

~ And Baby Makes... ~

by Carole Giorgio

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After Aphrodite's announcement that the newlyweds would be delivering a baby girl nine moons down the road, sleep was the farthest thing from their minds.

"Was that announcement supposed to calm us down for the evening and be conducive to a good night's sleep?" Gabrielle giggled as her Warrior held her close.

"Well at least we won't have to be looking to make a major move when the baby's born," Xena chortled.

"That's not funny, Xena," the bard chided.

"Sorry, couldn't resist," the warrior shrugged.

Although Gabrielle wanted to do nothing more than hold her lover and drift off into the land of Morpheus, she was so full of wonder and excitement that sleep kept eluding her. She was finally pregnant in the best of ways. This baby would be theirs to love and nurture together. They hadn't had much luck in the past with the children they had given birth to, but this little piece of Olympus would be different. This little girl would have the love of both her mothers and the support of an entire village, not to mention the fact that a dollop of magic would surely make this baby even more special. No bride could ask for a better wedding night.

"You sleeping?" Xena whispered when the bard became suddenly quiet.

"No," came the immediate reply.

"Things are happening so quickly," the warrior continued. "I knew that Aphrodite would come through for us, but now that I know definitely that you're pregnant and that we're having a baby girl, my head's spinning. Our lives are changing so quickly, it's hard to keep up with what I have to do next."

"Xena, you don't have to do anything. For once we're going to be allowed to live like everyone else, to settle down and raise a child together. We've both been denied that luxury before now; we've always put other people's welfare before our own."

"Maybe that's why it feels so strange. Instead of letting things just happen, we have to make plans; don't you see that?"

The blonde smiled into her lover's chest before raising her eyes to meet those of velvet blue. "Don't try figuring our life out like a battle plan, my Love; try to start enjoying each day as it comes along."

She placed her lips on those that had, mere minutes before showered kisses over her entire body. That day she had, in front of the entire village, given her pledge of love to Xena, but they both knew the pledge had been given and received years ago when they first started traveling together. There was nowhere on Earth that she would rather be now or forever but in the arms of her Champion. The bard laid her head back on her lover's chest, and almost instantly, the sleep that had been so evasive overcame her, and thoughts of motherhood and settling down became the basis of her dream.

Within seconds of the golden head being laid upon her breast, Xena felt Gabrielle's body relax. Now the smaller woman was breathing in a slow, constant rhythm. *Sleep well, my Love. Today you accomplished what no one before you ever could. I publicly gave myself to you, body and soul.* She kissed the soft locks and inhaled the fragrance of afterlove. Her body tingled at the thought of what had just transpired. *By all that's good, Gabrielle, we're going to be parents. You, my Love, are carrying my child! I would shout it from the mountaintop, but I'm afraid we would have a multitude of questions to answer if I did that ~ actually, we might have that anyway when you start showing.* The warrior grinned and squeezed her bard tightly. "I love you, Gabrielle," she whispered.

"Love you, too, Xena," the sleeping bard answered.

The newlyweds, wrapped in each other's arms, entered Morpheus' world as both dreamed of fulfilling their common destiny and raising their daughter in the Amazon Village they now called home.

The first few days after the joining ceremony found the entire village pitching in to clean up after the occasion. It seemed that on the political front most of the problems had been handled, but

Gabrielle asked Xena to consult with Tecmessa for assurances that no new situations had arisen concerning the Dramarians.

The leader of the Royal Guard informed the Queen's Consort that it seemed that just the rumors of the Warrior Princess taking up residence in the Amazon village had squelched the confrontation between the two factions. Both the women got a good laugh out of the fact that their enemies had been so easily deterred from continuing a feud that could very well have turned into a full scale war.

Xena practiced with her sword and chakram on a daily basis, just to keep in shape. With the help of some of the sisters, she began an addition onto the hut for the baby. It would not be needed immediately, but the warrior stated that when the time came, she wanted to be prepared.

"No sense waiting until she's a year old before starting on her room," she told Gabrielle when the bard laughed at her insistence on starting the room immediately.

"You know she'll be sleeping with us for a while?"

The warrior nodded, but went on to explain how it was better to be prepared than rushed when the time came.

"Well, it certainly will keep you busy for a while," Gabrielle agreed. Still, every time she passed by the construction area she couldn't help but giggle and shake her head from side to side.
Warriors, can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.

Gabrielle's days were spent fixing up the inside of the hut. She also made time to work on her sorely neglected scrolls.

When meat became scarce, Xena joined the hunting parties, and they never came back to the village empty-handed. She made sure she was never gone more than a few days at a time, but upon returning home, she always received a greeting that made her feel as though she had been gone for moons.

"I need to sit down and make the plans for one of those rooms with a constantly fed hot tub that we talked about before," Xena informed Gabrielle one evening when they were sitting on the porch watching the first evening stars appear in the heavens.

"That would be a nice addition," the bard agreed. "But don't you think you ought to finish the bedroom first?"

"Of course, but I think it would be a good place for you to birth our daughter."

"Huh?"

"I've been thinking about it. You know the baby grows inside and is surrounded by fluids; that's why all that water comes out right before you give birth. Well, wouldn't it make sense that if you birthed the child in the water, then it wouldn't be such a traumatic experience?"

"No, she'd just drown."

"I don't mean keep her in the water, but if she's delivered into something just as warm as being inside your belly and then gently taken out and dried off . . ."

"You know, Xena, when I close my eyes and try to picture that, it does seem like a good idea. When do you think you'll be able to start on the room?"

"We should be finished with the bedroom in about seven suns. I can start anytime after that."

The bard nodded in agreement and placed her head on the warrior's shoulder as the two of them watched the sun go down through the trees.

"I love it here this time of the day. The forest is quieting down after a full day, and night is beginning to creep in, casting shadows on everything that had minutes ago been sparkling with light. This is a good place to bring a child into the world, Xena. Thank you for settling here with me. I know this can't be the easiest of things for you to do."

"On the contrary, Gabrielle, I enjoy having a bed to sleep in every night. The ground can be rough on the back at my age." She smiled at her mate and whispered, "Yeah, I'm not as young as I used to be, but don't you go telling anyone I said that."

Gabrielle giggled and put her head back into the hollow of Xena's shoulder where it fit so perfectly. "Dealing with the insects is not always the most pleasant of experiences."

"I have to admit that I sometimes miss the adventure, Gabrielle, but I think we'll be having a life-changing one in the not-too-distant future." She smiled again as she tilted her lover's face to meet her own and kissed it tenderly.

"Besides," the bard added, "it's pretty much common knowledge that we have semi-retired here in the village. If anything important happens, people know where to reach us."

"Come on-*Mom*-I think it's time we had some dinner. Do you want to go down to the main hall tonight?"

"Yes. I would much rather do that than cook," Gabrielle agreed. "You know, Xena, we're going to have to figure out what we're going to tell everyone when I start showing."

"I know. I've been thinking about that. I think mostly the truth would be our best answer. We'll just tell them that Aphrodite gave us a wedding present that we couldn't refuse. We don't have to go into great detail. We'll simply confide that the baby is a part of the both of us and leave it at that."

"As long as you're doing the telling, Xena, we might get away with it."

The duo decided the walk to the main hall would be good exercise and on the way they began discussing names for the little bundle that was slowly growing to maturity in the abdomen of the Amazon Queen.

On the morning of the twentieth day following their wedding, Xena awoke to an empty bed and the sound of Gabrielle retching outside the hut. She jumped out of bed and went to see if she could help.

"Gabrielle, what's the matter?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten already?"

"Forgotten? No, but you shouldn't have morning sickness already," the warrior objected. "I was going to start checking the area for herbs this coming week. There should have still been time before you needed them."

"Well, tell that to my stomach," the blonde countered. "I don't think anyone informed my body that it wasn't supposed to react this soon. I hope I don't feel like this the entire nine cycles of the moon. At least nothing about the first pregnancy lasted very long." She tried to smile as she looked over at her mate, who was beside herself with not knowing how to handle the present situation.

"Very funny," was the only comeback the warrior could think of as she stood helplessly by and watched Gabrielle again lean over to make horrid sounds and expel absolutely nothing. "Listen, I'll go talk with Thraso. There are some herbs that will help with morning sickness. I'll see if she has any on hand, and if not, I'll go gather them."

"What will you tell her?"

