

~ Wedding Preparations ~

by Carole Giorgio

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Leaving a town filled with people who loved them caught the small troupe in a web of silence, each contemplating the past couple of days and all the loved ones, new and old who had again become meshed into their lives.

Gabrielle was off in a world of her own thinking about having a niece who could have passed for her twin, as well as a nephew and brother-in-law. Occasionally she would get a pang of grief over the loss of her parents, but at least her memories of them were good ones.

She turned to her left and addressed Xena. "So, a dinar for your thoughts?"

"I guess I was thinking about Mother and feeling thankful that we got to see her. I think she really enjoyed having her entire family together. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity and one I'm sure she never expected. I also feel more reconnected with the family, but it's sometimes unsettling to have a niece who is almost the same age as me, when I should be old enough to be her mother."

"That is a weird feeling, isn't it? I feel the same way about Gabby. But, I was also thinking about how lucky we are to have had our families think enough of us to name the new additions after us." She smiled over at Xena and chuckled.

"What?" the warrior questioned.

"Well, with a new Gabrielle and Xena, I think that means we'll have to come up with an original name for any new addition we decide to add to the families."

Giving the bard the arched eyebrow look only made the blonde smile and giggle more as the warrior tried to keep a solemn face.

"Hey, I heard that, Mom." Eve drew her horse a little closer to Gabrielle's. "So, are you two actually contemplating giving me a baby sister in the near future?"

"Perhaps," Xena answered. "There are still some minor details to take into consideration."

"I have faith in you Mother," Eve smiled over at the warrior. "I'm sure you'll have the situation well in hand before long. You could do whatever it was you did when you conceived me." A quizzical look came upon the younger woman's face. "As a matter of fact, we are going to have to have a discussion about that one of these days, right?"

"Yes, one of these days," Xena agreed, "but not today."

"So, Eve," Gabrielle began, deciding there was no time like the present to change the subject from how babies are conceived. "How did you like meeting your relatives?"

"The experience meant more to me than you can imagine Mom. In Rome I was a child of the state. It's hard to develop family ties when responsibility is the outstanding lesson you're taught, even as a child. I made sure I got Grandmother off to herself for a little while and asked all sorts of questions about when Mother was young. She can't play the *'I was a perfect child'* with me anymore." She grinned over in Xena's direction and then turned back to Gabrielle. "I heard about your youth from Gabby; it seems Aunt Lila was very thorough when it came to family dynamics. She made sure her children knew all about their Aunt Gabrielle and Xena, the Warrior Princess. Gabby idolizes the two of you."

Gabrielle blushed, thinking about all the stories Lila could have told.

"I really enjoyed meeting both the families," Toxaris chimed in, as she positioned her horse on the other side of Xena. "I've never seen the inter-workings of a family that contained both males and females. The only interactions I've had with men were during tribal gatherings or when we went into neighboring villages to do some trading. For the most part I hadn't liked much of what I saw of them. But, meeting them in a family setting like in Amphipolis and Potidaea was so different. They were pleasant, fun to be with and . . ."

"Human?" Gabrielle asked with a smile.

"Yes, you could say that." Toxaris smiled back and then looked at Eve. "I'm not saying I'd ever want to get intimate with one of them, but I now see that it could be feasible to have a male as a friend."

"In some parts of the world you had best have them as friends, if you want to survive," Xena informed the younger warrior. "Most men are raised to believe they are superior to women and that we need to be coddled and protected; you can't fault all of them for the actions of some. Although, I must admit the ones who can be faulted are definitely in the majority."

"Or you could always become a Warrior Princess and let your reputation lead the way," Toxaris interjected.

Xena gave the younger woman a crooked grin and raised eyebrow, as she took Argo out of formation and began to ride ahead of the group.

"I'll be right back. I want to make sure we're on the right path; it's been a long time and some of my landmarks are changed."

The remaining three women chitchatted as they rode along, falling well behind Xena, as she disappeared over the top of a hill. When the warrior reappeared, Argo was at a full gallop and the warrior's face was crimson.

"Some things never change," Xena screamed as she came within yelling distance of her companions. "Ruffians on the road ahead and they saw me, thinking I was alone. I'm afraid we're going to have unwelcome company in a very short while."

"I guess it's safe to say they didn't recognize you, Mother," Eve commented when Xena joined their ranks.

"You're right, Eve. I'm sure they weren't planning on running across the likes of me. I don't know how many people actually believe that Gabrielle and I are still alive."

"Nothing like a little excitement to liven up an otherwise peaceful trip," Toxaris chimed in.

"How many of them are there, Xena?" Gabrielle asked.

"At least 20. They must be on their way back to wherever it is they stash their goods; they didn't seem to be in any hurry. I think our best bet would be to dismount in that small clump of trees over there; I don't want to get the horses involved. Also, this way we can see where they're going, if they don't happen to be looking for me."

"How far from you were they, Mother?"

"Far enough to give me a good head start, but close enough for them to distinguish that I was a woman alone. "

By the time they scattered their horses, the sound of hooves was becoming quite evident, as well as the roar of vociferous men.

"What was that I was saying about being friends with the opposite gender?" Toxaris laughed as she readied her arrows. "You want me to wait until they attack or take the advantage, Xena?"

"Hold until my signal Toxaris. I don't want more blood shed than absolutely necessary."

The last comment got a sly grin from Gabrielle, as she adjusted her sais and walked over to her mate. Looking at her champion poised for battle, the blonde finally realized the message behind the impressions she had been receiving the past few weeks. Without saying a word, Xena had conveyed to Gabrielle feelings of being out of touch, with life as she had come to know it. In her role as Amazon Queen, Gabrielle was instrumental in taking the warrior away from the action and putting her into a setting where she felt stifled and sometimes useless. What was about to transpire was her lover's true element; being in charge of a mission, whether it was large or small, gratified the warrior nature in Xena that needed to be feed. The warrior's leadership values were irreplaceable and Gabrielle needed to reinforce that to Xena the next time they found themselves alone. Pride shone on the bard's face, as old memories flashed before her eyes, while waiting for new ones that were just about to join them.

"I love you, Xena." Gabrielle made sure the warrior heard her over the increasing noise of the horses and men clamoring toward them.

With a look of confusion, the warrior turned and faced her soulmate, "I love you too, Gabrielle."

The bard smiled and then looked in the direction of the roaring ruffians.

From the sounds coming from the top of the hill, the marauders were definitely not going to give up the chance of vying for a lone female. As the first of them came over the mound, they searched the area before them, only to find not one but four women standing by the trees. Thinking that they would prove to be easy marks there was no reason for the band of outlaws not to attack, after all 20 against four, who could beat those odds?

Time for talk ran out as the men came charging in their direction, oblivious to the battle expertise of the women they thought would be a swift, sweet victory.

Xena's eyes began to sparkle when she realized that the men were going to instigate a confrontation. She could feel her muscles tighten at the anticipation of battle. After all, she was still a warrior and her skills needed honing in areas other than practice fields. She looked to her left and gave Toxaris the sign to ready her arrows and smiled, for she could see the glisten of impatience on the Amazon as well. *We're the same breed that one and I.*

The raiders began dismounting from their horses when they approached closer to the small group. Some of the animals were heavily laden with valuables taken from neighboring villages, and the men felt it would be easier to deal with the women on the ground. They would deeply regret the decisions just made.

Waiting until the enemy was within shooting distance, Xena finally turned to Toxaris again and nodded that the time had come to advance. With a resounding Ai-yayayaya the warrior was off

her feet and into the air with her bard on her heels and Eve beside her. They fanned out as they approached the oncoming ruffians.

