

~ A Day In The Change Of Life ~

by Cheyne

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Fandom: *Xena Warrior Princess*

Rating: (Don't faint) Maybe PG but probably not even.

Synopsis: Our favorite Warrior Princess and her favorite Bard are not as young as they used to be but still very settled in their bliss. Recently, however, Xena has started going through some *changes*...

Spoilers: Old Ares Had A Farm. FIN never happened.

In the northeastern corner of Greece, where east met west, lies Thrace, a vast and fertile land which extended from the Black Sea to the Aegean, from Moesia to Macedonia. Considered a colony of Athens, Thrace was best known for its ceramic artistry, elaborately handcrafted silver and gold treasures and fierce battles between tribes and Warlords for dominance and terrain.

In the southern part of Thrace, hosting the port of Eion, at a bend in the River Strymon sat the scenic settlement of Amphipolis. It was a depot for the mineral mines of the district, and for timber, which was largely used in shipbuilding and, last but certainly not least, famous as the birthplace of the legendary Xena, Warrior Princess.

A day's ride away, through the torturously long, dangerously rocky Hurata Pass lies the quaint village of Ipieros and, not unlike most picturesque hamlets in Thrace, it was mountainous and lush. Ipieros was a village famous for its oracles, outdoor theatre and, currently, it was known as the place the notorious Xena and her soul mate, Gabrielle, the lovely Bard of Potedeia, called home.

Their humble abode was, more accurately, just outside of Ipieros, a little less than half a candlemark's ride away. It was an area of not more than a Titan's handful of modest farmhouses. They were mostly dwellings that had been passed down from generation to generation and it was no different for Xena. The simple, little home where she and Gabrielle had settled down years before had belonged to her grandmother.

It was still a house of family, unconditional love, modest prosperity and harmony. Although lately, the harmony part was losing some of its congruency.

Entering the kitchen, Xena stood in the doorway and visibly searched the interior. Normally, she

would have paused to admire the view of Gabrielle's backside. Years together didn't diminish her appreciation for her soul mate's natural attributes. Seasons of working on the farm left Gabrielle's figure as solid as Greek marble and chiseled in all the right places. At the moment, however, Xena's concentration was elsewhere. "Gabrielle, have you seen my chakram?"

Bent over, scrubbing below the small brick oven Xena had built for her last solstice, Gabrielle told her, "Last time I saw it, you were using it to trim the hedges."

"No, I had it since then because I had to clean it. I could have sworn I left it right here..." She tapped the table.

Gabrielle straightened and turned, focusing on her lover of more than twenty summers. "Uh, Xena? Have you checked your hip?" she asked, amused.

Looking down, the former warrior princess grimaced. "Ah. I knew that. I was testing you." She then grinned at Gabrielle, sheepishly.

"Of course you were. You know, you've been 'testing' me a lot lately. There's nothing wrong with *my* memory," she teased.

"There is nothing wrong with mine, either!" Xena threw back, defensively.

"Really?" Gabrielle rested a hand on her hip. "And you came home late from town the last time, why?"

Xena's eyeballs rotated upward in deep thought. "I...uh...forgot where I parked the wagon?"

"Mmm hmm," Gabrielle nodded. "And this morning, before the yard work, you stomped around, cursing like a Cyclops with a sty, tearing this place and the barn apart because why?"

Xena scratched her chin. "I couldn't remember where I left the scythe?"

"You couldn't even remember what the scythe was called, much less remember where you left it last. That is why you used your chakram, instead."

"True...but the yard work got done a lot faster, didn't it?"

"Yes, dear, that may be true, but let's not forget the poor rooster who had the misfortune to hop up on the bushes to crow when your chakram was making its second sweep."

"Never liked that rooster, anyway. Well, at least we don't have to wonder what's for dinner. It's been moons since we've had Chicken Olympus," Xena said, looking at the bright side.

"And yesterday, you walked out onto the porch four times within a candlemark, why?"

