

You've Got Scrolls

What do you get when you combine the talents of three of the best in the fanfic business? You get a hilarious look at the first e-mail list!

"Another four days, Gabrielle," the warrior said without missing a beat as she sharpened her sword. "Then we'll be in Athens."

"It'll be nice to sleep in a bed and see everyone again."

"You'd better not be planning on seeing anyone in bed but me." On this note, the warrior did pause in her weapon's care, to steal a glance at the bard.

"Of course not, Xena! I'm not suicidal."

"Good. Because I tend to get homicidal." She checked the edge of her blade by plucking a hair from her head and letting it fall across the sharpened edge. She sniffed, as a satisfied smirk broke across her lips. "Constables hate that sorta thing. Messes with the time they get to spend at the local souvlaki shop."

"Yes, love, I know." Xena and Gabrielle exchanged smiles, enjoying the banter.

"Are you going to drag me to the latest Academy Productions?" the warrior asked, anticipating the rise she would get out of her companion.

She was not disappointed as Gabrielle hmpfed and set aside their evening dishes. "It's good for you to go to them. They uplift the soul, affirm our humanity..."

Xena held up a hand, but her eyes twinkled. "Fine, fine. I'll go and be uplifted and affirmed. But," she leered, "I like it when it certain parts of you are lifted and firm far better."

Gabrielle moved from her spot by the fire to kneel between the warrior's long legs. She quirked a brow in silent request for the sword to be moved. "I'd hate to injure anything important."

"I'd love to kiss it and make it better," Xena whispered, moving the sword and allowing it to gently brush over the bard's left breast.

The blonde looked down at her blouse. It had received a minor nick, but her flesh remained unharmed. "You owe my shirt a kiss."

"To Tartarus with the shirt." Xena dropped her head to the spot in question, allowing her tongue to find its way past the small nick in the fabric to the skin behind it.

Gabrielle could tell what kind of evening it was going to be. She smiled, wrapped her hands in long dark hair, and let her head fall back to enjoy the start of what promised to be a wild ride. She released a satisfied groan when she felt her right breast being massaged. Then she chuckled when she heard a mumble. She moved her hands to allow Xena's head the freedom to move where it liked.

"Air," the warrior croaked, taking a deep breath.

The bard laughed again.

The warrior growled. "Think that's funny, do ya?"

"I find a certain amount of humor in it, yes." She nodded.

"Then you should find this completely hysterical." Xena picked her up, moving them both swiftly to the bedrolls that had already been prepared. With the help of her breast dagger the laces of the bard's green top, like Xena's warlord days, became a thing of the past.

"Hey, I have to wear this in the morning!" Gabrielle protested, even as she squirmed out

of the shirt.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." The warrior leaned into the bard, pressing them to the bedrolls. "I have spare ties in my saddlebags."

"That's what you said last time, too." Ties. Gabrielle's mind began to drift as her bardic imagination kicked into high gear. "Xe... about those ties," she craned her neck, placing a light kiss on her partner's collarbone, "there's something I've been meaning to ask you...." _ _ _ _ _

The next day found Xena, Gabrielle and Argo headed down the main road toward Athens. They were playing 'Twenty Questions', as usual. Argo snorted, ruffling the bard's hair. "Don't try to distract me," Gabrielle chided the warhorse.

"Look alert," Xena called down, as she saw a Hermes Scroll Delivery Service rider ("When You Absolutely, Positively Must Have It There This Season") thundering down the road in their direction.

Gabrielle stepped around Argo, giving the young rider more than enough room to pass, but instead of doing so, he reined his pony to a stop. He grew a bit pale as Xena drew her sword.

"Uh..." His eyes shifted to the friendly looking blonde. "Are you Gabrielle of Podunk, the bard?"

The bard blew an exasperated breath. Why couldn't she have been born in Athens or Corinth? And why didn't anyone ever screw up Amphipolis when they addressed Xena? Could it be the big ass sword and the chakram? I need a better weapon than a stick, the bard thought briefly before answering. "Poteidaia. And, yes, I am."

"You've got scrolls," he said tonelessly, for the millionth time. Zeus, this job sucked! The young man carefully extended a scroll to her, mindful of the sword in cross proximity to him.

"Thanks." She took the rolled up parchment and broke through the seal. "Tip him, Xena."

The warrior leaned back in her saddle and sheathed her sword. A tip? Okay. She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, "Never let an Amazon tie you up, no matter what she promises."

This earned Xena a confused look from the lad and a swat from her Amazon Queen. "Uh, thanks..." The messenger quickly spurred his horse into a gallop, glad to be away from the intimidating woman. Though he was upset to have his secret fantasy so cruelly dashed.

Xena peered over Gabrielle's shoulder before the bard stepped away. "Who's it from?"

"A friend of mine, Homerita; another bard I met when we were in Corinth last winter."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." She read the scroll once more. Interesting. Homerita was inviting her to be a part of a secret bard scroll list, the Lesbos Literary Society. She had always heard rumors that such a group existed, but had never really believed it was true.

Apparently, it was a group of bards not affiliated with the Athens Academy of Performing Bards. The Lesbos Literary Society shared story ideas and information about upcoming literary festivals. To be a member was a big honor, Homerita said. To join, all Gabrielle had to do was send a scroll to the Scroll Moderator and affirm that she was of age, of the female persuasion, and Amazon or Amazon-friendly.

When they arrived at the next Hermes Scroll Delivery Service station, she would send her reply. It sounded like fun. And she was always glad to get feedback on her writing. _ _ _ _ _

By the end of the next day, Gabrielle had written her reply and sent it off with the messenger they found at the station. "I liked their old slogan better," Gabrielle remarked.