Toxaris hit her mark with her first shot and sent one of the cowards scurrying off to find his horse. Others could not believe that four women would attempt to outmaneuver 20 full-grown men, but they had no idea who the four women were.

Gabrielle, with her sais cutting patterns in the breeze ducked, bantered, kicked and lunged, taking the attackers on two at a time, while her back was to Eve, who was holding her own with her sword. In the middle of a maneuver, to put the attackers off guard, the two women linked elbows, as they swung each other around and changed battle partners. The intruder, who had seconds before been dodging short, pointed objects unlike any he had ever seen, was now looking down the blade of a sword. A lightening quick blonde who ducked and twirled and then lashed out with foreign looking weapons that cut him quickly and deeply was suddenly attacking the man who had been parrying with Eve. The men might have been robbers, but they had no intention of dying on a field far from home. They started to run from the area, but not before the sais and the sword cut loose of their change pouches. Second thoughts of continuing the fight to regain their dinars did not even enter their minds, as they ran for the shelter of the forest.

Over to the far right, Xena was in her glory. She derived joy from taking the men on two and three at a time and using their own stature and weight against them. Expertly the warrior applied a kick to the ribs, a blow to the face, and twist to the arm to send the rascals flying over themselves and causing them to land in heaps on the ground some feet away.

Toxaris, being off to herself, made the skirmish into a practice session of expert arrow placement, strategically aiming at legs and arms and seeing how many a body could withstand before the owner ran or limped toward the trees or horses. She smiled wickedly each time a bandit disappeared from her sight.

The thugs were liars, thieves, and rogues; they might even been warriors of sorts but were definitely no match for their female counterparts.

The band thinned quickly, and as the last of the men were dispersing, Xena jumped onto one of the their horses and relieved the animal of its saddlebags. She threw them in the direction of Toxaris before riding a little way and mounting another horse with the same end in mind.

Galloping up between Gabrielle and Eve where they were finishing with the diehards of the bandits, she jumped off the horse and between the two women and the men.

"Who are you?" the bravest of the men questioned.

"I'm Xena and this is my partner, Gabrielle," the warrior answered as long muscular fingers reached out to poke him quickly in the neck. Seconds later the curious young bandit was lying on the ground unable to even breathe easily, staring helplessly up into the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"I have cut off the flow of blood to your brain; in a very short while you'll be dead, unless you give me the answers I desire. Answer me quickly and honestly and I'll undo the damage and let you live." After the stern warning, the warrior proceeded with her question. "Where is the location of the town you stole all this bounty from?"

"Three candlemarks to the north, but we didn't destroy the town, we . . . we only robbed them."

"Was that the only village you attacked?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes, we've never worked together before."

"If you're smart, you'll never work together again; do you get my drift?"

"Y-e-s, y-e-s." Blood was beginning to run down his nose and Gabrielle gently touched Xena on the shoulder and gave her the *it's time to take the pinch off*-look.

The warrior had no intention of letting the man die, but she wanted to put the fear of the Gods into him in the hopes that it would be a cold day in Tartarus before he decided to attack another town of innocents. Another quick jab to the neck and he began coughing. She pulled him up and warned him that the next time she ran into him she might not be in such a generous mood. Relieving him of the pouch inside his shirt and the one attached to his waistband, she gave him a kick in the pants and sent him running and sniveling into the wooded area.

A large sigh of relief and deep intake of air and the bard could see that her warrior was invigorated.

"There really should be a better way to make you feel good, Xena," the smaller woman stated, shaking her head and putting her arm around the warrior's waist.

"There should be, Gabrielle, but it's hard to replace the adrenaline rush of a battle with sparring on a practice field with young Amazons." She put her arm around her lover's shoulders and drew her close, gently kissing the flaxen hair on the crown of Gabrielle's head.

It was difficult sometimes for the bard to remember that the warrior in the heat of a battle and the tender woman who caressed her at night were one in the same. The two women stood there for a few minutes watching the remainder of the robbers as they trailed off into the distance.

The confrontation was ended, and it was time to gather the horses and make a temporary camp. They needed to rest and eat before continuing on toward the lake, which Gabrielle decided to name *New Beginning*. The title definitely seemed appropriate because chancing to camp there on their return to the Amazon Village had most assuredly started their new life in a positive new direction.

Eve and Toxaris joined Xena and Gabrielle, bringing with them saddlebags and some of the pouches that had been dropped by men during the scuffle.

"From the contents of these bags, it looks like they made quite a killing," Eve observed. "Do you suppose all this stuff comes from a nearby village?"

"The man said the town was only about three candlemarks away. If he was telling the truth, which they tend to do in the condition he was in, we should be there by sunset," Xena concluded.

It was almost nightfall and they had been traveling almost the three candlemarks Xena had mentioned earlier when the small village came into sight. Even the horses realized that rest was only a short distance away. Animal and human alike were all beginning to tire, as the past few days had seen very little sleep for anyone and the confrontation earlier in the day was still taking its toll on their bodies.

It was obvious, from the abundance of smoke rising high into the early evening sky that this was the village the raiders had attacked. No one paid attention as the four strangers slowly made their way down the center of the village. People were too busy bustling around trying to contain the fires and make sure all their relatives and friends were safe.

As it turned out not many people had gotten hurt. The villagers had given the robbers what they asked for and aside from having a few barns and one store torched, the town was left virtually unscathed. Loss of personal treasures was another subject.

The women asked around, trying to find out who the town's leaders were and where they could be found. Finally the four outsiders were given directions to the Inn, where they had no problem spotting the spokesperson for the entire village.

"I'm told your name is Boronis," Xena addressed the loudest of the patrons standing at the bar.

Turning to face the unfamiliar female voice, the large man glared in the warrior's direction. "Yeah, and who are you?"

"My name is Xena and we . . ."

Not allowing her finish her sentence, he interrupted with a hearty laugh, "And I'm Caesar Augustus."

His friends joined him in ridicule but soon stopped laughing when a hand encircled the big man's arm, spinning him back around to face a not too happy warrior.

"I don't have time to play games with little minded men. We've not had a pleasant afternoon, recouping the dinars and jewelry that had been taken from this village earlier today." She could see from the looks in their eyes that she now had the entire Inn's undivided attention. "But, of course, if you aren't interested in getting any of your precious baubles back, my friends and I will be more than happy to . . ."

Again Boronis interrupted her as she spoke. "By all means-Xena-if you have news of the bandits who terrorized the town earlier, we're all ears."

"She has more than just news," Gabrielle interjected. "We ran into them on the road between here and Amphipolis and recovered a good deal of that which was stolen from your people. We simply don't know who it belongs to."

No longer were incredulous looks being thrown in the direction of the four women. Royal treatment was taking the place of rudeness, as wine goblets were placed in their hands and plates of food appeared on the table in front of them where they were offered seats.

"Tell us more," Boronis pleaded.

"Not much to tell," Xena mumbled, "They thought we were easy marks; we weren't. We got your treasures back; they ran away."

"If you can give us some idea as to what was taken, we might be able to replace some of it," Eve joined in the conversation.

"Well," the Innkeeper piped in, "let us see what you recovered." He reached for one of the saddlebags, only to have his arm quickly halted.

"I believe Eve asked what was taken?" Xena eyed Boronis suspiciously. "If you can't give an account of what it is you and your people lost . . . well then . . . finders keepers."

"There's an entire village here, ladies," the leader of the town protested. "Do you think you can take us **all** on?"

"Now why would we even want to try to do that?" Gabrielle asked. "If we intended to keep all the goods, we never would have stopped in the first place. We didn't recover all that was taken and feel that going by a list would be helpful in the case of duplicates or missing items."