"That you're pregnant. After all, she is the Village Shamaness. Don't you think she ought to know?"

"But, Xena, you're capable of helping me through this pregnancy," Gabrielle objected.

"Gabrielle, it was your idea to settle down and make this place our home. If we are going to consider these women family and if you want to raise the baby here, then we need to begin acting like part of the Village. They're our sisters; you're their Queen. We share common bonds, and it's time we stopped living like hermits. But this will only transpire if I'm understanding your desires correctly."

"You are," Gabrielle whined. "I just hate to seem so vulnerable."

"You are vulnerable, my Love, and it's okay. I'm here. You don't have to be a warrior right now, just a pregnant woman who's carrying the most special baby in the entire known world . . . and a woman who is making her Champion sound like a poet and mush-mouth," Xena added with a grin.

"That's okay, I'm allowed to see the soft side of the warrior," Gabrielle replied, wiping her mouth on the cloth she had brought out of the hut with her. "I think I'm finished for the time being. I surely hope this little ritual doesn't last the entire nine moons."

Xena put her arm around the smaller woman's shoulders. "Top priority is to see Thraso. We'll have this little problem taken care of by midday. Are you hungry?"

Xena looked down into green daggers. "Are you out of your mind?" Gabrielle scowled.

"Sorry," the warrior apologized. "I presumed you had all the bad stuff gone, and you might want to start all over again."

"Right now I just want to lay back down on the bed for a few minutes. By the gods, Xena, the sun isn't even fully up yet."

"Yeah, I thought it was awfully strange waking up and not hearing you snoring."

Again she received a nudge in the ribs, followed by a smile as she escorted her lover back to bed and pulled the covers over her.

"Listen, Gabrielle, I'm fully awake, and I'm pretty sure our Shamaness is an early riser as well. I'm going to head over to her hut, and when you wake up, I'll have something to fix that nausea of yours so we can have a good breakfast."

"Sounds like a winning idea," Gabrielle mumbled, already curling up and going back to sleep.

The warrior shook her head as she finished dressing, hoping that she could get this morning malady under control before it became more of a problem than it already was. As silently as possible, she opened the door and stepped onto the porch into the pre-dawn morning. *I love this time of the day when everything is quiet and still. The only sounds are coming from the forest creatures as they begin to shake the sleep from their eyes. The air is fresh and clean from the kiss of dew and . . . Damn, she is making me into a poet.* The warrior shook her head and grinned as she whistled for Argo.

Thraso's hut sat as far away from the east side of the complex as the Queen's hut did from the west. While most of the resident huts were within proximity of each other, these two had been set aside for privacy from the rest of the tribe. The only other distant hut from the village was that of Pyrene, the blacksmith, and hers was south of the other two.

As Xena had anticipated, the healer was already up and about. She found her in her herb garden tending to the pick of the season.

"Welcome, Xena," the Shamaness spoke without lifting her head or turning around.

"How'd you know it was me?" the warrior asked.

"Ah . . . do I have to tell you all my secrets?" Thraso smiled at the visitor as she turned, "I'm sure you would have known if it were I who was doing the visiting."

A nod from the woman on the horse let the Shamaness know she was right and that asking for an explanation had only been the warrior's way of starting a conversation.

"So, Xena, what brings you to my home at dawn, surely not trouble in paradise?"

"Yes and no," came the cryptic reply.

"Umm." Thraso gave Xena a questioning look.

"Gabrielle's not feeling well and I need something for morning sickness."

That statement got the Shamaness' attention and she quickly put her bounty into a jar on the porch, sat down, and motioned the dark-haired woman to join her on the steps.

"Sounds like we have something to talk about. You didn't *have* to marry her did you, warrior?" Thraso asked, unable to keep the laughter from her voice.

"Very funny, Healer. No. But I *have* to keep her."

"Interesting. Are we going to dance around this entire intercourse?" Again the healer smiled. "I could make us some tea if the explanation is going to be a while in the making. After all, you are here; I imagine I'm to be let in on a secret?"

"Well, it's a secret for right now, but surely it won't be in two more moons."

"I take it the Queen is pregnant?"

"You take it right."

"And do you want to fill me in on the details, or am I to use my imagination?" She motioned for Xena to follow her into the hut so she could begin preparing tea while listening to the warrior's tale.

Less than a candlemark later the healer was filled in on Gabrielle's condition-minus the really personal aspects-and between the two of them, they decided which herbs would do best to keep the new bride from expelling everything in her stomach at the break of each new dawn.

"I think we agree that the leaves from the deerberry boiled down into an elixir and added to hot water will be the most beneficial to keep around for headaches. Achiness can be counteracted by

using the oil from the leaves and bark on the painful area," Thraso spoke as she gathered herbs from jars, boxes, and cloth bags.

"Do you have any red sage for when her legs and feet start getting easily tired and swollen?" Xena asked.

"Yes, it's one of my staples," the healer agreed, reaching into an aromatic drawer and pulling out a handful of the dried leaves. "This also makes a good afterbirth tonic, but we have a while before we need to think about that."

"I always thought the feverfew was better for that?"

"It's a matter of opinion, whichever you want to keep on hand. But we really need to take care of that morning sickness. I have enough spearmint and peppermint leaves to make tea for a few days." The healer was busy stuffing the items into bags for Xena to take home with her.

"I'm sure the mint is abundant around here, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's not difficult at all to find. Here, this ought to get you started. You might want to boil some down and make a concentrate. It can also be used topically for headaches. Does she need some chamomile for sleeping?"

"No," Xena smiled at the Shamaness' eagerness to be of assistance. "Trouble sleeping is not one of Gabrielle's problems. I might need something to keep her awake."

"I guess we don't have to worry about her getting enough rest then," Thraso concluded.

"Right." The warrior picked up all the bags the healer had graciously labeled and walked toward the door. "I had better get back and prepare some tea for her before she wakes up."

"You might want to stop at the food lodge before going home and get some unleavened bread. Sometimes just a bite or two before putting her feet down to the floor after resting might help keep her stomach calm."

"Hey, I'll try anything once. If she's this bad already, what in Tartarus is she going to be like in another moon or two?"

"Hopefully, it will be something that only occurs in the early stages of the baby's development."

"Here's hoping," Xena agreed. "Thanks for the tea, morning cake, and medicine. I'll try to do some foraging and replenish what you've given me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Xena. I have helpers who do nothing but go and get the supplies I need when I start running low. It's the way they learn what plants are helpful and which ones aren't."

"In that case, thanks again. It's good to know we have somewhere to come if Gabrielle needs more help than I can give her."

"Thanks for the compliment, my friend, but we both know that you have no intentions of letting anyone else care for your wife but you." There was a heartfelt smile on the healer's face, and the warrior knew that she had someone to whom she could turn if things got complicated but who would not try to interfere unless asked. "Take care of our Queen, and keep me informed." She waved as Argo carried the early morning visitor back to her own hut.

As Thraso had suggested, Xena stopped for some bread on her way home. Once she arrived, she had more than enough time to make a strong tea before waking the still sleeping bard.

"Okay, Sleeping Beauty, time to wake and smell the tea," the ebony-haired woman gently shook the blonde lying on the bed. "Come on, Gabrielle, if you don't get up soon you'll be sleeping the day away, and it's a beautiful afternoon."

"Afternoon," Gabrielle mumbled. "Did you say afternoon?"

"As a matter of fact, the sun has been in the sky quite a few candlemarks since I left you."

"Okay, but it feels so good just to stay in bed and . . ." She started to get up and then grabbed at her stomach. "Gods! Not again!"

Xena reached over and broke off a piece of the flatbread she had brought back from the kitchen. "Here, Gabrielle, eat this."

"I don't want anything to eat!"

"No, eat this before you get out of bed, before you put your feet down, come on." She put the bread up to the frowning blonde's mouth and inserted a small piece. "Okay, and now a little of this mint tea."

"Is this going to be a morning ritual?"

"Perhaps. It's up to you and the little critter growing inside you there." Xena tried to make light of the situation, not wanting Gabrielle to feel worse than she already did.

Surprisingly, within only a minute or two the grimace left the bard's face and she smiled up into concerned blue eyes. "I actually think it worked, Xena. I'm not sure if it was the bread or the tea, but I think I'll continue to take them both until this phase passes."

This time when she put her legs over the side of the bed there was no aching in her abdomen, and pushing up to a standing position, she found that she still felt quite well.