Xena snickered. "I kinda like 'Our competition claimed not even Hera could stop them -

they're all dead now.' It has a certain ring to it."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. Ex-warlords, they're all alike. "Would you mind if we stopped early tonight, Xena? I want to do some writing." Once she was accepted to the Lesbos Literary Society, she was going to submit the special story she had been working on for Ephiny.

"Sure, love. Anything you want."

"Ooo, I like the sound of that."

"Not half as much as I do." _ _ _ _ _

"Why must every brigand start a fight with us?" Gabrielle sighed as she sat down on her bedroll. That day alone they had been in three fights, rebuilt a bridge for a river-swept village and delivered a litter of baby pigs.

"I guess we're just lucky." Xena started her nightly ritual of cleaning and sharpening her sword. "What story are you working on now?"

"The one I wrote for Ephiny. It's about an Amazon princess and her love for the leader of the Centaurs."

"Ooo, sounds kinky." The warrior waggled her eyebrows. "Will you read it to me?"

"Behave," Gabrielle chided, then blushed. "Sure. For bedtime."

Thundering hooves approached their campsite, instantly bringing Xena to her feet. She relaxed slightly when she saw it was another HSDS rider. "It's for you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle walked over to receive her scroll. This was exciting! She loved getting mail. "Hi!"

"You Gabrielle?" the messenger asked, grumpily.

Fair eyebrows drew together. Something was wrong. "I am."

"You've got scrolls," he announced, throwing a large sack of scrolls to the ground. The horse breathed a sigh of relief with the removal of the large pack.

"What in the Hades is that?" Xena queried. She gave Argo a reassuring look. There was no way her warhorse was going to have to lug that load around.

The rider shrugged, wondering what part of 'You've got scrolls' was too complicated for the warrior. He decided it must be the fact that it had three words in it and went for something a little easier. "Her mail." He turned the horse around and fled as quickly as he could, fearful Gabrielle might try to send some mail back with him. The fact that the warrior was advancing on him with a sneer on her face, and a sword in her hand, helped the decision making process along too.

"Gabrielle." Xena stretched out the bard's name as she turned from the sight of the fleeing rider. Normally, she did that under better circumstances, but she really wanted her companion's attention now. "Explain, please."

Gabrielle swallowed. She couldn't tell Xena about the secret society. She had already signed her oath. In blood. In triplicate. With witnesses. So she thought quickly. "I joined the Scroll of the Month Club. You've heard of it - ten scrolls for a dinar, then a scroll a month. You can read the scroll, keep it and pay, or return it."

"Looks like a lot of reading there."

The bard sighed. "It sure does." She dragged the bag over to her bedroll. So much for writing tonight. It would take her candlemarks to read through all of these.

Xena sighed. There went her bedtime story. Damn scroll club. _ _ _ _ _

The next morning the warrior awoke to the sound of furious hoof beats. Xena sprang to her feet, her chakram in hand, as Gabrielle continued to snore loudly, oblivious to the intrusion.

A winded rider pulled his steed to a stop at their camp.

Scowling, Xena tossed her chakram back on their bedroll. "Let me guess," she said drolly.

"Gabrielle's got scrolls."

The rider simply nodded. He was glad for any excuse not to have to repeat the slogan.

"Wake up, bard." Xena kicked the edge of the bedroll.

Nothing.

"Gabrielle!"

A blonde head poked out from under the fur. "I was not reading Dad's 'Amazon Rider' magazine, Mom! I swear... Huh?" Confused eyes opened slowly. "Xena?"

"You were expecting Ms. Summer Solstice?"

Gabrielle smiled sweetly. Her attention was drawn to the rider when an enormous bag of scrolls was unceremoniously dumped off his horse, kicking up a large cloud of dust.

The bard closed her eyes as the rider galloped away. She didn't have to ask what it was. She already knew.

"Gabrielle, doesn't the Scroll of the Month Club imply that you'll receive one scroll a month?"

"Umm... I joined many," the bard looked at the fresh pile of scrolls and cringed, "MANY times."

"Why in Tartarus...? Wait." Xena held up her hand. "I don't want to know."

"I'm sorry, Xena." Gabrielle bit her lip. She wanted to tell Xena. She really did. But she'd promised! "There must be a problem with my subscription. I'll write them and get it cleared up in no time. Meet you in the stream for a bath? Please?" C'mon, don't really be mad, Xe.

Xena nodded, eyeing her partner suspiciously as Gabrielle disappeared in the direction of the stream.

The warrior bent down and picked up the top scroll from the pile Gabrielle's had been reading the night before. I know she got through more than the first one. Tucking the scroll into her leathers, she stalked off toward the bushes, mumbling something about 'creative types' and Argo never forgiving her. _ _ _ _ _

"Umm... this is really good, Gabrielle." Xena licked her lips, scraping the last bite from her bowl. They had made good time the last two days and would arrive in Athens ahead of schedule.

"Thanks," the bard answered absently as she snapped the seal on yet another scroll. "I got the recipe from your mom last month."

Xena grunted her approval and served herself a second helping of supper. The campsite went deathly silent except for the occasional crackle of the fire. She regarded her reading partner carefully. After only a few days with Gabrielle in that damned scroll club, the warrior was already starting to miss her companion's voice. Gabrielle didn't have time to chatter aimlessly about fireflies and moonlit nights. Or even her dreams.

All she had time to do was read.

Xena grinned affectionately, admiring how the firelight danced over her lover's face... but even in the shadows, she could see that Gabrielle was nervous about something. She'd gently tried to prod the younger woman into talking all day. That was something she would have sworn she'd never have to do. But, for some reason, Gabrielle seemed determined to deal with whatever it was alone.