She gave the patrons of the Inn a searching look. "As for taking on the entire village-we took on the band of thieves who took on your entire village. What's the matter with you people?"

From the area of the kitchen a small voice began to rise above the clamor. "She's right you know. Here you all are beginning to act like a bunch of hooligans, while these women risked their lives to save your property and then had the decency to come here asking what it was you lost. Where are your manners?" A middle-aged woman entered the room and walked over to stand in front of Boronis. "I'm ashamed of you husband." She looked over at Xena and Gabrielle and extended a friendly hand. "I'm Cleone, wife of this big bag of wind." She pointed to Boronis. "Please, eat, drink, and rest yourselves. You're welcome to spend the night here in the Inn. In the morning I will have a list for you from all the people in the village as to what they had taken. For any items you have recovered, we will forever be in your debt." She glared at the her husband and the men gathered around him and then motioned once again to the food and drink on the table.

Eve and Toxaris took their seats with Gabrielle following. Xena looked from the woman to her husband and then over to the owner of the Inn. "We'll take you up on your invitations. Do you have a stable for our horses?"

"Most definitely," came an answer from near the exit door. "I'll have someone take your animals over and groom and feed them."

Xena nodded her approval before sitting down next to Gabrielle at the table.

The remainder of the early evening hours was spent recalling the events of the encounter with the bandits. Xena allowed Gabrielle to do most of the talking, as she seemed to enjoy embellishing the facts. The warrior withdrew into her shell, reliving in her mind the strategies of the fight, while eating her meal.

All four of the women were spent from a day of riding and fighting and after a quick bath, they each found the comfort of a soft bed with clean linens a blessing.

With Eve and Toxaris in their own room, the bard curled up in her favorite position under her warrior's shoulder.

"You handled that situation with your usual diplomacy today, my love," the bard whispered into her warrior's chest, a small smile creeping upon her face.

"Ah, diplomacy? Are you talking about when we beat the Tartarus out of that band of ruffians?"

"Most definitely," Gabrielle replied, as she tightened her grip on the warrior's waist.

"We did teach them a lesson in underestimating women, if nothing else."

Gabrielle could feel Xena's chest swell with involuntary pride and it warmed her heart to hear the touch of excitement in her champion's voice at the memory of the confrontation.

"I just wanted you to know that I think these villagers were very lucky you were around today. At least they will be getting some of what was stolen back."

Xena's strong arm tightened around her bard, pulling the smaller woman even closer to her. She gently kissed the top of Gabrielle's head and smiled, knowing that the bard was baiting her and loving every minute of it.

"Guess you have more fuel for another scroll?" Xena smiled the contented smile of knowing that her bard was smiling, also.

"I certainly do," Gabrielle yawned. "Good night my love."

"May Morpheus grant you pleasant dreams Gabrielle."

The excitement of the day faded quickly as sleep overtook the two heroes wrapped securely in each other's arms.

The loud clamor of voices awakened Gabrielle from a sound sleep. She looked around at the room, taking a few seconds to recognize where she was. There was no doubt in her mind that Xena was downstairs in the mist of the loud discussion. It had to be about the bounty they had recovered from the thieves.

Quickly the bard rolled out of bed. She slapped some cool water on her face from the pitcher on the vanity and got dressed. Picking up the heavy saddlebags full of valuables, she threw them over her shoulders, wincing slightly at the weight. The evening before they had asked the Innkeeper's wife for a large sack for all the small pouches, and she now dragged that behind her as she made for the main room of the Inn to join her lover.

Upon entering the large room, a smile crossed her face for dual reasons. The first reason being that her warrior was the center of attention, in the middle of a large crowd of men, and she was obviously enjoying her position of power. The other excuse for a smile was the large stack of pancakes sitting in the middle of the closest table.

All conversation stopped when Gabrielle entered the room carrying the anticipated treasure. The blonde nodded in the direction of her lover and then pointed to the breakfast food; eating won out over talking and the bard sat herself down at the table, dropping the sack handle as she sat and plopping the saddlebags down beside her.

A few minutes later Xena joined Gabrielle at the table, where the bard sat with two filled plates, one for herself, and one for her warrior.

"I hope you didn't start eating without me," Xena began as she sat, grinning down at her bard.

"Grmph, grrmpt," Gabrielle mumbled before swallowing the mouthful of pancakes she had just stuffed into her mouth.

"Uh, huh-just as I thought."

"Xena, these hotcakes were screaming at me and . . . and . . . they were starting to get cold," the blonde whined.

"It's okay, Gabrielle, I understand. At least you saved me some," the warrior chuckled slightly.

"I saved you an entire plate full," the smaller woman protested. "And I ordered you some eggs and ham to go along with them."

"Why thank you for being so considerate," Xena teased. "Should I, in turn, order you some additional breakfast?"

Gabrielle lowered her eyes and shook her head, "I think you already know the answer to that, Xena. I ordered some for myself as well." Changing the subject, she looked around the fairly full room. "Do you think we'll be able to get out of here and back on the road before midday?"

"The Innkeeper said most of the townsfolk have their lists ready, so dispensing of the loot shouldn't take us too long."

"Where are the girls, Xena?"

"I sent them over to check on the horses and bring them back here in front of the Inn so we can leave as soon as the distribution is taken care of. They already ate so they're ready to go."

"Great."

The serving girl brought out the food Gabrielle had ordered and the patrons left the women alone long enough for them to finish their meal. They could hear Cleone out among the crowd, telling everyone to let the women finish their breakfast before pestering them about the goods being returned.

Xena stood and looked out over the crowd of expectant villagers. "I know I asked you all to make your lists of what was taken, and I am definitely going to try to return to each of you what is rightfully yours. But I would like to make a suggestion if I might." She could hear the murmurs rumbling through the crowd and looked as many of the townsfolk as possible, directly in the eyes.

"I'm sure we didn't recover all that was taken from this village. I am also sure that we may have recovered some of one person's treasures, all of another's, and perhaps none of yet another's. We are going to take these lists and the goods into the other room and sort through them. Then I am going to make a determination that I want all of you to swear to uphold."

Her sapphire eyes expelled a coldness that sent a chill up the backs of even the rowdiest of men. Once again she searched the entire room, making eye contact with as many individuals as she could.

"This may not sound fair to all of you. But, if you don't agree with my decision, none of you will get anything."

Now the crowd began to fidget and become uneasy.

Gabrielle stood up and motioned for everyone to calm down. "What Xena is trying to say is that we don't think it's right for one family to have lost everything and another to have gained all they lost back. We are going to divide up the treasures."

Again the mumbling began, but this time Xena quieted the crowd.

"Listen-listen! We figure whatever it is you have written at the top of your lists is what you consider your most precious commodities; therefore, everyone will get what is on the top of their list, if it is in our possession. Then we will look at the lists where we seem to have recovered nothing and give them something out of what is left that is equal to their first items. If we have enough left over, we will continue to divide the goods in this fashion until there is nothing left."

Heads were now beginning to shake in agreement that this seemed the most amiable of ways to divide up the recovered goods.

For a final time Xena addressed the crowd. "When we're finished, if I see one person becoming angry because someone else received something that had belonged to them, I will personally and immediately relieve the perpetrator of all the goods given back to them. Is that clear?"

A small hand went up in the middle of the crowd.

"Yes?" The warrior looked at the timid young woman. "Do you have a question?"

"What if the article you gave to someone other than the rightful owner had more sentimental value than monetary? Could we trade?"