"I still can't remember what I walked out there for! Fine, Gabrielle, you made your point, Good

gods, so I'm getting a little forgetful lately! It happens," Xena barked, her mood turning sour.

"And you've been getting a little snappy lately, too."

"I HAVE NOT BEEN GETTING SNAPPY!" Xena snapped. Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath then let it out. Blinking thoughtfully at Gabrielle, she said, "Okay, maybe a just a little snappy and forgetful. I don't know what's going on, Gabrielle. Lately it feels like I have a tempest brewing inside me."

"You know, Xena, you're no spring gallus anymore," Gabrielle began, broaching the next subject carefully. "You might be starting your climacteric."

Xena's eyes grew wide with shock, as if she had been physically attacked. *"Menopause?"* How dare you suggest that to me, Gabrielle! I am not *that* old!"

"Honey - you've entered into your fiftieth summer. You have to stop denying that at some point," the younger bard reminded Xena gently. "I know being fifty bothers you but, Xena, you really should be grateful that you have lived as long as you have..." By the expression on Xena's face, Gabrielle knew she was still not making any points.

"Oh, great! Why don't I just go replace the crone, Gabrielle?"

"Your shears aren't sharp enough. You'd have to use your sword and that might throw off Clotho's and Lachesis' rhythm."

Shooting her a patented raised eyebrow, pursed lipped, *'You're lucky I love you'* look, Xena said, "Nice. Nice, Gabrielle. Here I am, probably getting to be like Ares, and you're making fun. And you're supposed to be the compassionate one."

Stifling a grin, Gabrielle knew by the time Xena returned from town, everything would be just fine. The retired Warrior Princess' moods were beginning to be predictable in their unpredictability. Gabrielle moved easily into her partner's arms, stood on her toes and kissed Xena on the cheek. "You are not getting to be like Ares. I'd kill you first," she warned, playfully.

As if on cue, a gravelly male voice from another room was heard, bellowing, "Horace! Bring back my gauntlet, you fleabag!"

Rolling her eyes, Xena scowled at Gabrielle. She shouted into the other room, "Horace is gone, Ares!"

"I know, that's what I said! I want him to come back and bring back my gauntlet!"

Closing her eyes, her restraint unraveling, Xena said, "No, I mean he's dead, Ares, he's been gone for -" She looked at Gabrielle. "How many times in one day do we have to tell him the same thing?"

"I know he's gone! Damn it, woman! Let me know when he gets back, I want my gauntlet!"

"Ares, you don't wear gauntlets anymore!" Gabrielle reminded him.

"I know. That's because Horace stole them and probably buried them again."

"Ares - Horace is dead! So is Horace the second, Horace the third and all the other Horaces!" Xena balled up her fists, holding them tight to her sides, about to enter the living room to get rid of some of her unexplained anger when Gabrielle placed her hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Gabrielle, what is wrong with a man who names every single pet the same name? I really thought he had a better imagination than that."

"Xena, you know how he loved that dog. Now, go saddle up Argo, go to town and get the molasses so that I can make the Moustalvria later." Gabrielle's tone never wavered from being warm and patient.

Calming down a little, Xena finally returned a squeeze to the woman in her arms and released her. "Okay. But I may stop at the tavern so I might not be back right away."

"That's fine. Just don't have too many, okay? You're starting to get a little mead middle there, honey." Gabrielle patted Xena's faintly thickening waist.

Looking down, she then looked back up at Gabrielle and growled, "I'm bloating. It's getting to be that time of moon cycle..."

"What time is that? Puanepsion?" Gabrielle asked, sarcastically. "I sleep with you and bathe with you, remember? You haven't cycled since before the winter solstice."

"Well maybe I'm about to start!" Xena started to flare up again.

"Maybe..." Gabrielle agreed, to keep the peace. She did not sound sincere. "Get going, my love, I don't want to be baking all afternoon because I have plans for you later," she winked, her voice low and seductive.

"Really? I'm not too old and fat for you?" Xena sneered. "Aren't you afraid if we're too frisky that I'll break a hip?"