Gabrielle held the latest scroll carefully in her hands; she was almost afraid to look at it. The scrolls had been getting nastier and nastier over the past several days. Was it possible for all the society members to be cycling at once? She couldn't see how.

Anxious fingers unrolled the parchment. She'd submitted her own scroll chronicling Ephiny and Phantes' romance and ultimate union, hoping for some quality feedback. For, while

she loved Xena with all her heart, the warrior usually restricted her comments to 'great', 'funny', or 'I don't get it'. And if she wanted to really improve as a bard, she needed people to be honest enough to point out her faults. But now that the time had come... she swallowed. Was she ready?

She scanned the first line of the scroll and saw, printed neatly in the subject space, Ephiny & Phantes: A Love Story. Gabrielle gasped and rolled the scroll closed.

"What is it?" Xena asked worriedly, setting aside her bowl.

"Xena, would you mind checking the perimeter one more time?" I'm going to Tartarus for sure! But I don't know if I can hide my reaction around her when it's actually my story they're talking about.

"Why?"

"I heard a noise."

Xena picked up her sword, running her thumb across the razor sharp blade. "Really?" Blue eyes narrowed dangerously as she quietly rose to her feet. "Where?"

Gabrielle pointed away from the campsite. "There. It would make me feel so much better if you'd check things out. Do you want me to come with you?" the blonde asked needlessly.

"Nah. You stay here and read. I'll take care of whatever it is."

"Thank you, Xena," Gabrielle said weakly, already feeling the crushing weight of guilt. "I love you."

Xena smiled. "And I love you." She looked out into the darkness. "Be right back."

The bard exhaled wearily as her partner disappeared into the woods. Steeling her nerves, she unrolled the scroll, which read:

What kind of Cyclops crap does Gabrielle of Potato Salad think she's selling?

It's Poteidaia, you imbecile. Gabrielle glanced at the top, looking for the sender's name. It was from Vulture. Gods, her scrolls were always annoying! Gabrielle kept reading.

Those people who insist on engaging in bi-species relationships make me sick! They're just fooling themselves into believing they don't really prefer Amazons! Which they obviously do.

Green eyes widened. What? Hades!

It's disgusting and immoral! They live their little lives passing for normal, so they don't have to put up with the discrimination that comes with loving an Amazon, and yet, when it comes time to reap the rewards of an Amazon lifestyle (boar roasts, flogging of trespassers in the square, the occasional public castration) they're the first ones in line!

The bard's insipid 'love story' sickened me, as do all lovers of Centaurs. There is no such thing as a bi-specist. You're either an Amazon or you aren't. This trying to have it both ways is a load of Centaur crap. Plus, the 'bard' misspelled three words, and her editor should be burned at the stake.

Gabrielle and her pony loving friends can all go straight to...

The scroll suddenly ignited in a burst of flames. "Ouch!" Gabrielle instantly let go of the smoldering parchment. "I don't believe this!" she muttered unhappily. "I've been flamed."

She reached into her bag. She read several more scrolls, some espousing Vulture's views, others the complete opposite. Several society members proudly proclaimed their bi-specist status, only to be crucified... okay, that only happened once... literally. That camel relationship was more than even the most liberal folks could go for.

Scroll after scroll ignited, until Gabrielle's fingers were stained with soot and the parchments were nothing but a pile of ashes.

Xena came crashing out of the bushes to find her partner standing over a smoldering

heap of, well, the warrior wasn't quite sure what. The intensity of the flames had destroyed the parchments beyond recognition. "Who's shooting fireballs at us?" she exclaimed. She'd seen the flames through the trees and made it back to the camp in record time.

"No one, Xena."

"But?" she gestured vaguely to the pile of ashes at Gabrielle's feet.

"That was me. I wasn't too fond of some of my new scrolls so I..."

"Got them to spontaneously combust?"

"Something like that."

The warrior wasn't buying it for a moment. Gabrielle's guilty face was doing a wonderful job of contradicting the bard's lips. She sighed. Serves me right for falling in love with someone who... Her thoughts trailed off when she saw tears begin to fill soft, green eyes.

"Gabrielle, could you, by any chance, be needing a hug?"

The bard nodded, and Xena stepped forward, enfolding her in strong arms, noting, as she always did, how their bodies and hearts fit perfectly together.

"Thanks, Xe." She sniffed. "I'm sorry. I'm getting your leathers all wet."

"You know I don't care about that." Xena's arms tightened around her partner.

"Can we go to bed now?" Gabrielle exhaled wearily. "I'm really tired."

"Sure." Xena looked at the pile of ashes in relief. Good. There were no more scrolls.

Maybe now their lives could get back to normal. _ _ _ _ _

Gabrielle sighed, snuggling closer to Xena. It was so nice to be in a real bed, under real blankets, with real pillows. Basically, it was just REAL good and the bard was REAL happy.

The only thing that might make me happier, she considered as she rolled over to look at Xena's slumbering form, is still sound asleep. Maybe they shouldn't have played that game of warlord and peasant girl last night. That one always wore Xena out and drained her for days afterwards. But the warrior looked so darn good in the peasant blouse, and Gabrielle loved playing with Xena's whip, even if the armor tended to pinch.

The bard considered going down to fetch the morning meal for her lover, but getting out of bed could be tricky. Xena always seemed to sense when she was about to get up, and she never failed to roll over and trap the bard. It wasn't that Gabrielle COULDN'T get up before Xena, it was that Xena generally wouldn't LET her. Now, in a deliberate effort to get the warrior to trap her in the bed, she made the furtive movement.