"I don't see why not," the bard answered, "as long as the two people concerned agree. Please, we are simply trying to be as fair to everyone involved as we possibly can."

It was at this time that Eve and Toxaris walked in carrying two saddlebags each. Added to the two Xena now had over her shoulders and the large bag of small pouches again in Gabrielle's possession, they were ready to retire to a separate room and divide up the stash.

A candlemark later Toxaris came out of the room with the initial pieces of the cache. She called out the first name on the list and thus began the distribution of the villager's goods back into rightful hands. The process took longer than Xena had expected, but it seemed by the time they were on the last of the jewelry and dinars scattered around the small room that they had done fairly well in reacquainting the townspeople with the valuables.

Surprisingly enough everyone seemed thrilled with the amount of possessions they recovered and there was no squabbling between them.

"Okay," Xena brushed her hands together as she and Gabrielle stepped back into the main room and were each handed a large goblet of wine.

"Thanks," Gabrielle accepted the wine from Cleone, "is everyone fairly satisfied?"

"More than just satisfied," the Innkeeper's wife announced. "These people never expected to see any of their possessions again, and you have delivered almost all of them back to the original owners. How can we repay you?"

"A thank you and a good meal before we continue on our journey will be sufficient," Gabrielle informed the woman.

Cleone looked at each of the four women, individually, and received an affirmative nod in return.

"Mid-meal it is, then. Give me and my helpers a while to prepare everything." She took off toward the kitchen, dragging two serving maidens along with her.

"Guess we did our good deed for this trip," Xena stated as she put one arm around Gabrielle's shoulder, the other around Eve's, and smiled in Toxaris' direction.

Less than a candlemark later the meal had been served and the women were, once again, ready to start traveling. While they were eating, the townspeople had gotten together a sort of reward, but the small group refused any payment. What they did accept was food and drink for while they were on the road and the promise of hospitality whenever any of them were in the area.

The horses were refreshed and ready to travel. It was anticipated they would arrive at New Beginning Lake somewhere a little after sunset. One more night and their trip would end back where it had started, at the Amazon Village Xena, Gabrielle, and Eve were beginning to call home. The idea of a permanent home was a new concept for Xena and Gabrielle. Always before, the term brought forth thoughts of either Amphipolis or Potidaea, neither of which were actually home to the duo any longer. Home was wherever they found themselves together and until now, they had never settled anywhere long enough to think of it as such.

The rest of the ride to New Beginning was uneventful and they kept the conversation lively with a discussion of what had transpired the day before and the looks on the villager's faces this morning when they received their belongings back. Everyone agreed that it had been well worth the conflict with the bandits to see the joy brought back to a town that hadn't deserved to be ransacked and robbed.

Finally the lake was in sight. The evening meal was no chore at all, thanks to Cleone. She had packed them enough to feed a small army and by the time the little group was ready to sit down and eat, they were hungry enough to finish most of it, including the freshly baked loaves of nutbread. The moon was high in the night sky when Xena and Gabrielle took the horses up to the enchanted forest and bid the girls good night.

"Don't expect us early," Xena informed the younger women as she proceeded to get onto the platform. "I know Gabrielle will want to sleep late, as she hasn't been able to do so on the entire trip, and once we get back to the Amazons, things are going to be pretty hectic until the joining. This may be the last relaxing evening and morning we all have in the next moon."

"We'll probably sleep in, also. It's been quite an exciting adventure," Eve told Xena. "I really enjoyed meeting all the relatives. Sleep well Mother."

"I enjoyed meeting them all, too," Toxaris added. "Even though they aren't mine, their hospitality made me feel like family."

"Goodnight, girls," Xena turned back to Eve. "You want to keep this key with you tonight Eve just in case there's trouble?"

"Sure, Mother." The younger woman got up and walked over to the platform. She bent down and began to turn the key that would send her mother up onto the ledge. "If we do have to use it, I'll make sure we're quite noisy on arrival." She grinned over at Toxaris and then back at Xena before finishing the turn of the key. "Sleep well, you two."

"We definitely will," were the last words the Amazons heard as Xena disappeared.

Immediately upon reaching the ledge Xena could smell the sweet odor of scented candles and see the flickering of the same in the dimly lit grotto.

"Someone's been busy," the warrior observed as she continued to look around the room.

"I thought you might want to take a nice shower and just spend a relaxing evening." The blonde approached her lover and wrapped her arms around Xena's waist. Looking up into iridescent blue eyes she smiled seductively. "It's been a marvelous trip, but I'm glad we have this quiet place for just the two of us."

"It definitely is a plus at the beginning and end of a lengthy trip."

The cool falling waters felt good on their tired bodies and sent invigorating chills up and down their spines.

"Sometimes I feel a little pang of guilt being up here in the lap of luxury while Eve and Toxaris are down in the forest lying on the hard ground, but you know what?" Gabrielle giggled as she scrubbed her warrior's strong muscular back.

"No what?" Xena asked.

"I get over it really quickly."

The warrior turned around and grabbed the smaller woman around the waist. She drew her close and slowly lifted her up, their bodies sliding easily on one another. "I'm glad you have such an easy conscience, my soul." She smiled, knowing that the exact opposite was more of a truism. "The upcoming days are going to be filled with so much to do that we will wish there was more sunlight available, but for tonight I would like to pretend that no one else exists in the world but the two of us."

"That's so romantic, Xena."

"I've been trying to think about the ceremony. What exactly do you want from me, Gabrielle?" the warrior asked as she let the smaller woman slip through her hands and stand back on her own feet.

"I don't know . . ." the blond head bowed and a strong finger gently tilted the slightly freckled face, until the bard was staring into her lover's baby blues.

"Yes, you do know. How do you expect the joining to go?"

The smaller woman put her arms around her champion's waist and squeezed her tenderly. "Can we finish getting the soap off our bodies first and talk about this in the soft bed over there?" Her head nodded into the middle of the room.

The remainder of the shower found the two women lost in their own thoughts as they both tried to formulate how they wanted their wedding to be played out. The warrior was regretting having given permission for the Amazons to begin making the wedding attire. No telling what they might come up with for her to wear, but Gabrielle was insistent that the entire Village be as involved as they wanted to be and of course that meant there would be very little privacy around the preparations. It wasn't everyday people got to witness the clipping of a great warrior's feathers, which was how Xena was beginning to feel. She knew beyond anything in the known world that she and Gabrielle belonged together forever, but making a public announcement of their love and loyalty to one another gave the warrior a lump in her throat.

In Xena's eyes they were already joined and she believed that Gabrielle felt the same way. Yet, the champion knew and had known for some time, that this exchanging of vows was extremely important to her mate. It would be a once in a lifetime affair, and Xena imagined she could live through anything, **once**-just the thought of that statement, brought a smile to the somber face of the beautiful brunette.

"A dinar for your thoughts, Xena? That's some smile on your face."

"I was just trying to imagine you in your wedding outfit," the statuesque woman lied with a slight smile, as she finished rinsing off and took the offered towel.

Minutes later with the small arms wrapped tightly around her, they snuggled close in the warmth and softness of the bed, and the warrior reinstigated the conversation.

"So, Gabrielle, how do you expect the joining to go?"

"You do have a one-track mind, don't you, my love?" Green eyes sparkled in the glowing candlelight. Looking up into eyes filled with love, Gabrielle searched for a glimpse of doubt and to her heart's joy, she found none. "I simply thought we would say something from the heart to each other."

"Something from one heart to another in front of an entire tribe? How private is that?"