"Here's hoping only three cycles of the moon and I'm done with this nonsense."

Lucky for Gabrielle and just as lucky for her partner, Thraso had been correct in saying that three moons might be all the time the Queen would have to deal with morning sickness. But now other issues were quickly coming to the surface. Xena didn't want Gabrielle out practicing with either her sais or her staff. It wasn't that she didn't have confidence that her mate couldn't hold her own on the training fields, but one slip or one lucky hit could have been dangerous for the baby. She diplomatically tried to steer the Queen from the practice fields and into a more passive role in the community. At first the blonde took offense, feeling that Xena didn't have faith in her to know that she was skilled enough not to get hurt.

But the first time the baby kicked, Gabrielle smiled and placed her hand on her stomach. There would be no more disagreeing with her Champion. Without letting Xena know that she was right, the bard stepped back into being more domestic, along with becoming more of a governing Queen. Instead of being in the fields with the practicing warriors and those in training, she started spending more time with the women who kept the internal workings of the village running smoothly.

Xena and Tecmessa could handle the Guard. Besides, she was only doing the exercises to keep her movements agile. There would be time enough after the baby was born to get back in shape, if that's what she wanted to do.

Once Gabrielle had decided to shy away from the physical aspects of ruling, it was time to let the entire village in on the secret she, Xena, and Thraso had been keeping from them. Moreover, Xena had been teasing her for a fortnight about hearing bits and pieces of gossip and discussions about Gabrielle's increasing weight. It was definitely time to set everyone on the right track as to why the Queen was looking a bit more rotund.

Xena sent a message to the ceremonial drummer to let the village know that the Queen and her Consort had an announcement to make at dinner that evening. It was not a formal call to order, and participation was not mandatory. There was a buzz throughout the village the rest of the day as the women tried to guess what could be the cause of the Queen calling a tribal meeting.

When Xena and Gabrielle arrived at the dining hall, it was filled to overflowing. "The drums didn't make this meeting sound this important," Gabrielle whispered to her lover. "Are we so short on gossip that any reason to gather is good enough?"

The weather had been chilly, so the blonde's stomach was covered as they walked into the room. At Xena's insistence she had put on a light coat to keep warm on the way home.

When they reached the head of the table, Eve and Toxaris smiled knowingly. Gabrielle couldn't keep the secret from everyone and had informed Eve about the happy news just days after they found out. Their daughter and her lover had no doubt as to what the Royal Couple had to relate to the entire village.

Gabrielle motioned for everyone to take a seat, and then she began to speak to the gathering. "Normally, it would be Xena doing this introduction and I would be doing the speaking, but I think it is fitting that she be the one to do most of the talking this evening."

The bard could feel her lover's eyes boring into her. The last thing Xena wanted to do was be the one who had to explain everything to the entire Amazon population.

"Without keeping you in suspense any longer, I give you Xena." Gabrielle sat down and smiled innocently up at her mate, who sneered slightly before turning to address the crowd.

The warrior cleared her throat and looked around the room at the anxious faces. "I guess the first thing I should clear up is that this is not an emergency or a predicament; it's an auspicious event, an occasion to celebrate, and who better to share happiness with than family?"

Solemn faces turned inquisitive and smiling as they stared at the Queen and her Consort.

"Okay, I imagine the best way to do this is to simply announce that Gabrielle and I are . . . um, your Queen is . . . this village is going to have a new Princess."

"A new Princess?" someone mumbled.

"A new Princess?" echoed through the throng.

Finally, someone jumped up and pointed in the direction of the royal couple. "The Queen's pregnant!"

The crowd began to go wild with enthusiasm and congratulations. Xena could hear questions of *how* and *when* spreading throughout the room. Eve and Toxaris sat shaking their heads and laughing. Gabrielle sat quietly as the blood rushed to her cheeks.

"Good show, Mother; you really have a way with words. Maybe you should have let the bard handle the announcement." Eve giggled again, as Xena nudged her in the ribs.

"So I'm not the best speaker in the village. I think they got the message."

"Yeah, now how are you going to explain the impregnation?"

Xena raised her eyebrow, and her daughter continued, "Are you going to explain to everyone how Mom got pregnant, or do you want the village to make up their own stories?"

"No need for the Warrior Babe to go explaining anything." The answer came at the end of a flash of glittering pink and gold light.

Silence ensued as faces stared at the deity before them. Everyone knew that Xena and Gabrielle were friends with Aphrodite and that she had promised to keep an eye on the Amazons, but other

than her attendance at the royal joining, she wasn't in the habit of simply popping in unannounced at large functions.

The Goddess of Love knew she had the attention of every person in the room, but she took her time before speaking. First she gave Gabrielle a kiss on the cheek, and then she stood between the happy couple. "Before there's a lot of talk about how your Queen got pregnant and maybe even when it happened, let me fill you all in and tell you that the little bundle of joy was conceived on their wedding night. And the how was that they had a little divine intervention. The baby will, of course, be special; how could she not? She's a part of both your Queen and her Consort. By the way, the new member of the royal family will, if you haven't already guessed, definitely be a Princess."

Xena gave Aphrodite a look that said thank you in so many ways. She had dreaded having to clarify to the entire village how the baby had come into existence.

Aphrodite accepted a glass of wine and a chair, which was pulled up between the two guests of honor. "Can't stay long; I just wanted to join in on the fun for a sec or two. I have an appointment for a massage, and you know how I like my massages." She put her arms around her two favorite mortals and gave them a squeeze. "Besides, I have to go baby-sit Ares tonight. I told him Gabrielle was carrying your baby and I think he's pouting. If you two can find it in your hearts, it would be a marvelous gesture to invite him to visit once the little one is born."

"We'll think about it, Aphrodite," Gabrielle answered the goddess, "as long as he doesn't start his crap again."

"He's been true to his word and not bothering you at all, right?"

"Right!" The warrior answered this time. "I imagine it wouldn't hurt us to have a little compassion . . ."

"You didn't say compassion. Tell me you didn't say we needed to have compassion for Ares?" Green daggers raced towards the warrior's face.

"I was merely suggesting that we . . ."

"Xena," the goddess interrupted, "I don't think it's a good idea to argue with a pregnant woman, especially when you have company." She smiled and acknowledged the village participants, who were still quietly trying to hear what the three women at the head of the royal table were discussing.

An ebony-haired head nodded in agreement. "We'll talk about this later," she mouthed while looking directly at her mate. Then turning back to the crowd she announced unequivocally, "So, this is an evening for festivity, let's celebrate."

It didn't take a second invitation for the atmosphere in the hall to change to jubilation. Throughout the remainder of the meal, toasts could be heard as goblets were held high, "To the Queen . . . to the Warrior . . . to the Princess."

As the days became weeks and the weeks turned into months, Xena swore that with each passing day Gabrielle's belly grew just a little larger. She did finally learn to stop commenting on it when, in the eighth month of pregnancy, the bard caught a glimpse of herself totally naked in front of a long looking glass and broke out in tears.

"I'm never going to look as I did before, not ever!" she lamented, staring at the reflection and rubbing her hands over her protruding stomach.

"Of course you will," Xena tried to console her, overhearing the comment as she walked into the hut. She was returning from a meeting with Tecmessa and a small group of Amazons who had just returned from a mission. "I was that big when I carried Eve, and look at me now."

Her words had the opposite effect than what she had hoped for. Instead of agreeing and beginning to smile, the bard cried even more. "Yeah, that's easy for you to say; you're tall and thin to begin with. Just look at me; I'm short, and right now I'm fat, and I'm probably going to remain so." Again the tears started to flow from sea-green eyes, melting the warrior's heart.

Xena knew it would be futile to try arguing with her mate. Instead, she walked over and comforted her by placing strong, protecting arms around the crying woman. *Thank the gods I've long arms*, she laughed to herself. *It will definitely be a happy day for me when I can hold Gabrielle like I used to*. "There now, my Soul, it will all be over shortly and things will settle back down to normal, I promise."

"You don't have the power to promise that, Xena, but thanks for the attempt." Gabrielle sniffled into her lover's breast.

"Listen, Gabrielle, this should all be over in less than a moon, and I promise to work with you to get your girlish figure back."

"I will definitely hold you to that promise, Warrior," the bard's eyes glistened as tears began to dry and a smile appeared on the fair face.

