hours for them to dry and now she really didn't have an excuse not to share a bath with the bard.

"Well, since I'm already up, I guess I might as well," Xena replied nonchalantly.

Xena sat on the edge of the tub and began working at her armor. She laid everything out in front of the still burning fire a few feet away. Finally, she was down to just her leathers and she slowly peeled them off. She grabbed the chair that sat in front of the dressing table along the opposite wall from the tub and draped the bodice over the back of it, then pulled off her shift. She turned around and found Gabrielle staring at her.

"What?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle blinked and shook her head.

"Sorry, I was just thinking," Gabrielle mumbled and turned away.

Gabrielle heard the splash as Xena lowered herself into the tub and she began unlacing her sandals while trying to concentrate on removing the blush from her cheeks. She hoped she'd turned around fast enough to keep Xena from seeing it. Soon, Gabrielle had finished undressing and walked over the cold stone tiles to join Xena in the bath.

Gabrielle eased herself over the side of the warming marble and sighed as she sank into the hot steaming water.

"Ohh, Xena, this is great. I can't believe you didn't want to try this."

"Hey, maybe you could get the amazons to install something like this in the Queen's hut for when you visit."

Xena kept her eyes closed, trying to block out real life images of a naked bard from her vision, but she grinned as she imagined Gabrielle indulging in the excesses of being a Queen.

"Think they'd do it?" Gabrielle asked, a lazy grin forming on her own lips, as she let the heat of the water seep into her muscles and relax them.

"I don't know. Couldn't hurt to ask."

"And I'm sure the Queen's champion wouldn't mind some extra perks, right?"

Xena's grin turned into a smirk.

“Well, there’s gotta be some kind of reward for saving your butt all the time.”

“This was not my fault this time. They just kind of kidnapped me and I couldn’t...”

“Hey, hey. It’s all right.” Xena had opened her eyes at the sadly apologetic tone and was partially standing in front of the bard. “I know this wasn’t your fault. You can’t help it if people mistake you for the love goddess’s priestess.”

Xena almost choked as she realized how that sounded and quickly continued.

“You two look identical. Even I had a hard time telling you apart.”

Xena moved back to her previous position and took long slow breaths as inconspicuously as she could.

“That’s true. Isn’t that amazing? I mean, she looks just like me the way Diana and Meg look like you. You know, they say everyone has a double and if you travel enough, you’ll eventually meet them. I guess you’ve traveled so much you get to have two doubles.”

“One would have been more than enough.”

“Well, you’re one of a kind, Xena. Even if Meg and Diana do happen to look like you, they could never replace you.”

“That goes *double* for you, my bard.”

Gabrielle covered her surprise at the endearment with a loud groan at the pun.

“Oh, that was bad, Xena.”

Xena just smirked.

Chapter Six

The attendant returned for them several hours later and escorted them to dinner. Xena's leathers were still a little damp, but they were only mildly uncomfortable. Xena had endured much worse, so she hardly even noticed.

The King sat at the head of the long table with his daughter at his right hand side. Gabrielle was seated at the King's left and across from the Princess. Xena sat next to Gabrielle on her left and the rest of the members of the royal court took their preferred places around the table. The servers brought in the food and then King Pericles gave his permission for everyone to begin their meals.

"Tell me more about why I should allow my daughter to marry so far below her rank, Priestess," King Pericles asked around a mouthful of chicken.

Xena kept the smirk off her face as she watched Gabrielle go into 'bard mode.'

"Well, it's not really a matter of Princess Calandria marrying beneath her royal station. It's a matter of the Princess being

allowed to marry the one she loves. Do you believe she could love someone who would be a bad king?" Gabrielle asked pointedly.

The King looked at his daughter and his eyes softened. He turned back to Gabrielle.

"My daughter could love only a good man, but good men do not necessarily make good kings. The boy you mentioned, the blacksmith. What could he possibly know of running my kingdom, collecting taxes, keeping an army to defend the people, negotiating with neighboring realms? As a blacksmith, he can make the coins of my realm, or forge the armor of my troops, but that is all."

"You could teach him what he needs to know before you passed the crown to him. Being born from royal blood isn't always a requirement for becoming a king. Just two years ago, Xena and I. I-uh, ay-uh, a girl, a woman, Xena's friend, Gabrielle. Um, they helped King Gregor adopt an orphaned baby that had been prophesied to become the next King. The boy was born to one of the King's servants, but the mother died in childbirth. At first, King Gregor thought the boy would grow up and take his throne by force, but Xena made him realize if he took the child as his own, then the infant would become his rightful heir and inherit the throne peacefully. So, you see, even though King Gregor's son isn't a prince by blood, he will learn what he needs to know from his adopted father. King Gregor is a good king, so it stands to reason he'll teach his son to be a good king, too. You could do the same with Jason. Take him under your wing, show him the ropes..."