Bingo! Right on cue. Xena rolled over. Wrapping her arm around Gabrielle's waist, she pulled her close. Oh, yeah, one happy bard. Figuring these warlord types out isn't so hard. They like to think they are in control. All you have to do is let them think that.

The pounding on the door of their room brought Xena out of her deep sleep. "What in Tartarus? Don't they know that people - namely me - are trying to sleep?" She grabbed a dagger from the table and made her way to the door.

Gabrielle scrambled out of bed, wrapping a blanket around her body. She grabbed Xena and kissed her quite soundly. She knew it was the only thing that would stop her naked, raging lover from killing whoever was at the door. She had learned this lesson the hard way two seasons ago, but that was another story. When she broke the kiss, she stroked Xena's cheek with the palm of one hand and gently eased the dagger out of Xena's hand with the other. "It's okay, sweetheart. You go back to bed. I was awake anyhow. I'll get the door."

Xena nodded, sleep still registering on her face, and turned back to the bed. She threw herself back onto it, effectively breaking the fourth post, and sending it thumping to the floor. It never even registered with Xena, who was already back to sleep.

"We're gonna have to pay for that," the bard mumbled. They needed to learn to be more careful with the furniture. She went over to the warrior and pulled the sheet over her naked form. Then, tightening the blanket around her own shoulders, she opened the door.

The HSDS rider glared at her. She swallowed hard, wishing now she had let Xena answer the door.

"Guess what?" he growled.

"I've got scrolls?" the bard asked meekly.

"Oh yeah," he answered, with a combination nod/shake of his head that made him look like some kind of psychopath straight out of a horror play by Raimius. "Move back, little girl," he growled once again. Then he began bringing in crates.

"Wait a moment!" Gabrielle placed a hand on the man's arm, only to have him snap at her like a wild animal. She jumped back, allowing him to deliver seven crates into the room.

He put the last crate in place, then turned on the bard. "We had three more, but for some reason they caught fire and burned my damned wagon to the ground! It was all I could do to save these and my horse."

The bard cringed. 'Thank you' didn't seem like it was enough under these circumstances. She turned to get a few dinars from Xena's pouch on the bedside table.

The warrior reached out, grabbing the bard's wrist. "What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna tip this poor guy."

Xena sat up in bed, the sheet pooling around her waist, rubbed her eyes, then leveled her best 'pissed off warlord' glare at the driver. "Don't play leapfrog with a unicorn."

The driver realized: one, no matter how mad he might be, he'd get over it, and, two, he should leave now before the warrior decided to get up. He slammed the door on his way out.

"Xena." The bard tapped her foot. "Are you trying to be funny or are you just really, really cheap?" _ _ _ _ _

Later, Gabrielle padded back to the bed and tugged the covers back up around Xena's waist. She placed a soft kiss between bare shoulder blades, wishing her lover pleasant dreams. The sight of Xena's lanky form sprawled out across the bed, and completely relaxed, drew a wistful smile from the bard. Days on the road were long and hard, and these times were too few and far between. She fought the impulse to crawl back into bed with Xena, feeling a twinge of resentment that she had other things to do.

Gabrielle groaned inwardly, forcing herself to concentrate on the task at hand, which was getting through as many of these scrolls as possible before Xena woke up and had a conniption. Homerita hadn't mentioned how intense these scrolls could be. The last few had ignited in her hands, leaving her with singed fingertips. Gabrielle opened the next one carefully and read quickly, lest she lose the contents, like she had with so many others.

She sighed deeply and counted to ten. Then twenty. She had to whenever she saw the writer of the scroll was Vulture or one of her cronies. This one was from Magentria.

Subject: Violated! (was Ephiny & Phantes: A Love Story)

I feel so violated! So used! So hurt! So betrayed!

Gabrielle counted to forty. "Get a real life, loser," she mumbled, before reading on.

I innocently opened my scrolls the other day and was forced to read about pony love. It was awful! I feel so unclean! I thought this was a safe place for Amazons!

Scroll Moderator, you need to take action against this 'Galloping Gabrielle' before she sends more of this putrid filth to the list.

Also, since we're on the subject of rules violations, I think we need to bring up a certain

unmentioned bard who is too big for her breeches.

You all know who I'm talking about. Don't make me say her name.

Gabrielle scratched her nose. She sure didn't have a clue. But she doubted that Magentria really did either. However, Gabrielle was sure the answer lay somewhere in the pile of scrolls that surrounded her.

Her gaze drifted back to Xena, who was still sleeping like a baby and probably would be for some time. Gabrielle smirked for a moment, before picking up the next scroll. Oh boy. It felt a little warm to the touch already. Having learned her lesson, she unrolled it, then placed candleholders on the edges to hold it open.

Green eyes scanned the scroll's enormous length. The bard rolled her eyes. The idiot writer had copied the previous three scrolls' subject matter to the bottom of this one! Gods, why did people do that? Couldn't they use what was between their ears and read the subject line, or at least employ a little snippage? It wasn't like parchment grew on trees. Well, okay, it did. But that wasn't the point!

Subject: Rules (was Violated!) From: Snare Cyclops

I agree with Magentria. This is supposed to be a safe place. I bet this Gabby person hasn't ever performed once to a sober audience. Her writing smacked of amateurish attempts at plot.

And I'm glad someone finally had the guts to bring up Sappho. It's not like she's some goddess ... or even a REAL muse.