"That's more like it; smiling becomes you." Xena's voice took on a serious tone and she held her love away from her and looked deep into the eyes that held her soul. "I wasn't quite sure how to break the news to you, but I was told this morning that there is some trouble about two day's ride from here. It seems our 'friends' the Dramarians have decided that since they are not going to interfere with Amazons, they would attack the less-protected villages along the coast. The scouts Tecmessa had sent out to check on the perimeter of our territory to the south of us came back with the news very early this morning."

"I guess that means you're going to put together a raiding party?"

"Yes, that's what we just finished discussing."

"How many?"

"We figured about thirty of us should be enough to get the situation under control."

"Of us? Xena, that sounds like you're leading the group." There was apprehension in the Queen's tone at the thought of her lover leaving at such a precarious time.

"I think it's best, Gabrielle."

"No! That's not fair. I need you here. Send Tecmessa."

"Gabrielle, she needs to stay and manage the rest of the scouts as they come back, in case there's trouble elsewhere along the outlying boundaries of Amazon territory."

"Send Eve."

"No. Eve is going to stay to be of comfort to Toxaris. You know how sick her mother's been recently. She'll also be here for you, if you need her, and to keep you company."

"But, Xena, what if the baby comes early?"

"I'm sure Aphrodite will come for me if that happens."

"What if you get hurt?"

"I won't, I promise."

"There you go again, making promises you can't keep." Again the emerald eyes began tearing. "Some Queen I am . . . crying like a baby because you're doing your job."

"I understand, Gabrielle, and I'll try to be back within a fortnight-much, much sooner if all goes well. I'm going on ahead, and I'll use our grotto to cut off some time. I'll also use it on the way back. By the time the Amazons arrive I'll have everything figured out, if not already taken care of." She smiled her crooked smile in an attempt to get Gabrielle to do the same.

"When do you have to leave?"

"As soon as possible, I'm afraid. The warriors are telling their families as we speak. We're meeting back in the command hut within the candlemark."

"I really wish there was some other way," Gabrielle sighed. "Is it wrong to want things to go smoothly, at least until after the baby's born?"

"No, my Soul, it's not wrong. Unfortunately, it wasn't our decision, and this has to be taken care of quickly before the Dramarians grow in force and decide that Amazons can't be all that much of a threat to them. You don't want them attacking this village *after* the baby's born, do you?"

"No. I guess I'm not thinking clearly."

"Your job while I'm gone is to take care of yourself." The warrior placed one hand gently on her lover's stomach. "And think of a name for her. One we will both like, okay?"

Gabrielle placed a small hand over Xena's larger one and smiled. "I love you, Xena. You're my world. Come home to me . . . us . . . quickly and safely."

"I will. The only reason I'm going is to make this home a safe place for all of us. I love you more than life, Gabrielle; I'm sure you know that by now." Pulling her mate into an embrace, she kissed the blonde crown and then bent down as a tear-streaked face looked up to receive a passionate kiss good-bye. "I'll be back before you miss me," she promised, then quickly relinquished her hold on the smaller woman and walked out of the hut without looking back.

As the door shut behind her, Gabrielle heard her parting comments; "Eve will come to check on you in a little while. I'll be back as soon as I can. I love you, Gabrielle."

Unwilling to give in to the depressed mood that was striving to descend upon her, the bard poured herself a small goblet of the dark red wine Thraso had told her was a good blood builder as long as she kept the dosage down to one goblet every few days. Today was one of those days when she needed the wine for more than medicinal purposes.

You're still the Queen, Gabrielle; don't you think you should at least make an effort to wish the warriors "gods' speed" on their quest? Nodding her head in the affirmative to her own question, she set the goblet on the table and walked to the door.

The midday sun was shining brightly on the village, and the coolness in the air pinched the Queen's cheeks as she stepped onto the porch. *What a beautiful day; it's a shame there has to be a tinge of sadness in the air.* She smiled at the young warriors about to pass the hut and waved as regally as she could muster. "Be safe and come home to us quickly."

The women waved back and smiled, putting their arms around their loved ones, who were walking with them to the edge of the village. She was slightly ashamed of herself for not walking Xena to the door, but she knew that Argo had been there waiting for her warrior when she left the hut, and she also knew that Xena did not want her any more upset than she already was. The bard smiled at how well her lover knew her and blew a kiss in the direction she knew her consort had taken out of the village. *Come home safe, my Champion,* Gabrielle whispered into the breeze. *The other half of your soul will be here waiting for your return.*

It was more than a little difficult to leave Gabrielle standing alone in the middle of the room, eight moons pregnant and crying. Xena cursed her title of Champion and Warrior when the job she was required to do caused heartache to the one she loved. But even Gabrielle agreed that it was better to keep the situation at the status quo and away from the village than to let it get out of hand and jeopardize the quiet life they were quickly becoming accustomed to.

She had taken only enough food to last her a few days. At the pace she was going, she would reach the lake and grotto by early morning. She could sleep for a while and then use the magic forest to arrive at the foot of Mount Ismarus. Scouting the territory between the mountain and the coastal city of Euphemus on the Aegean Sea would give her a vantage point from which she could manage her Amazons. They were to meet up with her at the base of the mountain in two days, and from there, they would travel together to the small Trojan city, mirrored by the town of Abdera on the other side of the inlet.

Xena had always felt that the Trojans were equipped enough to manage their own affairs, and she sensed that the Dramarians must have been a fiercer foe than she had anticipated to cause havoc among the displaced people who had decided to make a new life for themselves in this coastal area. After the conflict with the horse and the battle they had fought with Helen, Gabrielle's silver tongue had paved a quick path to a treaty. She and her bard had made allies of the remaining Trojans, and in aiding them now, she would be further extending the arm of friendship. Consequently, if the Amazons ever needed reinforcements, she would have no qualms about enlisting the seafaring people of Euphemus.

"It's odd being here without Gabrielle, Argo," Xena confided to her horse as they approached Lake New Beginning and the platform that would take them to the grotto. Within minutes she was standing in the center of the cavern alone, staring at the heart-shaped bed that brought back such wonderful memories. It was the first time she had ever been here without Gabrielle. She picked up one of the pillows on the bed and held it close. There were still traces of lavender from the last time they had slept there.

Before letting Argo roam free in the woods, she removed some cheese, bread, and deer jerky from the saddlebag. They had a fair stock of Amazon wine stored in a wooden keg over in the corner, and she poured herself a goblet.

"To us, my Soul," she announced lifting the goblet on high. "To our child, and to the peace that this venture will afford our village." To *us*, she heard Gabrielle reply in her mind. She drank deeply, refilled the glass, and placed it next to the food on the small bedside table.

Stripping naked, she walked to the edge of the grotto and allowed the inviting water of the falls to cleanse her of the layer of dust from the all-day ride. Basking in the cool liquid brought back memories of her first visit to the lake and its amenities. She tried to remember when she had last been so alone, without the constant babble of the bard who held her heart.

On a shelf, next to a pile of soft towels, was a bottle of lavender. The warrior wrapped herself in a towel, picked up the small bottle, opened it, and deeply breathed in one of her lover's favorite

scents. The raven-haired beauty shook her head and smiled. "I almost can't remember a time when you weren't part of me, Gabrielle."

She jerked, almost dropping the bottle, when the room suddenly lit with pink and gold sparks. "Feeling sentimental, are we, Warrior Babe?"

"Aphrodite! What in Tarnation are . . ."

"I just thought you might want a little company your first night away from home," the blonde smiled and pointed to the goblet filled with wine. Taking the hint, Xena retrieved another from the shelf, filled it, and handed it to the goddess.

"You didn't happen to stop and see . . ."

"Yada, yada, yada . . . of course I did. I checked on the littlest one first," Aphrodite assured the warrior. "Eve was already there, and Gabby was quite resigned to the fact that you would be just fine and back in the village long before she was about to pop that little sweetie out of the oven." She sat down on the bed next to Xena. "So, is everything okay here? You look a little lonely."

"It's been a while since I've been on a mission without Gabrielle at my side. It feels strange. I was trying to remember back to a time when I didn't have her with me. Of course I can remember, but it seems like a lifetime ago."

"It was a lifetime ago, Xena." The goddess smiled and put her arm around the warrior.

"So, how's Ares?"

"He's still depressed, but he's coping," Aphrodite answered in her usual lilt. "Are you going to invite him to visit the baby?"

"I think Gabrielle has decided that he's no longer a threat," the warrior smiled. "Yes, but don't tell him until after she's born, please."