Xena nudged the bard before she got too caught up with her metaphors.

"Um, and you wouldn't have to decide right away either. You could postpone the wedding, while Jason is learning how to be King. And just think. You could teach Jason to be the kind of king you are, not the kind of king he was raised to be by foreign parents."

Xena found it hard not to smile. The bard just kept piling on the pros of letting Calandria be with the one she loved, without actually focusing on that part of her reasoning. Xena knew Gabrielle cared more about making sure the Princess had the

right to choose than whether or not the King would be able to turn Jason into a suitable ruler.

King Pericles remained silent as he finished his meal, quite obviously deep in thought over Gabrielle's words. When he'd cleared his plate, he stood and addressed everyone at the royal table.

"Ladies, gentlemen. I bid you all a good evening." He lowered his voice and turned to his daughter and the two women at his left. "I will think more about the things you've said, Priestess. I will announce my decision in the morning." He bowed slightly and left the dining hall, followed by two guards.

Princess Calandria watched her father leave, then turned back to face Gabrielle and Xena.

"Thank you, Priestess Daphne. I think you might actually have changed his mind." She glanced down at her mostly empty plate, then back up. "I think I'm going to turn in as well. Goodnight." The Priestess left with several ladies-in-waiting trailing after her.

Xena looked over at the bard and smiled.

"You were pretty convincing. If I were him, I'd seriously reconsider my laws about how a new king is chosen."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I always preferred soldiers that didn't have any prior training because then I could train them myself without having to break them of any bad habits they'd picked up from previous instructors. You definitely gave him a few things to think about."

"I did, huh."

Gabrielle went back to work on her food. She'd stopped while talking to the King and only gotten through a single serving while the king had finished his meal, but all that talking had made her hungry and she ate the royal food with gusto. Xena kept half an eye on the bard as she slowly plowed through her own meal. She really got a kick out of watching Gabrielle put away more food in one sitting than most people did in an entire day.

After a full hour, the bard was finally sated. Xena had learned a while ago to pace herself so that she wasn't just sitting there staring at Gabrielle while the little Amazon ate, so she was just finishing the last bite of her food when Gabrielle called it quits.

"I'm stuffed," Gabrielle sighed and patted her firm belly through her white robes.

Xena held her tongue on the immediate replies that wanted to come out of her mouth and instead changed the subject.

"You ready to turn in?"

"Oh yeah. I could definitely go for a nice soft bed right about now," Gabrielle agreed.

"Come on, then."

Xena stood and helped Gabrielle to her feet. They bid everyone still at the table a goodnight and returned to their chambers. Once there, Gabrielle began to unwrap herself from her gauzy robes. Then she realized Xena was in the room with her and looked up to find the warrior watching her intently.

"Are you all right?" Gabrielle asked uncertainly.

Xena blinked and her eyes seemed to focus on the room again.

"Yeah. I'm fine. But what are you going to sleep in? Those acolytes never found your clothes."

"Oh, I forgot about that. Well, I'm not sleeping in this thing. It's too warm with all these layers."

Gabrielle went back to unwrapping the cloth from around her body and Xena turned around to rummage in her saddlebag. She found her brown shift and tossed it over to the foot of the bed where Gabrielle was standing.

"There ya go. You can wear that to bed."

Gabrielle looked down.

"But what about you?"

"It's all right, Gabrielle. I'll just sleep in my leathers like I always do."

"But Xena..."

"Gabrielle, don't argue with me." Xena prayed that Gabrielle would just drop it. If she actually had to sleep with a naked bard in the same bed, she'd lose it.

Gabrielle opened her mouth to protest, but then changed her mind. She finished pulling off the white robes and then donned the shirt. It came down to her knees and she felt like a little kid in Xena's over-sized shift, but the scent wafting up to her from the material was making her dizzy and she knew it had nothing to do with any childish thoughts.

Gabrielle climbed under the covers of the bed and curled up on her side to go to sleep. She listened to Xena remove her armor and boots and then felt the bed shift as Xena moved to lie down on her side of the bed.

“Goodnight, Xena.”