Sappho is on the list? The Sappho? Gabrielle trembled at the thought that the greatest and most prolific living bard had read her work. Did she like it? Was she moved? Did she feel Ephiny's birth pangs? Eager to see if Sappho had provided her with feedback, she opened the next scroll.

Subject: Sappho (was Rules, was Violated!) From: Celene

I think everyone needs to calm down. Sappho has only had two guest lectures at the Academy of the Performing Bards. I don't think that constitutes a violation of our rule against society members being affiliated with the Academy. How can she be one of THEM? She's clearly one of US. Besides, shouldn't we all be proud of her accomplishment, instead of being jealous? She did get into the Academy by receiving a high recommendation from her readers.

This is one of our own being recognized. For so long we've wished we had someone in the Academy. Now that we have a foot in the door, let's not slam the door on it.

Gabrielle tossed the scroll onto the pile at her feet - the one she'd recycle later. They weren't all flames. But those redundant 'stop the madness' scrolls got annoying, too!

The bard stopped to consider that. Oh Gods! I'm becoming one of these Bacchae! Wait, Gabrielle. These are some of the greatest bards in all of Greece. They can't really be soul-devouring Bacchae, can they? It must just seem that way. Some Society bards were known for their ability to reduce a grown man to tears with their inspiring prose. Even Xena would be moved if she would stay awake for an entire performance!

Gabrielle's gaze dropped to the next scroll.

Subject: Sappho (was Rules, was Violated!) From: Vulture

Jealous of Sappho and her cult? I think not! Punctuation?? Ever heard of it? I wanna know exactly why I would be jealous of someone who couldn't write her way out of...

Poof! The scroll disintegrated. Pale brows lifted. Gabrielle had to admit she was impressed. This one hadn't even burst into flames. It skipped directly over that step, immediately turning to ash.

As did twenty-seven of the next thirty scrolls.

And that's when it hit her. BY THE GODS! She had thought it was only a myth, something only whispered by creative minds in the halls of the Academy, but now she knew better.

Her mind whispered the words it was too shocked to say out loud:

Flame War...

Unable to stand it any longer, Gabrielle pulled a fresh sheet of parchment and a quill from her saddlebag. The Lesbos Literary Society was not what she thought it would be at all. They probably only needed to be reminded of their original purpose. She was especially confident that they would value the fresh perspective of a new member. She chewed the quill's tip for a moment. Taking a deep breath, she began pouring her heart out.

From the bed, Xena surreptitiously watched as her companion wrote. It was clear by the determined glint in the bard's eye that she was on a mission. But somehow Xena could detect faint sadness in those determined, green eyes. Something was wrong.

And she was going to find out what it was. _ _ _ _ _

An HSDS rider pulled up alongside the warrior and bard, who hadn't even bothered to slow their stride to the market as she approached. As Xena had put it so succinctly the night before, stopping for every deliverer would cause nothing but trouble.

The delivery woman panted, "You've..."

"Got," Xena supplied.

"Scrolls," Gabrielle finished glumly as they turned a corner.

"Well," the woman reached into her bag, "actually, you've only got one scroll. But we always have to say the slogan. Whether it fits or not."

"Heartless marketing bastards!"

The rider could only nod at the warrior's obvious wisdom and business savvy.

Gabrielle brightened. "Really? Only ONE scroll!" This was more like it.

"Really," the rider confirmed.

Gabrielle took the parchment carefully, breathing a huge sigh of relief when her sore fingertips grazed the scroll. The parchment wasn't even warm!

The rider looked to Xena. "Well," she demanded, extending her hand for a tip.

Twin eyebrows shot skyward. "If a man tells you that you can't get pregnant by boinking on horseback, he's full of sh..."

"Xena!"

The rider's eyes widened, then turned to slits. "Why, that no-good, lying..."

"Uh huh," the warrior agreed smugly, chuckling as the rider drew her dagger and rode off in the direction of her former beau's farm.

Gabrielle shook her head. And folks thought Poteidaian's were naive.

"I'm going to stretch Argo's legs. Be back in a minute?" Xena said, mounting the warhorse.

"Sure." Gabrielle laughed, seeing through her partner's attempt to get out of shopping for supplies. The bard took advantage of these few moments of privacy to read her newest scroll.

To: Gabrielle of Putrid Skeeter From: Scroll Moderator Subject: Warning

Please refer to your rules scroll for special posting rules.

Also, your membership confirmation needs to take place in the next quarter moon. Please confirm you will be in Athens at the below listed date, location, and time, so we can have a list verifier meet with you.

Because she sponsored your membership, Homerita, along with an impartial list member, will act as a verifier.

Huh? Rules scroll? Posting rules? List verifier? I think I'm missing something here. She scanned down to the date. That's tonight! Zeus! Gabrielle slapped her forehead.

What in Hades was she going to tell Xena? _ _ _ _ _

"I won't."

"You will."

"I won't!"

"You will, Xe!"

Xena pushed aside her half-full tankard of ale and leaned forward on her elbows, closing the gap between her and Gabrielle. Why was the bard being so unreasonable about this? "I'm not leaving you here in the middle of a strange part of Athens, in a strange tavern, with a stranger. It's... It's..."

"Strange?"

"Very funny. It wouldn't be safe!"

"I'll be perfectly fine here alone. Homerita isn't a stranger, Xena, she's my friend." Gabrielle felt her temper began to boil over. "We are attacked on almost a daily basis, you know, and, somehow, I manage to protect myself just fine!" She unconsciously drew a finger across the rough planes of her staff, which was propped up against the wall next to her. "You're not my mother. You don't need to be with me every minute of every day!"

"And it's not like this Homerita person is some bloodthirsty ex-warlord who attracts violence wherever she goes," Xena said.