The goddess made a sign of zipping her lips. She lifted her goblet and finished off the wine. "Gotta go. I just didn't want you to think I showed favoritism between you two."

"Really," the eyebrow rose and Xena shook her head giving the goddess a crooked smile. "Aphrodite, there's no doubt in my mind that Gabrielle is your favorite, but you know what? It doesn't bother me in the least. I'm thrilled that she has an Olympian on her side. I feel safe in knowing that if anything were to happen to me, you'd be there to look after her."

"Well, nothing's going to happen to you, Warrior Babe. You need to get that gorgeous body of yours home in one piece to help our bard raise that little bundle of joy the two of you are expecting any moon now. You take care of yourself like you promised, and I'll see you when . . . do you have a name for her yet?"

"No. Gabrielle's supposed to be working on that while I'm gone."

"Okay, then I'll see you birthing day."

As quickly as she had arrived, the goddess was off with a flash, leaving the warrior with a refilled glass of wine and a bowl of fresh fruit.

"Enjoy your dessert." Aphrodite's words echoed in the grotto after she was already gone.

"I will," Xena replied to the air. "And thanks."

"Welcome, Warrior," were the final words Xena heard that evening. She finished her wine and lay back on the soft covers, not bothering to fold them down. The sky was still dark, even though the stars were beginning to fade. Xena looked out through the falling waters and remembered back to the first time the two of them had gazed at an early morning sky together. *Goodnight, my Soul, sleep well. You'll be in my dreams.*

The foothills of Ismarus were quiet. The air was still crisp with the last breath of winter, as the Ides of March was but days away. *I don't think we have any enemies in the mountain, Argo. Time to take a trip to the sea.*

Once again, Xena approached the base of Mount Ismarus. She immediately felt the lack of isolation and knew she was no longer alone. The Amazons had made it as planned, and battle tactics would be discussed well into the evening. They would rest that night, and at daybreak the Dramarians would receive a surprise visit from neighbors as far from home as they themselves were.

Xena explained to the Amazon warriors that the Trojans that had decided to become fishermen had become soft in the ways of war. When the Dramarians sent out scouting parties, they spied both Euphemus and Abdera and were probably intent on attacking the latter city when they were finished with the former. They figured that a fishing village would be virtually no threat to them and that conquest would be quick and easy.

"Our job is to upset their apple cart and let them know that all the territories south of them are our allies and protected by the Amazon tribes. They don't know how strong we are, or what our actual numbers are. We intend to keep them in the dark on both those subjects."

"Xena," Ainia, one of the original scouts, addressed the warrior. "Will we have any help from the townsfolk?"

"Absolutely. While I was waiting for you to arrive, I talked to some of the residents. There's a plan already in place for the stragglers that make their way back to the town or those who are not

in the encampment in the morning. Between here and Euphemus I checked out the troops at their camp. From what I heard, they think the townspeople and the occupants of the surrounding areas don't have any idea what's going on. They're foolish enough to believe that they will simply walk in and take over the town and then go on to do the same across the sea at Abdera. I watched them practice, and believe me, we should all be home in a few days." She smiled at the attentive faces before her. "Our attack on them will come as a complete surprise. This little conflict should guarantee us peace for a long time to come and also fortify our allegiance with the Trojans."

The faces looking back at her now appeared more relaxed, and some of the younger Amazons had a youthful air of eagerness. "I know you will all make me proud of you, make our tribe proud of you, the seasoned and unseasoned among you as well. You have all been more than adequately trained, and I am proud to be fighting by your side. I will warn you that they do outnumber us about four to one but are extremely lacking in military skills. Their base is out in the open with no avenue of retreat. Okay, you've all had a long journey to get here; if there are no more questions, I think some sleep is in order. Those of you who will join us in the second strike can scatter and keep watch while the rest of us sleep."

But, the warrior didn't get much rest that night; she lay awake listening to the excited chatter of the younger warriors and the stories being told by some of the older warriors. She listened to the sounds of the forest, the mountain, the running brook, and the animals of the night. She ran over in her mind the strategy she had initiated with the fishing town and what had been discussed at the campfire tonight with the Amazons. She felt quite secure that they would be victorious. The deep dark hours slowly disappeared, and come two candlemarks before dawn, a semi-rested Champion fully opened her sapphire eyes to greet a day of reckoning for the invading troops.

This is for the Greater Good, Gabrielle, and for you and our child. If all goes according to plan, I'll be holding you in my arms in a few days. I love you.

As the first rays of the morning sun peeked above the horizon, Xena stood in front of the Amazons and gave some last words of encouragement. The thirty or so before her had used all the horses the village had and were the only warriors that had been trained to ride into the heat of battle as opposed to fighting on foot. As quietly as possible, they had surrounded the camp and were ready to attack. There would be no attempt at peaceful reconciliation with these troops; they were dealing with the Warrior Princess now, and not the Queen of the Amazons. The Dramarian soldiers had been given their one chance at becoming allies with the tribe the previous year. Xena and her comrades had the obvious advantage over more than half the troops they would soon be coming into contact with, as the Dramarians before them were mostly foot soldiers.

"For the survival of the Amazons and for our allies," Xena finalized as she waved her arm, signaling the women to move out and follow her.

Following Xena's war cry, there was an initial flurry of arrows that struck the early risers as they exited from their tents. The men scurried to retrieve their weapons and raced headlong into the midst of attacking Amazons. Most of the woman found no need to dismount, but swung from

their vantage points with skilled swords that hit their marks and downed the defending troops in their tracks.

After the inceptive combat, Xena pulled back and watched the fruits of her training as the Amazons easily conquered the unprepared soldiers even though the men greatly outnumbered them. The warrior smiled when some of the men took off to the north, no doubt to warn their people that the Amazons were definitely a tribe to be leery of having as an enemy. Turning her attention back to the battle, she ascertained that the women had the situation well under control. It was time for her to follow the handful of men who had escaped to their horses and galloped toward the town to warn their companions.

Greeted by a flurry of easily dodged arrows, the warrior entered the town as planned the day before when she had met with the townspeople. "Aiya la la la la la, cheea," reverberated throughout Euphemus as Argo galloped past the archers, her rider easily separating the bows from the shooters.

Armed with fishing nets, harpoons, and spears, the citizens of Euphemus opened fire upon the unsuspecting Dramarians, who had been under the false impression that the town and its people were an easy mark. From second story windows, netting fell on small groups of soldiers who thought they were safely hidden in the shadows of buildings. From more aggressive townspeople, the soldiers were met with barbed hooks, spears, and the occasional netting needles wielded by the women, who refused to be left behind during the skirmish to await the outcome. In less than a candlemark, the remaining troops were dragged into the center of the town and given an ultimatum.

The fear in their eyes was apparent as the tall, dark-haired warrior stepped up to the trapped soldiers and addressed them. "We're not barbarians. It is not our desire to kill you in cold blood. Doing so would not afford your relatives the knowledge of realizing that we are a formidable enemy. It would be in the best interest of all of your people to accept a peace treaty with not only the Amazons but also the good people of this coastal region. As you now know, we are allies, and it would take more of you than I believe exist to conquer all of us."

She gave them a stern look. "This is your final warning. Join us in peace or be annihilated in war. We have no qualms about joining forces again. If you want the ground of your homeland stained with the blood of battle, that choice is yours. But I guarantee that the better decision for you and your people would be to accept your dominion as it now stands, and allow the Amazons, the Euphemusians, and the Abderians to live in peace. None of us want your land, but we will fight for our own. Believe me when I tell you that in the scope of the entire Known World, your nation is small and insignificant. You would do well to remain at home with your families and live a prosperous life of peace. War, although it might be a necessity in some instances, does not allow you the satisfaction you would acquire from being content with your lives as you now live them."

Standing in front of the prisoners, she waited for one of them to be announced spokesperson. It didn't take long for the consensus to be passed around the group that was now unnetted but totally surrounded by townspeople.

A rough-looking older man with scars on his face carefully stepped away from the group and toward the warrior.

"This mission was not one of total agreement with our superiors from the beginning," he confessed as he continued to close the gap between himself and the dark-haired woman. "We had been told that you were protector of the Northern Amazons and didn't want any fight with you or your people. We had no idea that your protection reached as far as the sea."

A crooked smile and raised eyebrow was focused on the new leader of the group. "I imagine you see your mistake now?"