"It's not private, Xena. This is private; she motioned with a hand around the grotto. What we do behind closed doors is private. The ceremony is the sharing of our love with our extended family. People want to be a part of happy occasions; it makes them feel connected, and it makes them

feel good. They get to realize that life isn't always just the struggle to survive, that there are situations where we, as humans, rise above everything else and become impervious to the . . . "

"Okay, okay. I get the picture. We are to get all mushy in front of the tribe to make **them** feel good. Is that the idea?" There was just enough light in the cave for Gabrielle to see the eyebrow arch and the snicker appear on her warrior's face.

"The sarcasm in your voice is unmistakable, Xena. We both know that I'm the one who wants this ceremony; it's my dream that will be played out on that day."

"I know, Gabrielle, and that is the only reason we are going so public with so private a ritual." She held the other half of her soul close and kissed her head.

"Do you want me to have someone help you with your vows?" Gabrielle asked.

"No! I feel silly enough as it is proclaiming my love in front of the entire tribe. I don't need someone else putting words into my mouth."

"I was just trying to be helpful," the bard smiled.

"Well, don't," Xena smiled back. "I'm quite capable of telling you how I feel. I just don't want to seem . . . hmmm . . . you know."

"Yeah, I know-weak. As if falling in love makes you fragile."

"It does in a way; when you're in love with someone, your focus is split and so is your concentration."

"On the other hand, there are two of you instead of one, thus making your presence more formidable."

"Touché." The warrior smiled, knowing that an argument on this subject could extend well into morning, if she didn't give in right now. She would have much rather had the two of them exchange their vows simply, quietly, and privately, but Gabrielle was right, this was her dream. "What do you think about putting the topic aside for the rest of the evening and concentrating on the fact that we are alone for the first time in days?"

"Why, Xena, is that a proposition?" the small blonde smiled up into her warrior's face.

"You bet your sweet Amazon ass it is."

A tender kiss began the seduction of warrior and bard, their bodies renewing passions that had been set aside while dealing with family, new and old. It was not only sensuous but also comfortable the way they intertwined not only their lives and love but their bodies as well. They were akin to the symbol that had become almost synonymous with the two of them, the

yin/yang-their dark and light woven together in a symbiotic relationship, neither being completely whole without the other.

Thankfully, for this lifetime they were at least done with the searching. Just the living was left and they intended to make the best of the rest life had to offer starting today. The greater good just might have to do without them for a little while, until they caught up on the simple things life had to offer.

Thoughts rambled through both their minds as they caressed each other, their hands moving in similar directions and causing similar reactions. Finally, the touching was not enough and the warrior traveled down her lover's body with her mouth following where fingers had just recently vacated.

"I love you, Xena," the bard whispered. "I loved you the minute I set eyes on you. I didn't realize the how or the why at the time and certainly not the extent, but I knew you were the person I had been waiting for to come into my life and give it meaning."

The warrior mumbled something inaudible as her tongue trailed around the outer edges of Gabrielle's navel.

"Gods you make me feel beautiful."

"You are beautiful, Gabrielle," the dark-haired beauty replied. "You must know that by now."

"No, you're beautiful Xena-me-I'm . . ." She could feel the eyes of her lover boring a hole right through her and looked down to receive an incredulous stare.

"Now is **not** the time to start this conversation."

Gabrielle started to answer back but found her lips covered by a passionate kiss.

"No more talking," Xena whispered. "No one knows what the next few moons are going to be like; I want this night just for the two of us."

Before she knew what was happening, the bard found herself turned quickly onto her stomach with the full weight of her partner on top of her. Xena started at the neck and ears. "I am going to make you forget that anything exists outside this room," the warrior growled softly as she nibbled at the nape of Gabrielle's neck.

The entire time her lips were caressing the smaller woman's back, her fingers were trailing downward, in between the firm buttocks, to land finally on the moist area amid her lover's thighs.

She could feel Gabrielle's excitement, and her fingers slid around the nether lips, teasing as one finger slipped cautiously inside, before taunting the blonde with removal.

"Gods, Xena! Stop tormenting me!" the bard nearly screamed.

The warrior responded with an unseen smile as she once again allowed her fingers entrance to her lover's passion. One . . . long . . . slender finger, sliding gracefully in-and-out, in-and-out.

"More, Xena," Gabrielle pleaded into the pillow.

"What?" Xena teased.

"More, Xena-do you know what you're doing to me?"

"Definitely," the warrior commented before flipping the bard over on her back. "Your wish is my command."

The brunette repositioned her own body so that she was lying beside her lover, but upside down, her face even with the bard's nether lips. She deftly came to her knees and smiled when she felt Gabrielle's fingers tenderly caressing the thigh closest to the blonde's body.

Long, sinewy fingers played in the curly golden mound, as Xena applied wet kisses to Gabrielle's inner thighs before parting the nether lips and allowing her tongue access to the small nub that was already ripe with desire.

At the same time her tongue found the entrance to the moist area between the golden folds, Xena felt two hands grab her thigh and lift it over the smaller woman's body, positioning the leg so that she was now straddling Gabrielle, her own womanhood only inches from Gabrielle's face.

All the while the blonde's hips continued to gyrate with the rhythm of her lover's tongue and Xena was granted the sweet taste of the nectar of love.

Desperately, Gabrielle attempted to draw Xena closer, while the warrior struggled to keep her concentration on seducing her bard.

"Stop fighting me, Xena," Gabrielle pleaded, pulling the taller woman down and allowing her tongue access to the dark regions of her warrior. "I want us to come together."

Now on her knees, the champion leaned her body closer to her lover's face, until she was able to feel the heat from Gabrielle's breath. Xena moaned involuntarily when her skin began to ripple, in response to her lover's touch.

Simultaneously, their tongues sought refuge within each other's burning core. As Gabrielle's hips reached for the sky and Xena's bent downward to a Heaven on earth, they rocked together oblivious to anything other than the way it felt to be loved and to be loving at the same time. The moment of climax came and in unison they savored the sweet essence of each other.

Xena switched positions, against Gabrielle's wishes, and entered her lover three-fold, drawing her body close and holding her tightly. She positioned herself so that she could press her passion against Gabrielle's thigh, while using her fingers to bring the bard to a second orgasm.

Even when the blonde was totally spent, Xena refused to move her hand. She lay holding her world in her arms, waiting until the shuddering stopped and the smaller woman relaxed.

"I love you Xena," were the only words Gabrielle could manage to convey.

"I love you, too, Gabrielle."

The warrior removed her fingers without taking the pressure off the sensitive area. For a short period of time they lay in that position, until Xena sensed that Gabrielle's breathing had deepened, slowed, and become steady.

Wrapped in the protective arms of her lover the bard had fallen asleep.

"I love you more than life," the warrior whispered as she kissed the soft golden crown and continued to hold the other half of her soul.

Sleep was but a heartbeat away for the warrior, also, and both of the women would find the dream realm a marvelous place to visit, for tonight love would be their guide.

The first rays of the morning sun, along with the anticipation that they would be back in the Village before mid-meal hastened the awakening of the warrior. She smiled and unwrapped Gabrielle's arms from around her waist.

They had decided before going to sleep that they would take their time this morning, have breakfast, and go for a swim, before returning to the hustle and bustle they knew awaited them in the Amazon Village.

While waiting for Gabrielle to wake up, Xena walked over to the shelves and picked up one of the scrolls her bard left here for safekeeping. *There's no way in Tartarus we could carry around all of her stories any longer. Thank the Gods we have a few safe places scattered throughout the countryside where they can remain without fear of destruction.*

Joxer had been told where some of the storage places were and had gathered quite of a few of the scrolls together, after he thought the two of them had died. He had even made it a habit of buying up scrolls from other cities when he heard of them being offered on a bidding table. She grinned as she started reading of some of their lighter escapades, such as the time when Aphrodite put a spell on her, Gabrielle, and Joxer, turning their thoughts into obsessions. It amused her to contemplate what a reader, years from now, might think if she happened upon one of these scrolls. Would she believe that a Warrior Princess ever existed or would she merely think that the author had an overly active imagination and pass the warrior off as a myth?