"Exactly!" Gabrielle's eyes instantly fluttered closed. She regretted the slip the second the word left her lips. Gods. "Xena..."

Only the barest flicker of pain showed in the warrior's eyes before her jaw clenched and her gaze dropped to the table. But, to Gabrielle, Xena might as well have burst into tears.

The young blonde felt a pang deep in her chest. "Xena, I didn't mean that." She reached across the table to wrap her hand around one of lover's, only to have her pull away.

Xena quickly rose to her feet, sending her chair clattering behind her. "It's fine, Gabrielle. Have fun with your friend. I'll go... umm..." She searched her mind and came up with a well-worn excuse. "I'll take Argo for a ride." Without waiting for a response, she pushed away from the table and headed for the door.

"It's dark! Xena!" Gabrielle called after her friend. "Hades!" she hissed under her breath. She stood to follow her partner, but stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Homerita rush through the tavern door and run directly into the rapidly escaping warrior.

"Watch it..." Xena growled, giving Homerita a quick once over. A slender eyebrow lifted.

"Sor... Sorry," Homerita stammered quickly as scenes of a gruesome death (written in iambic pentameter) flashed behind dark eyes.

"No problem, buddy," Xena dismissed the bard easily, moving around the tall figure and disappearing into the night.

A short, heavyset woman made her way into the tavern, stopping at Homerita's side. "Did you have to pick such a rough place? Why that woman looked like... like..."

"...a warrior," Homerita interrupted, drawing out the word as though it were a curse. Stories about warriors and warlords were the bread and butter of any bard's repertoire. Still, warlords were distasteful, dangerous creatures who were unlikely to support the arts, notoriously cheap, and unpredictable at best. Not to mention sweaty. Homerita felt faint.

Thank the Gods for the Lesbos Literary Society. There Homerita was 'safe' from such disturbing influences. One of the Society's most important rules was that its members were forbidden to associate with warlords or warriors. She hoped that merely running into the mysterious-looking, dark-haired woman, who was obviously one of the taboo class, wasn't enough to call HER membership into question. Homerita swallowed hard. The Society's members had been on the rampage lately. Nowadays, a bard couldn't be too careful.

Gabrielle waved at Homerita, motioning the large woman over to her table, vowing to make this quick so she could track down Xena.

"Gabrielle, how marvelous to see you!"

"Hello, Homerita."

"Is something wrong?"

"Hmm..." The bard tore her eyes away from the tavern door. "I think so," she sighed. "Listen, I'm sort of in a hurry. Can we..." She made a vague motion with her hands.

"Of course." Homerita pointed to the shorter woman at her side. "This is Darian. And we're here to verify your membership."

"Well, I'm a member. Consider me verified. Nice seeing you again, Homerita." Gabrielle slapped the bulky woman on the back and picked up her staff.

"Wait!" Darian exclaimed. "We haven't ACTUALLY verified anything. Paragraph nine, clause three, line four of rule number ten clearly states..."

"Rules? What are these rules everyone keeps referring to?" Gabrielle was getting exasperated. Were there rules posted with a scroll mistress somewhere? And if so, why hadn't anyone given her the scroll mistress' address so she could check them out herself?

Twin gasps.

"You haven't read the rules?" Homerita whispered.

"I repeat," Gabrielle cocked her head to the side, "what rules?"

"You should have received them in your first batch of scrolls, not that it matters. Paragraph six, line forty-one of rule three clearly states that all members are deemed to have read and agreed to all rules, under all circumstances."

The bard put her hands on her hips and glared at the short, chubby woman. "Who in Tartarus are you again?"

"Darian. Author of 'Ode to Plague'."

Gabrielle groaned inwardly. Tragedy writers were simply the pits.

"I can see you're in a hurry, Gabrielle. So we'll make this quick." Homerita wiped off her sweaty brow. "Are you of legal age?"

The bard rolled her eyes. She'd already sworn that she was. "I'm of legal age," she uttered impatiently.

Darian looked her over hard. The blonde bard did look awfully young. Of course, you could still be awfully young and be over the age of consent. With a quick nod to Homerita, Darian indicated she was satisfied.

Homerita smiled. "Good. Next, are you an Amazon or Amazon friendly?"

"Both."

"How friendly?" Darian demanded. There were simply too many closeted Amazonphobes in the world.

Gabrielle nearly bit her tongue through. She'd had about enough of this. "Well, Darian, does this count as 'friendly' enough for you?" The bard leaned over and whispered into Darian's ear, smiling smugly when it turned a bright scarlet.

"Gods," Darian whispered, her mouth hanging slightly open.

"Did I mention I was upside down at the time?"

The little verifier swallowed. "Gabrielle's Amazon-friendly. Verrrry friendly," she croaked. "Next."

Homerita breathed a sigh of relief. It was almost over. "Last question. Are you female?"

Gabrielle snorted indignantly. She wasn't the butch one at the table, that was for damn sure! "What do you think?"

Homerita nodded, but Darian shook her head 'no'. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle. That's not good enough. I'm afraid we'll need to conduct a quick visual inspection."

"You want me to get naked?!"

The tavern broke out into applause.

"Certainly not!" Darian did, of course, but this was business. "You'll only need to disrobe from the waist up."

"Bite me."

"Gabrielle, I can understand your modesty," Homerita inserted, trying not to stare at the bard's skimpy, cropped top or the low-cut skirt that hugged her hips. "But these rules are really in place for your protection. We want a 'safe haven' for Amazon-friendly bards."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes again. These were only scrolls for God's sake! So far, second degree burns and parchment cuts seemed to be the biggest 'safety' issues to have arisen.