"Slut!" came the cry from the other room.

"Shut up, Ares," they chorused back at him.

Pushing Xena out the back door before she used her chakram on Ares, Gabrielle swatted Xena on the behind in an affectionate gesture, and said, soothingly, "Just stay out of trouble and leave the senile old God of War to me." She watched Xena walk to the barn, not being able to keep the smile off her face.

She adored her warrior princess now more than ever. So Xena had a few wrinkles and a bit of extra padding, there was nothing unattractive about the woman she had not only chosen, but been destined to spend eternity. She had lived for Xena and died for Xena more than once and would not have changed the past, even if she'd had the ability. She had proven that she loved Xena more than life, itself, and although it had been quite a while since they had been in any battles or seen any kind of a fray, she knew she wouldn't hesitate to kill someone with her bare hands if Xena was ever taken from her again.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she walked into the living room to face the man who tried, unsuccessfully, to take Xena from her many times. Ares was elderly now and demented but far from feeble. When Xena and Gabrielle decided to return to the Lakawan Valley to settle down and spend the rest of their lives together in Xena's grandmother's farm, they agreed to care for the aging God of War, who had lived there since he lost his powers and had to hide from vengeful warlords.

There were days when their decision had been a rewarding one.

Today was not one of those days.

Ares glared at Gabrielle. "Hey, Blondie, have you seen my dog?"

Halfway to Ipieros, Xena was still mumbling to herself. She wasn't pissed off at Gabrielle; she was just...pissed off. She guided Argo through the woods, a shortcut off the battered road to town. "Climacteric, my butt!" She petted Argo's neck vigorously, "Do you think I'm getting old, girl?"

Wisely, the horse didn't respond.

"I mean, just because I can't move as fast as I used to or occasionally get a hitch in my hip, or my knees lock up or I get more frequent back aches - that doesn't mean anything. For Zeus' sake, I live an active life, right?"

The third generation Argo moved her head up and down, as Xena ruffled the Palomino's mane.

"Thank you! Okay, so my skin isn't fitting as well as it used to but I still have everything I had when Gabrielle and I first met..." She glanced down at her ample chest, covered by a fitted suede tunic. "It's just a little lower now..."

Seeing the streets of Ipieros, through an opening on the edge of the forest, Xena snapped the reins so that Argo would pick up her pace. The horse always seemed to get very thirsty before crossing the slender brook that separated the woods from the beginning of town. If Xena didn't prompt Argo to proceed at a decent trot, she would stop dead in her tracks to drink at the brook, going no further. Last time they came to town, Argo tried to slow down but Xena was able to keep her on track. This time, Argo planted her hooves when she reached the stream and Xena

nearly went flying over the mare's head. The saddle horn stopped her, digging into her belly. "Yeeouch!"

Sliding off the saddle, landing on her feet with a thud, Xena was about to give the horse holy hades when she found it was more dire for her to bend at the waist. She suddenly had the urgent sensation to relieve her bladder. NOW. Resting her hands on her knees, she remained in that position until the feeling passed. "Well...that's new," she thought out loud, straightening up. "But it's not menopause," she insisted. She grabbed Argo's bridle, attempting to pull the Palomino away from the water.

Protesting, Argo refused to move. "You are so much more stubborn than your grandmother ever was!" With one huge yank, Xena got the mare moving and decided to lead her into town instead of mounting her again.

Tying Argo's reins to a post in front of the Silver Chalice Inn, Xena stopped dead in her tracks. "Son-of-a-Minotaur! What in Tartarus did I come to town for?"

After getting Ares settled down by leaving him to cradle and pet a feather duster, Gabrielle brought a bushel basket outside to begin collecting some herbs from her garden. While gathering thyme, savory, sage, oregano and mint to dry and store, she pondered Xena's unwillingness to face getting older and all that came with it.