Gabrielle stirred among the covers, one arm thrashing around in search of a missing body. Xena walked over and leaned across the bed. "Missing something?" she queried.

"Uh huh," came the answer, as lashes blinked opened and shut a few times to become accustomed to the light now streaming through the grotto. "Seems as though I lost you in my dream. I knew if I searched hard enough, you would come to me." Now the eyes opened fully and the soft emerald orbs looked lovingly into her warrior's baby blues. "Good morning, Xena. How long have you been up?"

"Long enough to finish two scrolls and start on the third."

"You're reading more of my stories? How sweet." Gabrielle crinkled her nose and smiled. "There are a lot of them now, aren't there?"

"More than I ever thought there would be in the beginning, my soul, many more. But . . . enough about reading and writing. What do you say to getting out of that warm bed and joining me in a swim over to the campsite below?"

"I guess I did kind of promise we'd take our time this morning, didn't I?"

"That you did." Xena offered the blonde a hand and pulled her up into a standing position. "Have I told you lately how beautiful you are in the morning?"

"I don't believe you have, but you know what?"

"No what?"

"You're full of . . ."

"Now, now." Running her long fingers across the nakedness of her bard's back she grinned as the texture of her lover's skin changed at even her slightest touch. "Remember, beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"How could I forget that?" Gabrielle replied, melting into her warrior's arms.

Two steps backward and the two of them fell back onto the still warm bed.

"We could begin the morning the same way we ended the evening. After all we did say we were in no hurry to leave, right?" Gabrielle reached down and pulled up the shift Xena had thrown on when she left the bed earlier in the morning.

Offering no resistance, the raven-haired beauty helped in the disrobing process. "Absolutely," she answered her lover, before tossing the shift to the side and positioning her body over that of the small blonde.

After a repeat performance of the night before, the two lay side-by-side, listening to the soft sound of the waterfall as it cascaded down the rocks to rejoin the lake below.

Sounds of hunger rumbled from Gabrielle's stomach, causing giggling from the small bard as she lay wrapped in her lover's arms.

"Guess we had better go feed the beast," Xena acknowledged, loosening her hold on her heart.

"Yes, she refuses to be ignored," Gabrielle agreed as she rolled over and off the bed. "As excited as I am about the wedding, I enjoy our quiet time here."

"This place isn't going anywhere," Xena assured her bard, as she got up and started dressing.

"Is it okay if we do the swim **after** breakfast, Xena? We stayed up here a little longer than anticipated." Gabrielle smiled over at her mate.

"Fine with me, besides I think I smell biscuits and fish."

"What are we waiting for?" Gabrielle stuck her sais in her boots and the warrior grabbed her chakram and sword, no sense leaving themselves defenseless, even if they were on vacation.

After checking on the horses, the two lovers stood side by side in the enchanted forest, closed their eyes, envisioned the campsite below the falls, and found themselves transported there within the time it took to exhale.

Eve and Toxaris were sitting by the fire with four large fish skewered and cooking.

"Good morning, sleepyheads." Toxaris greeted the two latecomers as they walked toward the fire.

"Good morning," Gabrielle replied. "Looks like the two of you have been busy."

"More than just busy, Mom. Toxaris dug up some root vegetables that are absolutely delicious. We were hoping the aroma of the cooking would reach you because we had no intention of waiting for you if it didn't." Eve smiled over at her mothers and motioned for them to find a place to sit.

Discussion was kept at a minimum as the other three women realized that they were all as hungry as Gabrielle was. When the food was eaten and the fire extinguished the four of them took a swim before heading up to the enchanted forest and back to the Village. It was a relaxing morning and a marvelous way to bring their vacation to an end.

Before the sun was full in the sky, the four women were mounted on their horses with thoughts of the Amazon Village in their minds. One minute they were in the enchanted forest and the next they were transported to the edge of the wooded area surrounding the meadow just before the entrance to the Village.

Gabrielle looked over at Xena and smiled, "We're home."

"Let's go face the music," was Xena's reply as they all galloped toward the huts.

They were soon met by the cheering cries of sister Amazons proclaiming that the Queen and her entourage were home. Gabrielle glanced over at her warrior to see an emotionless face as they were cheered through the Village. The first stop was Tecmessa's hut where Gabrielle intended to check in and find out what was happening with the Dramarians and if the situation had been worked out between the two villages. Eve and Toxaris rode on toward Rhea's hut before going back to their own and visiting with friends who wanted to hear all about their adventure.

To Gabrielle's relief, the strategies Xena, Tecmessa, and herself had planned out before their departure were working and the rivalry was squelched for the time being. There had been no attacks on the Village since they had been gone and the Regent was hoping that the peace would remain at least until after the Royal Wedding.

It didn't take long for the entire tribe to know the Queen and her party were back and preparations were made for an evening feast.

After their meeting with Tecmessa and her guards, Xena and Gabrielle were asked to make an appearance in the hut of the tribal seamstress. Ainia was the woman everyone sought out when it came to having something truly special sewn or when a ceremony was approaching and new masks or wardrobes were needed. She had been put in charge of the apparel for the Royal Wedding and she requested that the Queen and her Champion stop at her hut to go over some of the arrangements.

"I didn't realize we would be jumping right into the preparations so quickly," Xena confessed as they walked from the Regent's hut over to that of the seamstress. Some of the younger Amazons had taken the horses off to groom and feed them and to let them roam freely in the neighboring meadow.

"Xena, you should have known they wouldn't leave us alone today. They're excited about getting everything planned. If you stop to think about it, the sooner we coordinate everything, the sooner the day will come, and the sooner it will all be finished and we can settle in to settling in." She smiled in the direction of her heart and took the taller woman's hand. "I promise it won't hurt to terribly much." The twinkle in the soft green eyes caused the dark-haired warrior to smile ever so slightly, as she squeezed the hand that was nestled securely in her own.

"I love you, Gabrielle," the warrior whispered.

"I know that, my love," the bard whispered back.

The seamstress and her crew had been diligently working on the ceremonial attire for the Queen and her Consort, since the women had taken off on their journey. With a little coaxing, Xena agreed to a fitting and her bard's eyes lit up when the warrior walked out from the back room where Ainia's apprentices had escorted her to try the clothing on. Even the warrior was impressed with the intricacy of the designs on the wedding attire and could not help but smile at the look on her lover's face.

"I guess I clean up pretty good, huh?" she asked Gabrielle, as she did a gracious spin for the bard's sake.

"By the Gods, Xena! You look beautiful," Gabrielle walked over to closer admire the handiwork of the talented women. The basic garb was leather that had been dyed a royal blue and matched the color of the warrior's eyes. It was trimmed in an emerald green. In the middle of the bodice was an applique of the chakram, rimmed in gold but filled in to resemble a yin/yang symbol. The swirling colors were sky blue and emerald green. The warrior wore laced up boots the color of which matched the outfit, with replicas of the multi-colored chakram on each boot. Her bracers and armbands also displayed the two-tone sign of total balance.

"Is she suppose to be seeing this?" Xena asked the seamstress with a grin.

"Why, I hadn't thought about it. It's a little too late now to do anything about her seeing your outfit, but you do know that you can't see the Queen's attire until the day of the joining?"