“Night, Gabrielle.”

Chapter Seven

The morning dawned bright through the windows of the room and Xena was up and dressed by the time Gabrielle sleepily opened her eyes. Gabrielle reluctantly changed out of the borrowed shift and donned the robes of the priestess again. An attendant came for them to escort them to breakfast and Gabrielle finally started to wake up as her stomach was slowly filled.

“So, what do you think his answer will be?” Gabrielle asked while she munched on some fruit.

“I don’t know. He loves his daughter, but he’s also pretty set in his ways and he knows he has to think of his people first,” Xena replied as she took a bite from a muffin.

Princess Calandria entered the room and was immediately served a plate of food and a mug of juice.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Princess. Did you sleep well?” Gabrielle asked.

“No, I’m afraid I didn’t. I kept tossing and turning all night. I’m worried my father won’t think your reasons are good enough to change the laws and I’ll have to marry that Prince Boris. He’s not really a bad guy. I just don’t love him. I’ll always love only Jason.”

Gabrielle nudged Xena when she caught the rolling eyes at the Princess’ near swooning when she said Jason’s name. Xena looked down at her and, even though there was no smile on her face, Gabrielle could see the twinkling eyes and had to work not to laugh herself.

They both sobered and turned their heads to the room’s entrance when the herald walked in and cleared his throat.

“Princess Calandria, High Priestess Daphne, and Xena. You are all commanded to attend to His Highness, King Pericles, in his throne room. Please, follow me.”

The three women stood and walked after the departing herald out of the dining room. Soon, they were in the throne room in front of the King and they waited for him to speak.

“My daughter. Do you love Jason?”

“Yes, Father, with all my heart.”

“And do you believe he will make a good husband to you *and* a good king to the people?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Priestess Daphne. You believe that anyone could be taught to be a good king?”

Gabrielle shook her head.

“No, Your Highness. A bad man will never make a good king. But you said yourself that your daughter could only love a good man. It will be up to you to teach him to also be a good king.”

King Pericles nodded.

“Then so be it. From this day forward, the King himself will train the King’s successor, regardless of the station of his birth. The Princess may marry any man she chooses, as long as he passes the King’s tests, which I will devise later.”

“Thank you, Father!” Calandria practically squealed and ran to embrace her father.

King Pericles grinned and hugged his daughter back and winked at Gabrielle and Xena. Gabrielle and Xena turned to each

other and smiled. They had saved the day again and kept love from being taken from the world.

Chapter Eight

“Priestess Daphne!”

Gabrielle just barely remembered to turn around at the name and saw Princess Calandria and a young man walking up to her in the middle of the courtyard.

“Well, I guess you two will be more enthusiastic about the wedding arrangements now,” Gabrielle grinned.

“Yes. This is Jason. Thank you so much for everything you did for us,” the Princess gushed.

“I want to thank you, too. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d had to watch her marry another man. Thank you for making the King change his mind,” Jason said.

“I just showed him another way to look at it. He made the decision for himself. You might want to remember that when he’s showing you how to be king. Keeping an open mind is very important.”

“I’ll do that. And thank you again, Priestess.”

The happy couple nodded their farewells and returned to the castle.

Gabrielle walked off down the hall with her twin and Xena watched for a few moments before turning to leave the temple again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Xena brushed down Argo's coat and tried to distract herself. It wasn't working. She just kept seeing images of Gabrielle as she'd climbed into that huge tub and when she'd been slowly removing that flimsy piece of clothing from her body. That had been pure torture. She'd very nearly offered to cut the thing off with her breast dagger, but she knew where that would have led.

Xena shook her head. She couldn't keep thinking about Gabrielle like this. It wasn't worthy of the bard's trust. Gabrielle saw her as a friend and looked up to her. If she only knew what her 'friend' was thinking about her.

Xena put the brush aside. She was only half done with the chore and Argo nickered at her in annoyance, but Xena continued to put the stuff away.

"Sorry, girl, but I've gotta talk to someone who can talk back to me about this. I'll come back and finish later."

Chapter Nine

Xena walked into the priestess' quarters without so much as a knock and saw her sitting at the table with a scroll in front of her.

"Daphne? I need to talk to you. It's about Gabrielle."

The woman looked up at her a little startled.

"Sorry. Guess I should've knocked."

"It's all right."

Xena sat down at the table across from the woman and then tried to gather her thoughts.

"You said if I needed to talk to you, you were here to help. I guess I'm taking you up on that offer."