She has trouble making decisions, doesn't seem to sleep for weeks, then can't stay awake for days, Gabrielle thought. She sauntered through her rows of beans, chick peas, lentils, onions, garlic and cabbage and thought, Xena has to be starting 'the change' - all during one sentence, she laughs hysterically, sobs uncontrollably, is joyful then sorrowful, nurturing then angry. 'I love you, leave me alone.' That is so not her. Unless she's pregnant and I know that's not possible. Gabrielle stopped and rethought that statement. Okay...it shouldn't be possible and no god should have that warped of a sense of humor.

"Gabrielle?"

The blonde bard alerted to the voice of her neighbor, Greba. The middle-aged, former Miss Iperios appeared at the natural barrier that divided the properties. Turning around, Gabrielle nodded in acknowledgment at the dark-haired beauty.

"Greba. Hi. Are the grandkids still visiting?" Gabrielle approached the newly trimmed hedges that stood between them. She plucked a couple of chicken feathers out from the freshly cut branches and leaves.

"Oh, yes. Arsenios and Ianthe are still here. They were wondering if they could hear one of Eemee Gabrielle's stories before they went home."

Revealing a brilliant smile that could have lit all of Greece, Gabrielle said, "Sure. Bring them

over."

"Great. Thanks. How are things? Ares? Xena? You?"

Gabrielle grinned. "You want a cranky ex god of war?" Then thought, *you want a crabby ex warrior princess?* She then shook her head. Right. Like she would ever give Xena away.

Even though Greba had the reputation of being a gossip, she really wasn't a bad person. She honestly seemed to care for her neighbors and, once she had settled down and married a village merchant, she and Gabrielle had formed a nice friendship over the years, even if she did get on Xena's nerves. But then, it was still difficult for Gabrielle to think badly of anyone and *everyone* got on Xena's nerves.

"Things are good," Gabrielle continued. "Ares is the same. But...honestly? Don't say anything but Xena's driving me a little nuts. Trying to get her to admit she is going through menopause is like trying to herd asps."

"Be patient with her, Gabrielle. It is a big admission. I remember when my mother entered her climacteric. You think the eight-headed beast in the Pultruis Naughton caves is scary? My mother could have given him a run for his dinars."

"How long did her climacteric last?" Gabrielle inquired.

"Six summers."

Gabrielle stopped and swallowed hard. "*SIX* summers?"

"Six," Greba confirmed.

Running a hand through her blonde locks, the bard closed her eyes and recited, "This too shall pass, this too shall pass, this too shall pass..."

"Trying your patience, is she?" Greba asked, knowingly.

"No. Yes. No. She is confused and ready to blame it on everything but what we both know it is. I understand. Really."

"Doesn't make it any easier on you, though, does it?" Greba inquired.

"No, but we're okay. I guess I just had to get that out there. I shouldn't complain. At least we aren't suffering from Amazon Pallet Death."

"So...everything is okay...in that area?" Greba asked carefully. She knew Gabrielle wouldn't hesitate to philosophically discuss intimacy issues - as long as they were Greba's issues. But because of Xena's obsessive privacy about everything, especially sex, getting juicy information about their love life would be like trying to blind an Argus. Unfortunately. Greba had been trying

for at least twelve summers to find out just exactly what two women did in bed.

With an unmistakable twinkle in her eye, Gabrielle said, "Everything is perfect in that area. Still."

"Slut!" Ares voice carried outside through the open window.

The sudden intrusion startled Greba but Gabrielle just shook her head. "Everything else may be failing but he's got ears like a damned sphynx."

Stopping at the Tavern to relax with a mug of port and to wrack her brain to try and remember the errand Gabrielle had sent her on; Xena took a seat in the corner with her back to the wall. Old habits died hard.

She was happy to be away from the farm for a few hours. She didn't know how Gabrielle maintained the patience she did with Ares. Xena had forgiven Ares long ago for being the Centaur's butt he had been to her when he was a god and he had actually started to treat Gabrielle with respect when they all started living together. However, since losing his immortality, Ares began to age rapidly and with that came the mental deterioration. It started subtly with Ares forgetfulness and then his conversations became annoyingly repetitive. Next, his mind started living in the past and if he pinched Xena's behind one more time, she was going to break his fingers...