He glanced back at his comrades who were all shaking their heads in agreement. "Yes, you could definitely say we understand now. We don't have any argument with you, Xena."

"You do as long as you have an argument with any people between my Amazons and the Aegean Sea. In actuality, I might show up anywhere in Greece or Thrace to help defend those who are in need of fortification. It's a small world . . .?"

"Garius," the man acknowledged, "Garius of Dramaria."

"Garius," Xena parroted. "Do you think you could manage to negotiate with your leaders back in Dramaria and get them to agree with your companions here?"

"I don't think I'll have any problem at all, now that we all know exactly who and what we are up against. It's better to have strong allies than strong enemies." The man tried to smile, hoping to soften the look on his adversary's face.

Xena was not ready to give in and become friendly with the group standing before her, heads bowed. "Before I let you and your friends leave, I want you to know that you will be followed home and that I intend to see a delegation of your top governing officials within three months time, around the summer solstice. We will be in touch with you by messenger before that time as to exactly where and when. The Queen of the Amazons will want to personally officiate at the meeting, and only then will we solidify a truce between your territories and those protected by the Amazons."

"Queen Gabrielle, the Bard Queen? We heard of her, and some of our bards have even seen copies of her most famous scrolls."

"Yes, Queen Gabrielle. It was her leadership that united the entire Amazon nation so ambitious nations such as yours would have more of a power to deal with than individual tribes. United we stand, divided we would have fallen." *Bet your ears are ringing now, my Soul.* Xena couldn't help but allow a small smile to grace her face.

She heard a commotion coming from just north of them and breathed a sigh of relief as the moment she had been waiting for finally arrived. The warrior took her attention from the captives before her to watch as her fellow Amazons herded in the surviving Dramarians.

"Looks like the remainder of your troops are coming to join you." Xena first addressed Garius and then the people of Euphemus. "With the permission of the people you came and yet failed to conquer, I'll release you to return home." Her eyes met those of the spokesperson for the town and she was given an affirmative nod.

"Release all the prisoners, and from this day on they will be considered our allies until such time as they make it known that the bond has been broken."

Garius stretched forth his hand to clasp Xena's. "Thank you, Xena, I'm sure that the next time we meet it will be under much better circumstances. Sometimes it takes a military failure to open the eyes of those in charge."

"Safe journey to you and your men, Garius." She shook her former enemy's hand. "I, too, hope our next encounter will be under better circumstances."

Turning her back on the exiting soldiers, she questioned Ainia about the battle that had just been concluded.

"We didn't lose any sisters, Xena. A few were seriously wounded, and some are badly bruised, but all are alive and with a little rest will be ready to make the trip home in a few days."

"The citizens of Euphemus will house those of you who want to stay and heal. I'm sure there will be a celebration tonight, but I think you and the rest of the sisters will understand if I don't stay."

"Definitely," the younger warrior agreed. "Being away from the Queen at this stage of her pregnancy must be difficult for both of you."

The warrior nodded in agreement. "I'll be leaving you in charge, Ainia, and Melanippe will be second in command. I don't care which of you stays to travel home with the wounded, but one of you will. There's a woman who lives at the edge of town who will be able to give medical attention to those in need. The rest of the sisters and whoever of you decides not to stay can leave in the morning, but I want half of the sisters to remain here so your traveling numbers are not too small."

"Understood. How soon will you be leaving, Xena?"

"After I speak to the first citizen, Arian, I will look in on all the sisters. If you can get everyone who is able to gather over by the tavern, we can discuss what happened here today and how we will be dealing with the Dramarians. I'll get something to eat and drink and then go see the wounded before leaving." She patted Ainia on the shoulder. "Today was a good day, my friend. Everything went according to plan, and casualties, it seems, were kept to a minimum. I'm proud of all of you."

The young warrior blushed slightly and nodded at the legend standing before her. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined fighting in a battle with the Warrior Princess as her leader.

The lump in her throat deterred her from saying what was really in her heart. She swallowed hard and then told the hero that she would go get the women as asked.

Xena made eye contact with Arian from across the courtyard and motioned that she wanted to talk. The two met on the fringes of the crowd, and with her arm around his shoulder, she walked with him to the tavern.

After discussing the activities of the day, food, medical treatment, shelter for her Amazons, and plans for the future, she allowed the first citizen to properly and publicly thank her and the Amazons for saving the town and turning a dire situation into victory. Talk of a feast was underway, and the dark warrior slipped from the excitement of the crowd into the pub, where she ordered food and wine. She was politely told that her dinars did not spend in Euphemus, not now and not ever. She thanked the owner and left a tip for the waitress when she got up to join the Amazons who were waiting for her outside.

Less than a candlemark later, she had congratulated the warriors who had bravely fought and checked on the condition of those who were wounded. She tried to give the healer compensation, but again found that her dinars would not be taken. Graciously, she allowed the woman to go about her business and went to have a final discussion with Ainia and Melanippe. Satisfied that both the wounded and the well were in competent company, she bid goodbye to her friends, both old and new, and began her journey home.

It was getting close to sunset, and even though the day had been a full one, the warrior was not tired. Foremost in her mind now was hurrying home to Gabrielle. As she rode away, she waved farewell to the citizens of the small town. The battle that had just been fought and won was beginning to fade into her memory, as visions of her mate filled the sky before her. She would rest when Argo got tired, but she knew that by sunset tomorrow she would be at the grotto. A smile crossed the solemn face of the warrior; reaching the cave by sunset meant she would be home no more than a few heartbeats later and in the arms of the woman she loved.

Her heart skipped a beat as she led Argo across the grotto to the magical forest. Closing her eyes, she envisioned the area of trees directly behind their hut. She could see Gabrielle staring out the back window, a faraway look in her emerald eyes.

Seconds later, the smell of pine permeated the air, and as Xena's eyes beheld her home, she was not at all surprised to find that her soulmate was, indeed, at the window and looking in her direction. The face of an angel greeted her, and as always, Gabrielle's smile brought joy to the warrior's heart.

"I knew it the minute you reached the grotto," Gabrielle announced, leaving the window to open the back door. "Gods, I missed you!"

Dismounting, Xena gave Argo a pat and the horse took off into the woods.

"I missed you, too," the warrior confessed, reaching for her soulmate.

"I take it everything went according to whatever you planned, or you wouldn't be back here so soon. Do we have new friends, or are there a lot of dead enemies in and about the town of Euphemus?"

"We have new allies, but we can talk about that later. Right now I want to know how you've been feeling and if our daughter has been behaving herself." She placed a hand gently on the bard's abdomen and questioningly cocked her head.

"She's been a bit active, but that's as it should be." Gabrielle covered the larger hand with one of her own. "As much as I don't want to share you right now, I think we need to blow the horn and let the rest of the village know that everyone is all right . . . they are, aren't they?"

"Yes, my Soul, there are some bruised and battered bodies, but they all made it through the battle. A few of the sisters got some pretty deep wounds, but the healer in Euphemus is very good." She gave her lover a welcoming hug and kissed her tenderly on eager lips. "You're right about telling everyone what happened, but I wanted to see your face first and have a few minutes alone with you."

Arm in arm they walked back into the hut. Not wanting to release her hold on Xena, Gabrielle continued to clutch her lover's hand while reaching for the ceremonial ram's horn with her free one. She then stepped onto the porch and blew the instrument loudly to announce the warrior's arrival home.

Tecmessa, Eve, and Toxaris were the first to arrive at the Queen's hut. Xena stood beside a now seated Gabrielle. She greeted her daughter and Toxaris and then turned to address Tecmessa. "If it's okay with you, I would just like to give a general summation tonight to the entire village and then go over everything in detail with you in the morning. I think you realize by my timely return that everything went our way and the Dramarians are our new allies." A powerful handshake sealed the conversation.

It didn't take long for the entire village to be standing in front of the Queen's hut. Xena put her hands up to hush the crowd. "I want everyone to know that there were no fatalities among us during the battle."

A cheer arose from the assembly, and the warrior had to raise her hands again to silence the women.

"There were a few who were gravely wounded, but they are being taken care of by an excellent healer who lives outside the town of Euphemus. All your sisters were treated as heroes, and the coastal community gave our tribe an open invitation to visit any time we feel the inclination. Of course, I made sure to tell them that we would not all show up at one time to vacation along the seashore." The statement broke through the solemn atmosphere of the assemblage, and then Xena quickly moved along, explaining a little of the battle plan and how the Dramarians had

been conquered without wasting a single Amazon life. She called the families of those most seriously wounded up onto the porch and filled them in on the condition of their loved ones.