"Okay."

"You already seemed to have guessed that I, um, I've been thinking about Gabrielle." Xena looked everywhere but at the priestess. "More than thinking about her. I don't know how much longer I can take being around her and not..."

"What?"

"Not letting her know."

"Not letting her know that..."

"I'm attracted to her."

"Attracted to her?" Her voice sounded a little strained and Xena realized she wasn't being entirely honest.

"Okay, more than attracted to her, but..."

"But?"

"I want so much more than..."

"Sex?"

"Yes.... I fell in love with her.... But she's so young. I know she doesn't understand."

"Maybe she understands more than you think."

"No. Not about this. She never loved Perdicus, at least, not as a wife loves her husband. She married him because he needed her. I don't even think she realizes it, realizes the difference. She does it completely without thought. Whatever is needed, she fulfills that need. I know she left Potedeia for personal reasons, but I think she followed me because, even then, she could see I needed a friend, someone to guide me and keep me on the straight and narrow. That's all she could ever feel for me, is friendship."

"You don't think she could have fallen in love with you, too?"

"If she's in love with me, it's not me, it's the hero she wants me to be. And I can't accept that. It's not enough."

There was a lengthy pause and then the woman finally spoke.

"Has she ever seen your dark side?"

"Yes."

"What did she do?"

"She fought me. Went against my direct orders. She saved us all."

"So, she didn't run screaming. She stood up to you."

"Yeah. What are you getting at?"

"I think maybe she started out wanting to help you, saw you do spectacular things and fell into a little hero worship, then got used to you and became your friend. And then she f-fell in love with you."

"No. You don't know her. She sees only the good in people. I don't think she really understands the evil that I'm capable of."

"But you said she saw your dark side."

"Yes, but it barely scratched the surface and even that.... I saw the look of horror and disgust in her eyes. If she knew that was

barely a taste of the Warlord.... Whatever image of me she loves, it isn't me, it's the character she puts into her stories and calls the Warrior Princess."

"I think you're underestimating her intelligence," she said, her eyes flashing in anger slightly.

"No, not her intelligence. She's smarter than anyone else I know. It's.... She doesn't want to see the evil, so she doesn't, even when it's staring her right in the face. She just can't accept that I'm unforgivable. The things I've done.... There's no excuse."

"Maybe it's you who's having trouble accepting. You seem to be living in the past, instead of accepting your new life in the present. No one is perfect. It sounds like she knows that and understands that there will be times when you lose your way."

"But when I lose my way, people die."

"Since you made your conversion from evil, have you killed without provocation?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you killed anyone that wasn't a threat? Just for sport or fun or because you felt like it?"

"No. But just because I felt justified doesn't make it right."

"You're right, but there is a difference between killing to protect yourself, or those you love, and killing just to have killed."

"It's still a part of who I am."

"Now you're just arguing for the sake of arguing. You know I'm right. Go to her."

"No. I can't. I won't.... Look. If you see her, tell her I'm at the stables."

"Sure, Xena."

Xena stood and left to go finish taking care of Argo. As soon as the door closed behind her, the woman in the room grinned.

Chapter Ten

Gabrielle made her way to the guest room and opened the door just as Daphne was trying to leave.

“Oh, Gabrielle. They found your clothes. I set them out on the bed for you.”

“Thanks. I’m kind of glad you didn’t find them earlier. It’s been useful to not be me.”

“Really,” Daphne squinted her eyes at the bard and smiled.

“Yeah. So were those scrolls you showed me. Well, I’ll see you at dinner tonight.”

“Until then.”

Daphne continued past her twin down the hall and looked up.

“You were right, Aphrodite. Timing really is everything.”

“Of course it is, babe,” came the ethereal laughing reply.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Gabrielle entered the stables and looked around. It only took a moment for her to find the warrior and her horse in the last stall.

“Hey. It’s almost time for dinner,” Gabrielle said to Xena’s back.

Xena turned around and smiled.

“Hey, they found your clothes. Where were they?”

“I don’t know. Priestess Daphne left them in the room for me.”

Gabrielle moved a little closer until she was standing right next to Xena, her shoulder brushing against Xena’s upper arm. Xena looked down at her with a slightly puzzled expression on her face and then went back to brushing Argo.

“You know, you take really good care of her, Xena.”

“She deserves it. She’s always there when I need her and she’s come through for me more times than I can remember.”

“You love her a lot, huh?”

Xena glanced over at the bard again with the same strange look on her face.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you ever tell her?”