Taking a long swallow of her wine, Xena silently deliberated about her own recent forgetfulness. Given a choice between entering her climacteric and becoming like Ares, she would gladly take 'the change.'

Maybe menopause won't be so bad, Xena thought. If that is what's happening, it's a biological thing, right? So if I don't let myself feel 'old' then I won't be old. Does that really work? Well, that's what Gabrielle would tell me. Optimistic wench. She rubbed her eyes and sighed. Gods, I don't want this. On the other hand...I sure haven't been missing my cycle. The cramps, the mess, the moods... She thought back to when she began cycling at thirteen. Thirty-seven summers of that is enough. Man, this port is going right through me. What's up with that?

After using the little koritsi's room, Xena returned to her table to finish up her last sip of wine. Draining the mug, she was about to bring the empty tankard to the bar when commotion from that area pulled her focus to a scruffy-looking man who looked vaguely familiar. He was about as tall as she was and his weight looked in proportion with his height. His clothes were filthy and he looked like he had not bathed in a while. The closer Xena got, the more he smelled like he hadn't bathed in a while, either. He had a straggly grey beard with black flecks, stringy salt and pepper hair and a wooden stump for a right leg.

"Your watering down the ale again, Spiros!" the man bellowed. "I'm sick of it. Every time I come down here from Ratheus' old camp, the ale gets worse and worse. I've let it slide before but no more. Ain't in the mood. Watering down is punishable by death and I'm going to make sure you die by my sword!" Swiftly withdrawing the blade from its sheath, the man threateningly pointed his weapon at the barkeep.

His appearance may have been unkempt but there was nothing disordered about his bearing with that sword in his hand. Whoever this guy was, he had the posture of a warrior. Xena immediately went on alert and tried to recall where she had seen him before.

Spiros, the bartender, stepped back and raised his hands. He wasn't a young man but he wasn't this man's age, either. He was also rotund and not a fighter. "Now, hold on, Demetrius, it's a different kind of ale, I've never watered down anything, anybody in here could tell you that." His voice was shaking as much as his knees were.

"This ale tastes like hydra piss! If you ain't watering it down, then you've been taking a leak in it," Demetrius argued. He thrust his sword forward, just missing one of Spiros' chins.

Pulling her sword, Xena deftly knocked Demetrius weapon away, much to his shock. She was standing behind Spiros. "That's enough," she announced, her voice commanding but cool.

Retrieving his sword, Demetrius said, "What business is it of yours, honey?"

Gaping, Xena thought her brain would explode. "Honey?! Did you just call me *honey*??!!" Then she stopped dead, snapping her fingers. "Honey! No, molasses! That's it!"

Squinting, Demetrius approached Xena until they were practically nose-to-nose. "Wait a minute...I know you. You're...you're..."

"Xena," she finished for him.

"No, that's not it," he shook his head continuing to try and place her. "Xena's long gone from here. She was here once but then she left after she sent us to the Pultruis Naughton caves in search of Ares. No, I'd know Xena if I ever saw her again."

"Then I think you need to get your eyes checked," Spiros spoke up.

It finally dawned on Xena who Demetrius was. "You used to ride with Gasgar! Yeah. Now I remember you." She took a step forward and Demetrius took a step back. She gave him a triumphant once-over.

"That's right. And you think you're Xena, huh? Okay, well, if you're Xena then do that pinch thing."

"I don't have to prove anything to you," Xena scoffed. "Just leave Spiros alone and be on your way, okay, Demetrius?" *So I can get out of here before I forget the molasses again.*

Raising his sword, pointing it at Xena, he said, "I said show me that pinch thing."

"I said No." Crossing swords with him, the fray was on. They advanced, retreated, knocked over tables and caused the others to flee the tavern. Ipieros was a quiet town now and skirmishes like this were rare. "Ah, I love a good fight. Gets my heart racing, blood pumping...makes me feel young again," Xena grinned.