During the discussion some of the women had gone for food and drink for Xena and her family. Eve received the refreshments, placed them on the table in front of her mom, and then excused herself and Toxaris after once again whispering to her mother that she was happy all had gone as expected. She made sure to tell her that she'd never had a single doubt that it would end any other way.

The crowd had dwindled quickly after the initial speech was finished, and as soon as the last family was apprised of their relative's condition and anticipated time of arrival back in the village, the warrior and her bard were left to their own devices.

Xena sat and joined Gabrielle at the table. The bard poured her lover a goblet of wine and then one for herself. "I haven't had a drink since the day you left, so stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like, *Why Gabrielle, should you be drinking so close to the baby's birth?* Like that!"

The warrior smiled and took her lover's hand. "I know the healer told you the wine was fine used in moderation, and I know how good you are at following orders."

"You're not home a full day and you're back to teasing . . ."

"Oh, but you're so much fun to tease, my Love."

Xena got up and walked around the table; she offered Gabrielle her hand, and the smaller woman took it and stood. Xena picked up both goblets, and with her free arm around her lover they went back inside the hut.

"I'm so glad you weren't gone on the Ides of March, Xena. I hope the baby doesn't decide to make her appearance on that day; it's one I keep trying to forget."

"One of many, Gabrielle, but at least the final outcome was something we could both live with." She grinned and then saw that her lover was not smiling back at her. "It's only a few days away, do you feel like you are that close to delivering?"

"No."

"Well then, no sense letting the past upset you. You look radiant, Gabrielle. This pregnancy becomes you." For some reason there was no keeping the dark-haired beauty in a solemn mood tonight. She was happy the battle was over, pleased they had new allies, and most of all she was thrilled to be back home with the love of her life. The longer they lived in the village, the more her childhood memories of Amphipolis returned, and she remembered how peaceful and heart-

warming it was to grow up in a secure home. She wanted that for their baby. "So, have you thought of a name?"

"I have a few in mind, but none that really strike me as being permanent. Do you have one?"

"No. I promised you could have that honor. I'll just wait and be surprised, if you don't want to tell me yet. Any name the Warrior Bard of Potidaea comes up with has got to be one for the scrolls. What do you say to turning in early tonight? I'm sure you could use the rest, and I can think of nothing I would rather do than lie down on my own bed and wrap my arms around you."

"Or as much around me as you can," the bard giggled.

"These are long arms, my Love, no problem."

Lost in the comfort of familiar surroundings, the warrior was able to put away the visions of battles and problems and concentrate on affairs of the heart. *It was difficult sleeping without this precious bundle in my arms. I thank the powers that be for allowing me to return home before the birth of my daughter.*

Secure in her lover's arms, the bard had no problem getting to sleep. *Little does she know that I hardly slept when she was gone. On the other hand, probably one look at my eyes and she absolutely knew that I needed rest. Thank the gods our daughter didn't decide it was time to arrive before her other mother returned home.*

Xena had predicted that the Ides would come and go and the baby would still be happily resting in Gabrielle's abdomen. She had mentioned more than once that everything was ready for the arrival, and Gabrielle would laugh at the anxiousness in the dark beauty's voice. Every jump or groan coming from the blonde elicited a string of questions as to whether she was going into labor.

On the first day of the new moon, the mother-to-be was sitting quietly on her front porch after watching Xena playing with some of the village children. They loved it when the warrior would show off for them and twirl her double swords high above her head, bringing them down to stab at an unseen villain. They would beg Xena to teach them how to twirl the play swords the village woodworker had fashioned for them out of tree branches.

Placing a hand upon her abdomen, the bard smiled and then picked up her quill. It had been some time since she had done any serious writing, but the Muse was speaking to her today as she penned a poem to their unborn child.

*Poem to Gabrena
Dear child of ours who will you be?
A bit of her and some of me?
I know that you'll define us two ~*

*I hope there will be more of you.
Oh babe of ours, can't wait to see
A little Gab, a tiny Xe,
Or mixture of us two, as we.
Darling daughter, will you surprise
With sea-green or blue-velvet eyes?
Guess we'll just have to wait and see
Until we two becomes us three.*

No sooner had she finished the final word than the baby kicked like she never had before. Pain began shooting downward, and as she stood to call for Xena, she felt a warm liquid flow from her body and down her legs.

The warrior must have sensed the change in the atmosphere surrounding the hut, for she glanced immediately at Gabrielle and then back at the children. "Go quickly, get So-So. Tell her the Queen is delivering." The little girls ran screaming through the middle of the village on their way to the healer's hut as Xena took the porch stairs in one leap.

She had made a decoction of Centaury leaves to ease the birth pains, and after sitting Gabrielle back down, rushed into the hut to retrieve the medicine.

"Here, Gabrielle, take a sip of this; it will help with the pain. Thraso is on her way and the tub is warm. I have the room well stocked with blankets and towels. How far apart are the pains?"

"I've really only had . . . oh, gods . . . there . . . ooooooh . . . another."

"Breathe into the pain, Gabrielle."

"Take it away, Xena," the small blonde cried.

"Come on, my Love." The queen's champion picked her up and started to carry her into the house. A young woman was passing by and Xena yelled to her. "Tell our daughter her mom is birthing."

The woman ran off in the direction of Eve's hut while Xena took Gabrielle inside.

On the way to what she had always thought of as the "birthing room," Xena picked up a candle scented with lavender. After helping Gabrielle undress, Xena lit the candle and placed it on the edge of the tub. "This will help with the afterbirth, my Love," she told her mate. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," came the soft answer as a now naked Gabrielle stepped cautiously into the warm tub. "Are you sure this is going to be the best way to deliver the baby, Xena?"

"Yes, Gabrielle, I am."

"I wrote our baby a poem today; it must have been a sign that she was ready to make her entrance into the world." Gabrielle smiled, her green eyes shining in the dimly lit room. "I love you, Xena; this is the most beautiful day of my life."

Tears flowed from the warrior's eyes as she beheld her soulmate. Gabrielle's beauty was breathtaking, and she was going to deliver into the world a baby who would be the culmination of their love for each other. The child would possess characteristics of each of them. Xena shook her head trying to imagine the miracle that was about to happen. Both of them had given birth before and both of them had loved their children, but this little girl would be something so special that even the gods would stop and take notice of her. She was the offspring of Xena of Amphipolis, the Warrior Princess, and Gabrielle, the Bard of Potidaea, Queen of the Amazons. Even the royalty of Egypt and the god-like assumption of a Caesar would pale in comparison to the wonder that would be their daughter. A voice interrupted her reverie and she shook her head, bringing her thoughts back to the here and now.

"Xena, is she okay?" Again Thraso asked the same question.

"Yes . . . yes . . . she's fine, but if she asks me one more time to stop the pain, I absolutely intend to do so." The warrior looked up from her sitting position beside the tub into the eyes of the healer.

"So, do you want to get in the tub with your mate, or did you want me to deliver your daughter?"

Without a moment's hesitation, the warrior stripped down to her underwear and joined Gabrielle. From the outer room she could hear voices and recognized that one of them belonged to Eve.

"Mother, what can I do?" Eve asked, slightly opening the door.

"Get your mom some cool water in case she wants something to moisten her lips."

"You got it." Eve was gone and back again before the next pain struck.

"How are you feeling, Gabrielle," Xena asked as she sat in the water in front of her lover.

"Actually, since I got into the water, it seems like all my muscles have relaxed and the pain has diminished to the point where I probably won't be asking you to take it away."

"I certainly hope that's the case."

Thraso leaned over and administered a little more of the elixir Xena had given Gabrielle to help with the pain.

Gabrielle easily shifted in the water and positioned herself to make it easy for Xena to see when the baby's head started crowning. "Do you see her yet?"

"No, my Soul, not yet."

"Would you like to know her name so you can greet her when she arrives?"

"That might be advantageous; it's always a plus to know your own daughter's name."

"Gabrena," Gabrielle whispered.

"Gabrena?"

"Yes. She's a blending of the two of us and so is her name, a combination, yet totally separate, and a personality all her own. I honestly tried to put your name first, but the name never sounded right."