"Please, Gabrielle," Homerita changed tactics, "I understand that Sappho read your last submission and found it very thought provoking."

Green eyes went round. "Sappho said that about my work?"

Homerita smiled and nodded. "She's one of many distinguished members of the Lesbos Literary Society."

Darian gasped loudly, covering her gaping mouth with her hand. "You said the name!"

Homerita immediately clutched her breast.

"You know the penalty, Homerita. To say the Society's full name in public is to blaspheme! Remove your hand, wench!"

"NO!" Homerita cried.

"I don't understand." Gabrielle inserted herself between Homerita and Darian, whose fingers were outstretched like pinchers.

Darian shot Homerita an evil look, but managed to address Gabrielle. "Part of our sacred rites of initiation involve the piercing of one nipple."

Gabrielle paled.

"We also use the nipple ring as a mild form of corporal punishment. For blasphemers!" she directed at Homerita. "And as a way of identifying one of our own."

"It was a mistake!" Homerita tried to escape, but her back was against the wall.

"Paragraph four, clause ninety-nine, line one of rule...." While Homerita and Gabrielle were distracted by Darian's impressive recitation of the new, super-amended rules, Darian's fingers darted past Gabrielle and found purchase on Homerita's nipple. She gave a sharp tug. Adding a twist for good measure.

A collective gasp went around the tavern when Homerita's breast popped out of her tunic and landed on the floor. Then bounced. Twice.

Gabrielle and Darian stared at the pig's bladder that had been filled with sand, and had a shiny, gold nipple ring attached to the tip.

"Hera's left tit!" Darian appropriately screeched. The small woman tore open Homerita's

tunic to expose a hairy chest and another 'breast'. "You're a man?"

"I... I..."

Gabrielle bent closer, noting the obvious shave line. "Uh huh." She sighed softly. This was sad. "I don't mind the fact that you're a man, Homerita, but why the elaborate deception?"

Before Homerita could reply, Darian raged, "Well, I mind! Liar! Liar! Pants on fire! Infiltrator! Infidel! Traitor! You're Homer, not his hormonally-challenged sister, Homerita!" Unable to think anything else she added 'liar!' again.

"I think I should go now," Homer said sadly, in a voice three octaves below normal.

"I'm leaving too." I've wasted enough time with this ridiculous melodrama. I need to find Xena. Gabrielle took a step, but was held firmly by Darian. "Let Homer go. The Amazons know how to take care of his kind."

"But..."

"No 'buts'. I shouldn't be telling you this, but Sappho is interested in co-writing a poem with you. She thinks you have real promise."

"She does?"

"Absolutely. Now about that piercing. I happen to have a needle and ring right here in my pouch." Darian wrapped her arm around Gabrielle and led her toward the rear of the tavern. "I can perform your rites right here."

"Sappho wants to write with me?" the bard asked dazedly, not having heard anything past those incredible words.

"She does. We need only take care of this one little bit of Society business first." _ _ _

_ _ _ _ _

"Zeus' boots, Argo," the warrior huffed, while she brushed her faithful mare. "It's not like she's a little girl." A smirk crossed Xena's face when she thought about how well Gabrielle handled a whip. She faltered momentarily, nearly dropping the grooming tool. "Far from it, as a matter of fact."

Argo looked back at her mistress. If it were possible for a horse to roll her eyes, the Palomino certainly would have done so. Instead, she gave a snort and slapped the warrior with her tail.

"Watch it!" Xena warned. "And be nice to Gabrielle. She likes you; she really likes you."

This only earned the former warlord another whack.

"Okay, no sweet oats for you in the morning! And I'm gonna let her braid your..." Xena's tirade to the horse was forgotten when the stable door opened and Gabrielle stepped into the building.

"Xena." The bard's tone was low and very apologetic.

"Yeah?" The warrior's tone was 'come over here and kiss it and make it better'.

"About what happened at the tavern..."

"Yeah?"

Gabrielle's stepped closer to her warrior, but didn't touch her yet. She wasn't so sure it would be welcome at this point. "I'm sorry. I spoke without thinking. And, I guarantee you, that's not how I feel about you. You are the best person I know. I am so lucky to have you to love."

The pain in Xena's expression lessened. "I'm the lucky one, Gabrielle."

"Not true."

They stood there, sharing small smiles, before Xena began to get embarrassed at the mushy sentiments. "So how was your time with Homerotica and her odd little friend?"

The bard cleared her throat, giving it a little scratch as she mumbled, "You have no idea." This was followed by the need to massage the side of her right breast in an attempt to ease a little of the pain in her nipple. "Oh, by Artemis, that stings," she growled through clenched teeth.

"What?" Xena moved toward the bard a bit. "Are you okay? Did your little drag queen friend hurt you?"

"You knew?!" Blonde brows shot up.

"Of course I knew. Sweet Aphrodite's nightgown, Gabrielle, he had a five sundial shadow at birth. And he needed to shave his legs."

"I didn't even..." The bard suddenly glared. "Why were you looking at her... eh... his... legs?"

The warrior coughed a bit, scratched the back of her head, and tried to focus on anything in the room that wasn't blonde and cranky. Unfortunately, she had Gabrielle in front of her and Argo behind her; that left looking up as the only option. "Hey, look." She pointed. "A hayloft."

"Imagine that." The bard's hands went to her hips. "A hayloft in a barn. What will they think of next?"

"Wanna go up there and play Spank the Bard?"

"Can't." The bard shook her head.

The warrior counted on one hand and then the other, ticking off fingers and counting in her head. "Nope, not that time."