Huffing and puffing, Demetrius defended himself for all he was worth. He was losing steam but he was not about to let his opponent know that. "Not bad for only having one good leg, huh?"

"What happened to your leg?" Xena crashed swords with him, the blades whooshing through the air and coming together in zings and clanks.

"The eight-headed beast in the caves had it for lunch. Better for me than Gasgar, though. Each head got a piece of him."

"And it didn't throw him back up?" Xena was just hitting her stride when suddenly - **Woomph** - it felt like her skin had caught fire.

A torrent of heat surged through her, leaving her face and neck flushed. Sweat soaked her as though she had just stepped out of a sauna. Putting her hand up, getting Demetrius' attention, she halted the fight, much to his heavy-breathing glee.

Leaning against the bar for support, he rested his sword against nearest stool. "What's wrong?"

"Is it me or is it hot in here?"

Thinking he had her at a weak moment, he took a deep breath and rushed her. Defenses down but expecting it, Xena dropped her sword, whirled and hit him with her trademark 'pinch.'

"Do I need to say it?" she asked him, eyebrow raised.

Paralyzed, his nose starting to bleed, he managed to get out, "You've just cut off the flow of blood to my brain?" he croaked.

Xena nodded. "Mm hmm. Do you believe who I am now?"

Demetrius tried to nod. "Yes." When Xena removed the pinch, he gasped for breath and fell back into a chair. He looked at her intensely. "My leg's gone because of you!"

"No, your leg is gone because of you and trying to impress Gasgar by going after a powerless god of war. Hard lesson, Demetrius, but you could have ended up like Gasgar. Be happy you're still alive."

Slowly standing up, rubbing his lower back, Demetrius said, "I'm surprised you're still alive."

"Why? Are you saying I'm old?" Xena stiffened, her tone elevated.

"Me? Heh...no. I'm...I...hey, how 'bout them Spartans, eh?" Demetrius coughed and looked away. When he looked back at Xena, her expression was still prickly. "What do you say we call a truce?"

Xena shrugged. "We were never at war. I just didn't want you to whack Spiros. He gives me too good of a discount on my kegs of mead."

"So sit down and have a mug on me."

"Naw, I need to be going. I have to pick up some...some...oh, bacchae balls! I can't believe I forgot it again!" Frustrated, Xena stood next to Demetrius and pounded her fist on the bar.

"Hey, Spiros, pour us some of that hydra piss." He looked Xena up and down. "Didn't you used to be taller?"

When Xena walked through her front door, she saw Gabrielle seated on the rug with two small children cuddled up against her. Xena leaned against the archway and observed her life partner. She thought Gabrielle was more beautiful now than she had ever been, maturity only making her much more appealing in every manner. Smiling, Xena silently reaffirmed how lucky she was to still have the younger bard in her life.

She watched as Gabrielle told a story to Greba's grandchildren. Her bard was so natural with them, so loving and indulgent; it made her sad that Eve, her husband and their children traveled all over the known world, spreading Eli's word. Xena and Gabrielle's great-grandchildren were approximately the same age as Arsenios and Ianthe and it would have been nice to be able to see them more than the once-a-winter visit the family usually made.

Xena then looked over at Ares who appeared to be sound asleep in his chair. His head was tilted to the side, his mouth was open and he was snoring softly. He was clutching their last feather duster close to his chest, an indication to Xena that she'd be making many more feather dusters in the future if that's what kept Ares quiet about the damned dog.

As another hot flash drenched her in flop sweat, which left as quickly as it came on, Xena returned her focus to Gabrielle, grateful her partner had not noticed. She wasn't up for another discussion about the change. But one look at the bard made her forget about her body's recent power surging and she listened with quiet adoration while Gabrielle finished up her tale.

"...Before he rose to the throne of Crete, Minos battled with his brothers for the right to rule. He prayed to Poseidon - " Gabrielle squeezed Arsenios' shoulder. "Do you know who Poseidon was?"