"That doesn't seem fair," the warrior was heard to almost whine.

"Ah, but it's custom," came the reply from Ainia. "I'm sorry Xena, but you have to leave after you change back into your own clothes."

The warrior started to protest, but when she saw the look of elation on her bard's face, she decided to play the game by the rules right up to the very end.

"Okay. I guess I know when I'm outnumbered." She walked back into the dressing room and when she came out, she kissed her lover on the cheek on her way over to the door. "I'm going to see how the evening meal is coming along. It's been candlemarks since we've eaten, and I might need to sample something."

"I'll catch up with you in the main hut, Xena." Gabrielle gave her a little wave as the warrior exited the hut.

The now excited Queen turned to the seamstress. "Okay, I can't contain myself any longer. I know it's going to be difficult to top Xena's attire so . . . "

One of the apprentices came out of the back room with a long flowing gown draped over her arms. It was of the same color green that trimmed the warrior's leathers and it, in turn, was trimmed in the royal blue of Xena's raiment. The bodice was outlined with a collar that contained a smaller, yet identical yin/yang symbol outlined again in gold, as did the cuffs of the sleeves and the bottom of the dress.

Gabrielle's face lit up when she saw how creatively beautiful the gown was. "You certainly have been working hard on this," she exclaimed as she took the dress from the apprentice.

"It is a labor of pride and love, my Queen . . . "

"Gabrielle will do, Ainia, please. This is not a formal ceremony."

The older woman smiled and nodded then sent her helper back to the storage area to retrieve the sandals, which had been made for the Queen.

They were made from the same leather as Xena's boots, and on the strap leading from between the toes up to the ankle, Ainia had, again, placed the symbol of the balance.

"It's unbelievable how quickly you got these outfits put together." The small blonde took the sandals from the bearer and tried them on. They fit perfectly.

"We have been working hard . . . Gabrielle," the seamstress assured her Queen. "We wanted to have everything nearly completed by the time you arrived so the joining would not have to be postponed on our behalf. The rest of the Village has been busy as well."

"I just want you all to know that Xena and I appreciate your help and the time you have all spent on these projects."

Ainia motioned for the younger woman to try on the dress and Gabrielle quickly disrobed and put on the nearly finished garment.

"It looks wonderful on you, Gabrielle, just as I pictured it in my mind." The older woman smiled, as the younger spun around admiring the artistic handiwork.

"Xena is going to love this! It fits perfectly. I can understand why all the young sisters come to you when they need to learn about being a seamstress; you're definitely a master, Ainia. The sign of balance is an excellent touch to all the pieces. It personifies the way Xena and I feel about our relationship."

Slightly embarrassed from the extra attention, the seamstress eyed the entire dress, fussing with areas she didn't feel fit properly and smiling at places where it did. "There are a few spots that need touching up, but that won't take long at all. If you have other things to do, Gabrielle, I believe we're finished with you for the day, so I don't have to keep you here any longer. I heard Xena said that you hadn't eaten in a while. I'm sure they have something already prepared at the communal table. Thank you for stopping by and doing the fitting."

The seamstress was careful not to breach the trust the Warrior Princess had placed in her when she requested adding the yin/yang chakram to the attire. Before handing Ainia a drawing of the way she wanted the design to look, Xena had sworn the woman to secrecy. Seeing the Queen's expression when she viewed the nearly completed items had made the silence worthwhile, and the seamstress felt honored to have had a part in pleasing the Queen and her Consort through the use of her talent.

"The honor was all mine! Thank you for making the clothing." Gabrielle stepped out of the dress and back into her normal outfit. "I guess I'll go join Xena, but believe me, it's going to be difficult keeping the design of that dress from her until the joining."

"We have faith in you, Gabrielle," the older woman smiled and nodded as the Queen headed for the door.

The aroma of something roasting floated through the air and pleasantly assaulted Gabrielle's nostrils. Almost on cue, her stomach began to churn and grumble. *I hope Xena's in the food area because that's certainly where I'm headed.*

Of course it took her longer than usual to get to the lodge; she was stopped every hundred feet or so by an Amazon wanting to greet the Queen, congratulate her on the forthcoming joining, or hear something about the journey they had just returned from. Gabrielle decided on the way to the communal hut that she would address all the Amazons at once and tell them about the visits, so they could all get back to normal quickly.

She arrived at an already half-filled hut but had no trouble spotting Xena sitting up at the head of the table, Eve on one side, Toxaris on the other. There was a small group of young Amazons gathered around and hanging on every word that the warrior was relating. She saw Gabrielle walking toward her and made room for her lover to sit.

"So, how was the fitting?"

"Okay," Gabrielle did her best to contain her excitement over the dress.

"Hmmm," the warrior nodded and asked one of the young women if they would get a plate of food for the Queen. The young woman scurried off to accomplish the task, and the warrior poured her bard a goblet of wine. "So . . . just okay?"

"Mother was telling us all about her outfit, Mom. Tell us about yours." Eve tried prompting Gabrielle to speak up and act excited.

"No. Can't do that. Against the rules."

"Rules?" Eve looked confused.

"The Consort is not allowed to view the Queen's wedding attire until the morning of the joining; it would bring bad luck to the marriage."

"That's ridiculous!" Eve insisted.

"Doesn't matter, that's the rule."

"But, she can tell **us** about the outfit?"

"Sure, just not the Consort."

"Great. Then either Mother can leave or Mom and I are going for a walk."

"I don't think either of those scenarios will be playing out at this very minute, Eve. I waited for Gabrielle to get here to eat and I don't intend to wait any longer." She gave her daughter 'the look,' which was meant to curtail any further arguments on the subject.

"We're hungry, too," Toxaris added.

"Then that's settled, we'll all have something to eat and sometime later this evening I'll tell you girls about the gown when Xena is off doing something else."

The statement got Gabrielle a raised eyebrow, which she promptly ignored as the young woman who had been sent for food returned, not only with a plate for the Queen but with one for the Consort as well. Eve and Toxaris were told the food was ready to be served if they wanted to go help themselves, and neither of the women needed a second invitation.

The meal was interspersed with questions from anxious Amazons about the trip the four women just returned from. About halfway through eating, and after talking it over with Gabrielle, Xena stood and announced that if the Queen were allowed to finish the rest of her meal without being disturbed that she would tell of their journey by the campfire after everyone was finished eating and cleaning up. A huge roar vibrated the room as the Amazons all immediately agreed to let the Queen eat in peace.

"There now, that wasn't too difficult," Xena stated as she sat back down.

"Easy for you to say," the small blonde smiled. "You're not the one who's going to spend candlemarks telling the story."

"Oh, you love it and you know it!" Xena retorted and caught the smiles on the faces of her daughter and Toxaris.

Changing the subject Toxaris began to tell the soon-to-be joined what the Village had been up to in their absence. She described the arbor that had been erected near the practice field. They needed an area that would house the entire Village and that seemed the place of choice. She had been told that the preparations would be completely finished in less than a fortnight and reminded the warrior that she had told Xe it would most likely be a full cycle of the moon before all the arrangements were finished. It seemed that the Amazons were a little more anxious than anticipated.

"We also have a few loose ends to tie up." Xena looked over at Gabrielle and covered the smaller woman's hand with her own. "How long do you think we need?"

"I can be ready in less than the fortnight, Xena; what about you?"

"Sure-no problem." The warrior turned back to the Amazon sitting across from her. "So, I guess you'll be leaving a little sooner than expected. Did you find someone willing to accompany you on the journey?"