Xena stopped brushing the horse and turned to face Gabrielle.

“Why are you so interested in Argo all of a sudden?”

“Not Argo. You.”

“Huh?”

“I want to know if you always show your affection by doing things for the ones you love or if you ever actually plan on telling them someday.”

Xena felt her stomach drop and her eyes found it impossible to be anywhere near Gabrielle at the moment.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, ya do. And so do I. Remember, I’m the one that does the sensitive chats so well.”

“Gabrielle, what did, um, did Daphne talk to you about anything?”

“No.”

“Then what... Where is all this coming from?”

“Newfound confidence, now that I don’t have to be worried about your reaction anymore.”

“What?”

Gabrielle took a step forward and almost laughed when Xena reflexively took a step back to maintain the small distance between them. She took another step and then another, until Xena had her back up against the wall.

Gabrielle reached for Xena's right hand and gently pried the curry brush from the warrior's grasp. She set the brush down on a shelf at her right and then turned her attention back to the spooked woman. She brought the newly freed hand up to her lips and kissed Xena's knuckles. She watched as Xena's breathing hitched and then Xena stood a little straighter and pushed herself a little forward away from the wall, even though it brought her closer to the bard.

"You were in Daphne's room, when I went to go talk to her. You heard everything we said."

"Not quite. You really do have a hard time telling us apart, Xena."

Xena turned her head and sighed.

"Look, just forget what I said. We're friends, that's all."

Gabrielle listened to the tone of Xena's voice. She'd obviously said that phrase many times, probably to herself as well as other people.

"You want me."

Xena stood stock-still and brought her gaze down to study the bard. Her eyes narrowed and then she sighed again.

"So, you're just fulfilling a need again."

"Yes. I'm trying to get you to fulfill *my* needs. Now that I know you want me, I don't have to worry about being rejected on the grounds that you don't. I just have to wear you down, and I'm very good at that. I got you to let me follow you, didn't I?"

"Gabrielle..."

"Don't you 'Gabrielle' me. Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for this? No way, Warrior Princess. You're never gonna get rid of me now and sooner or later you're gonna give in. I've waited this long, I can wait a little longer," Gabrielle grinned smugly.

She dropped Xena's hand and sauntered out of the stall.

Xena stood dumbfounded. That wasn't how that was supposed to go. Gabrielle was not supposed to be the aggressor here. Xena checked and straightened her leathers and then jogged out of the

stable. She saw Gabrielle walking back towards the temple and quickened her pace to catch up with the small woman. She reached out her hand and grasped the bard's left wrist and spun her around.

Before Gabrielle knew what was happening, her mouth was being covered by Xena's and a tongue was finding its way between her lips. She froze for several heartbeats, but then gave in. Her arms wrapped around Xena's neck and she felt Xena's hands move down to cradle her lower back. The kiss wasn't as romantic as she'd been hoping for, but it was definitely Xena and that was all that really mattered.

Xena finally broke away and stared down at Gabrielle. Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes and then grinned.

"If you don't want to say the words, I think I could deal with just the actions."

That got a grin from the warrior.

"I love you, Gabrielle. All right?"

"All right."

Xena waited for more, but Gabrielle just kept smirking at her.

"That's it? You're not gonna say any more? I thought you were a bard."

Gabrielle pulled down with the hands that were still wrapped around Xena's neck and gave her own version of a passionate kiss, which was a little gentler than the previous one. She pulled away and the smile that graced her lips had changed from humorous to content.

"I love you, Xena. Don't ever doubt that."

"I don't."

Xena eased up on her hold on the woman and they stood a little more easily.

"So, how long...?"

"I don't know. A while now. I thought it was hero worship, too, at first. Just a crush on the amazing Warrior Princess. But I've gotten to know you, Xena. I know who you are inside and I love you. And it hasn't gone away. It just keeps getting stronger and stronger."

Xena pulled Gabrielle into a hug and they stood like that for a long time. Then Xena heard Gabrielle's stomach growl and smiled into the bard's hair.

“Hungry?”

“Yeah. Guess dinner’s probably started by now.”

“Let’s go get you fed.”

They walked into the temple and neither saw the smug look on the love goddess’ face as she congratulated herself on another perfect match.

No really annoying cats named Felix, who kept meowing for my attention almost non-stop while I finished writing this because I spoil her rotten and she knows if she pesters me enough she’ll get me to stop writing and hold her, were harmed during the production of this fanfic.