The little boy nodded enthusiastically. "He wath the god of the thea."

"Yes, that's right," Gabrielle smiled and ruffled his hair.

"Uncle Poseidon!" Ares piped up, startling everyone. His eyes were closed and he wore a deranged grin. Then he immediately fell back to sleep.

"Potheidon wathen't hith uncle!" Arsenios accused, crossing his little arms.

"Well, actually, he was. But that's a story for another time." Feeling a yank, Gabrielle looked down at Ianthe, who was two winters younger than her brother. "You want me to keep going?" Ianthe nodded, her long, dark ringlets bouncing. "Okay."

Xena warmed at the sight of both children settling against Gabrielle again. She wished it had been possible to give Gabrielle their own children, a thought that caused her to unintentionally tear up. *Tear up?* That was another thing. *Why the urge to cry over everything? I hate this!* A couple of deep breaths and she was in control again.

Gabrielle continued. "Minos prayed to Poseidon to send him a snow-white bull. He thought that would be a sign of acceptance by the gods and permission for him to rule over Crete. Minos promised to sacrifice the bull as an offering, and as a symbol of obedience. The gods answered his prayer and a beautiful and perfect white bull came out of the sea, but when Minos saw it, he suddenly wanted the bull all for himself. So he kept it, not thinking Poseidon would mind and, instead, sacrificed the best bull from his own herd. When Poseidon learned about how Minos had deceived him, he caused Pasiphaë, Minos' wife, to fall madly in love with the bull."

"Slut!" Ares cried out. And once again, he went right back to sleep.

Ianthe glared up at Ares, upset because his loud voice in contrast with Gabrielle's soft one, made her jump. Then she looked at Gabrielle, big brown eyes blinking curiously. "What's a swut, Eemee Gabwielle?"

Without missing a beat, Gabrielle said, "A woman who has the morals of Old Uncle Ares, sweetie." Before the inquisitive child could ask what that meant, Gabrielle finished her story. "From the love of the white bull and Pasiphaë, the Minotaur was born."

Minotaur. Minotaur. Menotaur. Menopause. She picked this story on purpose! Xena glared at Gabrielle, who hadn't even realized she was in the room yet.

"The Minotaur had the body of a man and the head and tail of a bull. He grew to be so powerful and dangerous that Minos had a labyrinth built just for him to keep him there."

"But Eemee Gabrielle, didn't the Minotaur eat people?" Arsenios asked.

"Well, yes. To stop a terrible plague, Minos would send Athenians into the Labyrinth as a sacrifice. When that wasn't working, Theseus, Poseidon's son, volunteered to enter the Labyrinth

and slay the Minotaur. With the help of Minos daughter, Ariadne, Theseus killed the Minotaur with Poseidon's sword." She pulled both children into a loving hug, kissing them both on their foreheads. "So no more bad dreams about the Minotaur. He's dead and he can't hurt you."

Gods, I love to listen to Gabrielle tell stories, Xena thought. I wish that she could do it more often, knowing how much she loves to. And then, much to her annoyance, her eyes welled up again.

"Yay, Eemee Gabrielle!" Arsenios clapped and stood up. "Come on, Ianthe, time to go." He held his hand out for his sister who took it and stood up. "Thank you," he said, hugging Gabrielle around the neck.

"You're welcome, Arsenios." She also stood up just as Ianthe hugged her leg.

"Thank you, Eemee Gabwielle."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. You come back anytime." She watched them with a fond smile as they walked toward Xena in the doorway, noticing her for the first time.

"Xeeena!" they chorused, running to her. The warrior princess picked them both up at the same time and spun them around, feeling her bladder threatening to let loose from the lift. She stopped abruptly, again waiting for the feeling to pass. Hugging and kissing them loudly, she slowly put them back down. Both children were giggling as they left the house.

Approaching Xena, Gabrielle put her arms around her and rested her head under Xena's chin. "You forgot the molasses, didn't you?"