"Gabrena is beautiful, Gabrielle. I love it."

"I like it, too," Thraso agreed. "It's a good Amazon name. It sounds strong, yet has a lyrical quality."

The bard grabbed her stomach and winced.

"Pain?" Xena asked.

"Not too bad," came the reply. "But I think you had better look a little closer."

Sitting in the warm water seemed to relax the bard. Her movements were fluid and she was breathing easy. Xena and Thraso looked at each other and agreed that this was definitely a plus for not only the mother, but for the baby as well. The less Gabrielle had to fight pain, the more energy she could focus on the birthing process and the less tension on her body as the baby came through the birth canal.

Xena watched as the skin around the opening of the vagina began to stretch almost easily, and the crown of her daughter's head made its first appearance.

"Gabrielle, if you can gently push, it would help her greatly," Xena encouraged as she placed her hands in a catching position between her lover's thighs. "She's coming out easily and just needs a little help." The warrior smiled at her mate and then at the Shamaness. "I think this is going to work magnificently."

Thraso simply nodded as she focused her attention on both the birth mother and the area where the child would enter the water. "What are you going to do, Xena?"

The warrior smiled and addressed her mate. "Gabrielle, give me your hands." She took her small fingers and placed them on their daughter's crown, as her head broke free of her mother's body.

"Xena, I can feel her."

"Yes, my Soul, a few more minutes and she will be totally released." Large, strong hands helped to guide smaller ones to the area of the baby's shoulders as they began to squeeze through the opening. "One final push, Gabrielle."

Xena watched as Gabrielle followed her instructions, and their daughter emerged fully into the warm water. The warrior immediately scooped the infant up into her arms and gazed upon its face. "She's absolutely beautiful, Gabrielle." Carefully she handed the baby to her birth mother.

"Welcome to the world, Gabrena; we've been waiting to meet you." Tears of happiness flowed down the faces of both mothers and mingled with the waters of birth.

At that instant there was a familiar flash of gold and pink sparkles, and Aphrodite stood beside the tub smiling down at her two-and now three-favorite mortals.

"Like your mother said, Littlest One, welcome to the world. Your Auntie Aphrodite is here with a birthday present." The goddess passed her hand over the small body, immediately cleansing it and dissolving the cord that had attached mother to child. Simultaneously, the afterbirth disappeared and the tub's water again became crystal clear. Aphrodite caressed the baby's completely healed navel. The goddess then leaned down and kissed the newborn on the forehead. "I heard your Mommy call you Gabrena; nice name for the warrior and bard's daughter. I know you'll have the best attributes of both your mothers, and of course a kiss of magic."

Because Gabrena had been receiving the breath of life from her mother until the cord was severed, there had been no reason for the baby to breathe on her own. Now, cuddled close to Gabrielle's chest, the infant took her first breath and let out what sounded like a small sigh. The adults all laughed; it was the first time any of them had ever witnessed a human birth *sans* crying.

"What a marvelous way to bring children into the world, Xena," Thraso congratulated her friend. "She's a beautiful child."

"You'll get no argument from me," the warrior agreed.

Eve handed her mother a cool, damp cloth, and Xena wiped Gabrielle's forehead.

"Ready to get out of the water, Gabrielle, or do you want to stay and relax a few minutes longer?"

"She seems so happy to be lying here," Gabrielle stroked the soft down on her baby's head. "Perhaps we should stay a bit longer?"

"I'll get out and get you some tea."

"No need, Mother," Eve placed a hand on Xena's shoulder. "I'll get it." She put the water down and left the room.

"May I do my shamanistic duty and check the child, my Queen?"

"Of course, Thraso," Gabrielle answered handing the baby to the healer. "You don't have to be so formal . . ."

"Oh, but I do, my Queen, this is an auspicious occasion, one of formality and royalty. A new Princess has been born." She searched each area of the baby's body with adept fingers, smiling when the reactions came as were expected. "Normally, it would also be my obligation to present the babe to the tribe, but I'm going to forego that honor this one time and let her other mother do the introducing."

Receiving a grateful look from the warrior, she handed the baby back to Xena. "She's perfect, but I'm sure you already know that."

"Again, my friend, you'll get no argument from me," Xena agreed.

"I've left some herbs on the table in case you need them, Gabrielle," the healer smiled, reverting back to familiarity. "If I can be of further service, blow the ram's horn in three short bursts, and I will be here as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Thraso." Gabrielle extended a hand to the healer.

"That goes for me as well," Xena replied.

"You are both more than welcome. I will let the crowd know that the little one has made her presence known; you may present her to her sisters whenever you're ready."

After the Shamaness left, Gabrielle noticed a slightly drawn expression on Eve's face as she handed her a cup of tea.

"Where's Toxaris?" the bard queried, realizing suddenly that the younger woman had been absent from the celebration.

"Toxaris lost her mother, Rhea, today, Mom," Eve answered. "I didn't want to spoil the atmosphere surrounding the baby's birth. I couldn't be in both places at once, but I knew Mother was here with you, so I waited with Toxaris for the final moments."

A bittersweet smile tickled the corners of the new mother's face. "I guess it just goes to show us that even with death all around us, life persists." She snuggled her small bundle close to her breast and allowed the baby to feed. "We all knew that Rhea's time was short, but she was so hoping to meet this little one before passing over. I know she's here in spirit. Will you please relay that to Toxaris for me, and tell her I understand if she doesn't want to visit today? Let her know that anything she needs is only a request away."

"I will, Mom. I need to get back to her now." Eve kissed Gabrielle on the cheek and smiled at her new sister. "Welcome to the family, Gabrena; you sure picked a fascinating one to join."

Eve left the room as Gabrielle was still nodding her head in agreement. The new mother looked from the baby to her lover. "Our daughter is beautiful, Xena. I think she has your smile and coloring."

"I think she's a real cross between us, my Love. Look at that nose, and her eyes are shaped just like yours." Xena touched the silky light brown hair of the baby's head. "What do you say we get you and our little miracle into bed for a while?"

Xena took Gabrena from Gabrielle's arms and handed her to Aphrodite to hold while she helped Gabrielle out of the tub and dried her off.

The small blonde was pleasantly exhausted, enjoying the feeling of being surrounded by the soft warm covers of her bed. She took a sip of the tea that had been prepared for her and then received the baby back from the goddess.

"Here you go, Little Mom. I have to leave, but I'm glad I was here for this littlest one's birthday. Have you thought about letting Ares visit?"

"We have," Gabrielle acknowledged. "Give us a few days and he can come with you the next time you visit."

"Oh, Gabby, he'll be so pleased. Thank you, Little One." She kissed Gabrielle on the cheek and then did the same for the baby. With a wink in the warrior's direction and a wave good-bye to all, she was gone in her usual glitter and light.

"Alone at last," Xena sighed. "It's been quite an afternoon."

"That it has," Gabrielle agreed, holding Gabrena to her breast and allowing the baby to continue to feed. When she was finished, the infant made a sound that most people would have taken for a gurgle, but her moms insisted that she had just giggled at them as they looked down into the beautiful turquoise eyes of their daughter.

"Welcome to the world, little Amazon Princess," Gabrielle cooed as she rocked the baby in her arms.

Xena sat down on the bed next to her and placed one arm around her lover's shoulder while her other hand gently caressed the cheek of their newborn. "Gabrielle, I think we're about to start on our greatest adventure ever," the warrior whispered. "If she's anything like you, she'll be a handful." The warrior laughed as she received an elbow in the ribs.

"You think so, Warrior Princess. If she's anything like you, you'll have the redemption you still feel you haven't obtained. You'll receive it simply by raising her; she will definitely be your golden ticket to the Amazon afterlife."

"You look tired, Gabrielle. Do you want to rest for a while? You know I won't be able to keep the curious out much longer. Everyone wants to see the newest royal addition to the tribe."

"Maybe a few minutes' rest would do me some good, while Gabrena is quiet and content. I have a feeling we'll be doing a lot of napping in the next few moons."

"I can always take the early shift." Xena took the baby from the small blonde's arms and proudly held her close to her heart. Instead of placing Gabrena into the crib, she turned around to tell Gabrielle that she would be back as soon as she talked to the crowd outside the hut, but the bard was already sleeping. The warrior smiled at her mate and then at her daughter before venturing out to introduce their precious bundle to the anxious but patiently awaiting Amazons.

The Beginning of a New Life

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