"More than enough sisters wanted to come with me, but I decided on taking only two of my closest friends with me; the smaller the band traveling the easier we'll have keeping together.

"Good thinking, Toxaris. I'll draw a map for you, like we discussed on the way back."

"I'll need it!" The younger woman smiled in the direction of the warrior and then turned and began talking to Eve.

The rest of the meal was uneventful and when they were finished, they sat relaxing and watching the seemingly endless line of Amazons making their way to and from the kitchen area. Not a single soul in the entire building attempted to coax the Queen into a discussion. Xena's idea did, indeed, give them a quiet meal, but it was almost time for Gabrielle to make good on the promise of a bardic monologue.

A bonfire was in full blaze, in the ceremonial center of the Village, as Xena and Gabrielle approached the crowd of Amazons gathered around it. A young sister approached the duo and ushered them to an area where seats had been placed for the Queen and her Consort. The sisters wanted to be sure that the bard was comfortable; they figured the more relaxed she was the longer she would sit and relate to them all that had happened on her newest adventure. Consequently, there was also a small table with a glass of water and two goblets of wine sitting between the two chairs.

Gabrielle had barely begun her story when Xena graciously excused herself and disappeared through the crowd. At first the blonde was curious as to where her lover was sneaking off to, but she soon became engrossed in the embellished account she was telling and all thoughts of anything else slipped quietly from her mind.

Xena took one look back at her heart's desire and the crowd sitting mesmerized by the melodious sound of the bard's voice, before heading in the direction of the Village's blacksmith.

The Amazon's didn't possess many horses, but there was always need for a master metal worker. Broken swords needed fixing as well as the creation of new weapons, goblets, plates, and specialty items. Xena had handed Pyrene four small gemstones (two sapphires and two emeralds) and a small chest full of golden coins before leaving on the trip back to Potidaea and Amphipolis. She had asked the artisan to cast goblets and insert the gems, using the drawing she had provided. Now she carried with her the remaining four stones and golden nuggets she intended to cast into rings. She had given the smithy a second drawing and asked if Pyrene could make the mold while they were away. Now it was time to see what had been accomplished in her absence.

Xena had spoken briefly to Pyrene earlier in the day when she left Gabrielle with the wardrobe mistress. The warrior informed Pyrene that she would be back after the celebration of their arrival back to the Village was underway. The solitary Amazon was used to missing out on a lot of the social activities so waiting for the warrior did not upset her. She wasn't comfortable in large crowds anyway and preferred the warmth of her fire to that of close companions.

By the time Xena reached Pyrene's sequestered hut and workshop, the fire was fully stoked and she could feel the heat radiating as she approached the blacksmith's work area.

Upon the warrior's arrival, the metal worker brought the goblets out from behind a curtained shelf. The look of pride on her face was unmistakable when the Warrior Princess took the products of her labor and held them out for inspection.

"These are all I imagined they would be, Pyrene. Thank you. They are most definitely works of art." Xena sat the goblets down and pulled out a pouch containing the remaining gems and gold. She held out a few coins for the artisan to take and was surprised at the reaction of the pensive woman.

"I expected nothing in return for being given the honor of making the Wedding Goblets, Xena."

The warrior showed no emotion, while continuing to hold out the coins. "I realize that Pyrene, but it's only fair that you be compensated in some way for your time and talent."

"No! They're my gift to you and Gabrielle; all I did was offer my time and talent, you supplied all the costly materials. "

For the first time since the warrior had met the blacksmith, she saw the solemn woman smile. Slowly she retracted her offering and placed it back into the pouch. "Well they are certainly gifts worthy of Royalty. I will thank you now for the both of us, and I'm sure Gabrielle will thank you herself after the ceremony."

"You're very welcome, Xena."

"You know you don't have to stay, Pyrene," the warrior informed the smithy. "Feel free to go listen to Gabrielle spin her tales. I've done this before, and while I appreciate the use of your facilities, I don't want to keep you from the celebration."

"I'd rather stay and watch you forge the rings, if you don't mind, Xena."

"I don't mind."

In silence the warrior crafted while the blacksmith stood and watched in awe the expertise of this woman they called the Warrior Princess. She, indeed, was a woman of many skills.

When Xena had finished cooling the rings, they were beyond a doubt a work of art, and the warrior smiled both inwardly and outwardly at the thought of placing one of the rings upon her soulmate's finger.

She again thanked Pyrene for the use of her equipment and told her she should be on her way back to the celebration before Gabrielle began to worry about her absence. The two shook hands and parted company. They had not only forged goblets and rings together but also solidified the beginning of a meaningful friendship between two solitary souls. While Xena had a large

following of Amazons in the Village who admired and cared for her, she had very few sisters she could truly call her friend. Pyrene was turning out to be one such person.

While Xena was on her way back to the celebration from the blacksmith's abode, Gabrielle was still relishing in the attention her stories were getting, yet in the recesses of her mind she was trying to formulate what she would be reciting for her wedding vows. Once or twice she even found herself at a loss for words as the story she was reciting and her mind were in two different places. She eventually begged away from the insatiable throng by telling them that although she would love to continue with the stories, she was exhausted from traveling and hoped they would all understand.

There were a few moans and groans from the audience but they seemed to take the announcement fairly well. Of course, they understood even better when they saw the tall warrior who appeared directly behind the Queen's back and stood glaring out at the crowd.

Gabrielle smiled, as her sister's seemed to be taking the breaking up of the party very well. She watched as small groups got up and began walking away in different directions.

A firm hand on her shoulder brought the bard back to the reality of why there was no begging for more. She looked up into twinkling blue eyes and smiled. "I thought that went a bit too easily."

"Come on, Gabrielle. I'll walk you home. It's been quite a day."

"I'll say!" the blonde agreed. "I have a feeling we are in for a busy fortnight."

"But for tonight we can put it all aside and just go home. You may sleep as late as you desire tomorrow, my love; we've no where to go."

"That sounds marvelous." She placed an arm around the taller woman's waist and her head on Xena's chest as they slowly walked back toward their hut.

They walked mostly in silence, only occasionally commenting on how much the Village had grown since the time of Eve's birth. They were definitely happy with the way it had grown away from the Queen's hut. Being the last hut in the Village gave them a privacy no one else possessed. It had been a bit difficult getting rid of the guards but Xena finally convinced them all that she was totally capable of protecting their Queen in her own lair.

Minutes later the duo found themselves standing on their porch, looking up into the clear night sky.

"This is a good place to settle, Gabrielle," Xena acknowledged with as much conviction as possible.

"If you find it becomes more than you can tolerate, Xena, we'll consider going . . ."

"No, no, no. We will put all our efforts into seeing if this is where and how we want to spend the rest of our lives. No predetermined thoughts, my love." The beautiful brunette held her soulmate close. "Besides, Gabrielle, if there is something that needs our looking after, be rest assured the problem will find its way to our door without our ever venturing forth in search of it." She bent down and kissed the silky, golden crown. "Come on, let's get some sleep."

It had been a full day and evening and the two lovers finally lay comfortably in their own bed, in the hut that was to be called home. Each lost in her own world, thinking of the day to come in the not so distant future.

Xena had the rings well hidden until the day of the joining. All she needed to do now was figure out what she was going to say in front of the entire Village without sounding like a fool.

Gabrielle continued to play with words in her head knowing that the perfect combination would eventually come to the surface, hopefully in time to write them down and memorize them.

The land of dreams quickly engulfed the warrior and her bard, as they each followed their separate thoughts to a same yet different place. Each of them dreamed of the celebration yet to come, and the day that had started out in a secret grotto, a day's journey away, ended quietly in the familiar setting of a place called home.

The End