Xena closed her eyes, swearing under her breath. "Molasses. That was it." She kissed Gabrielle on the top of her head. "Sorry."

"It's okay. It's too late to bake now anyway. Guess I'm going to have to use a little sticky scroll to affix to your forehead when I send you to town from now on. What do you say we feed the bad boy here," her arm extended toward Ares, "have some dinner and go to bed. I'm dog tired."

"Dog. Where are you, Horace? Bring back my gauntlet!" Ares eyes were still closed. He clutched the feather duster closer.

Xena sighed. "Ignore him," she whispered. Nuzzling Gabrielle, Xena smiled. "Just how tired are you?"

Recognizing Xena's tone, Gabrielle leaned her head back, staring into Xena's beautiful baby blues. "Oooh, I'm not *that* tired."

"Slut!" And with that, he was asleep again.

After the dishes were washed and put away and Ares was settled down for the night, Xena and Gabrielle changed into their nightshifts and prepared for bed. As Xena sat down on the edge of the pallet, Gabrielle began massaging her shoulders.

"Oh, yessss. That feels wonderful."

Kneading one particularly tight lump, Gabrielle said, "You've got knots everywhere, my warrior."

Relaxing and allowing Gabrielle's hands to work their magic, Xena broke the comfortable silence and asked, "Does my hair look like it's getting thinner to you?"

Scanning the top of Xena's head, Gabrielle wondered out loud, "Which ones - the black ones or the gray ones?"

"Very funny."

Gabrielle started to chuckle. "The upper ones or the lower ones?"

"Ohhhhhh, now you're going to get it..." Xena turned and grabbed her bard, tackling her, throwing her on the bed, where they playfully swatted at each other. Slap quickly turned to tickle which rapidly became foreplay. Xena managed to make tender love to Gabrielle but dozed off before the bard could reciprocate.

Not a problem, Gabrielle thought, I'll make it up to her in the morning.

A few candlemarks later, Gabrielle woke up to Xena tugging at her. "Snuggle up to me, would ya? I'm chilled to the bone!"

Eagerly cuddling into her lover, Gabrielle was just dozing off when she was awakened by the covers being wrenched away.

"Sweet Mother of Zeus!" Xena pushed away from her. "Gabrielle, could ya move away a little bit? I'm burning up here!"

Feeling the heat and wetness of Xena's skin, Gabrielle rolled away. "Gods, Xena, it feels like you just got back from using a hot spring somewhere."

"Augh! I hate this! What is going on with me?!"

"Xena, I'm telling you -"

"I don't want to hear that 'change' stuff again tonight, okay?"

"Fine. Maybe you should go to one of the town oracles then to see if they can tell you what's

happening to you."

"You know I don't believe in them, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle sighed. "I know - if they're an oracle, why do they need to ask you your name," she quoted Xena's suspicion.

"Exactly." Moments later, Xena was curled around Gabrielle again.

"I thought you were too hot."

"That passed. At least *that* kind of heat did." Her hands started to freely roam Gabrielle's body, working the bard into another state of arousal. "Ready for me again, my love?"

"Always, Xena." Her breathing hitched and her heart pounded. "I am awed that after all these years, you can still find new and amazing ways to make me happy and to satisfy me."

Lovingly attacking Gabrielle with her mouth, Xena murmured, "I still have many skills."

"Slut!" They heard from downstairs.

"I swear, I'm going to kill him," Xena mumbled into Gabrielle's neck.

"You say that every night," Gabrielle reminded her. The sound of very loud snoring filtered up to them. "See? He's oblivious. Now, come here, my big, bad warrior, and let me take your mind off him before you fall asleep again. Xena? Xena?"

Feeling Xena's full weight on her and the sound of deep, rhythmic breathing in her ear let Gabrielle know that another day was done. Smiling, she eased Xena onto her back and snuggled against her side, resting her head on her warrior princess' shoulder.

As she drifted off, she wondered what tomorrow would bring, knowing that life with Xena was never dull.

The End