"Not because of that."

"What then?"

"This!" She pulled the edge of her top down. She hadn't bothered to tightly re-lace it because it hurt like a week on a Roman cross.

"Why, Gabrielle, you little minx, you!" Xena absolutely beamed when she saw the silver nipple ring piercing tender pink flesh. "That's downright..." Suddenly Xena's mouth was very dry, and it was all she could do to contain the flare up of lust that rushed through her body.

"Gods-be-damned painful, and you're not getting within a staff's length of me tonight."

Xena looked to the ground as the toe of her boot kicked up a little dirt. "Even if I said I know how to make it stop hurting?"

"You're only trying to get a little hurt-comfort action going here."

"Duh! But if you're the one getting comforted, what are you bitching about?"

"True." The bard surveyed the loft. "Can you really make it feel better?"

"Skill number 637-a: Easing pain in painfully erect, recently pierced nipples."

"What's skill 637?"

"Easing pain in painfully erect, recently pierced..."

The bard put up her hand. "Never mind! I really don't want to know."

"So, how about it, my love, a little romp in the hay?"

"Shouldn't that be a roll in the hay?"

"Sweetheart, we can roll, romp, hop, skip, jump, and frolic; I really don't care as long as we get started. Soon."

"Frolic? You're gonna frolic?"

"I will, if you will."

"You're on!" The bard began climbing the ladder to the loft.

"Gabrielle?" the warrior asked, following the bard up the ladder so she could look up her

skirt.

"Yeah?"

"We are gonna do this naked, right?" _ _ _ _ _

The next morning found Gabrielle and Xena still intertwined up in the hayloft. The long hours of frolicking had relieved the ache in the young bard's tender breast. Gabrielle wasn't sure whether to attribute that to the application of skill 637-a, which was a very handy skill for Xena to have, the bard decided, or to the undisguised and unadulterated look of lust that overcame Xena whenever she saw Gabrielle's new jewelry. This look managed to knock all rational thought out of the bard's mind as she gave in to her expressive nature.

In the stalls below them, the animals were respectfully quiet. A few of the younger sheep had been scared a couple of times during the night, but their mother ewe had managed to calm them down. It wasn't really the way she had envisioned discussing the humans and the bees, but there had been no escaping it.

Argo snorted loudly, however, when a young rider came into the stable. He followed the discarded pieces of clothing up the ladder and into the hayloft ... only to be met by the tip of Xena's sword at his throat. He tried to ignore the fact that she was naked.

"I don't suppose you are Gabrielle of Potadeetoo, the bard?"

"No, I am," a pile of hay answered him.

The rider looked confused. Was he imagining things? Then he noticed that buried underneath the straw was the golden hair and sweet face of a young woman. Ooh, that's how things are. He decided to continue his conversation with the friendly hay. "You've got scrolls."

"Gee, what a shock."

"Where do you want me to unload them?"

"Unload?" Gabrielle echoed weakly. Why had she ever joined that list? What could they be bitching about now? Homerita. Gods on Mount Olympus! The scroll list is going to be having kittens today.

He nodded. "I have a few crates of scrolls for you. Do you want me to bring them up here?"

"No!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "Fire hazard."

Xena frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Think, think, think. "If I have to light a candle in order to read them, it might start a fire."

"It's daylight," the warrior pointed out reasonably.

"We're inside."

Xena gestured to the roof. "There are a lot of holes."

The voice coming from the pile of hay was annoyed. "It's better to read in indirect light."

"How much more indirect can it be than coming through a hole in the roof?"

Gabrielle sighed dramatically, liking what that did with her nipple ring in the process. Ooh, that's fun. Focus, Gabrielle, focus. "Xena, I would rather read them outside."

"Isn't that direct sunlight?"

"Xena!" Gabrielle growled.

The warrior shrugged. "Fine, fine. I'll come down with you," she said to the HSDS rider, "and we'll put them outside the stable."

He nodded and began descending the ladder. As Xena started to follow him, Gabrielle's voice stopped her. "Put on clothes first, Xe." _ _ _ _ _

After a few pieces of nutbread for breakfast, the bard settled down on a large boulder

to begin reading the latest deluge of scrolls. Xena and Argo were looking at new tack for the warhorse. Gabrielle had given Xena a pointed reminder to buy more laces for her top, as another set had met a valiant death the evening before.

Gabrielle unrolled the top scroll and began reading. Great. It's from Vulture. This should be enlightening - not!

Subject: Homoerectus

Well, I can't say that I am very surprised by this turn of events. I had long suspected there was something wrong with Homerita/Homer/Homeboy. Did he ever once tell me how amazing my epic - over four seasons in the making - was? Did he ever use my scrolls as the basis for some of his discussions on this list? Did he ever say how much he wanted me in an Amazon-friendly kinda way? Did he join my fan club, the Vulture's Nest? No! No! No! No! How much more explicit could it have been?

Gabrielle blew a raspberry, despite the fact that Vulture wasn't there to hear it. Oh, please! You would think Aphrodite had died the way she carries on about herself. 'As if', as Dite herself would say. Gabrielle snickered.

The next scroll she picked up was huge. Gabrielle once again thought of all the trees that had given their lives for this, mostly likely, useless message. The world would have been better off with the trees, she bet. Great. A scroll from the very aptly named Verbose.

Subject: Plato's Ethics (was Homoerectus)

I have sat silently -

Yeah, right, Gabrielle nearly snorted the juice she was sipping out her nose. I'd pay to see that.

- in anguish over this latest atrocity. I am ashamed. Deeply ashamed. Deeply, deeply ashamed. Deeply, deeply -

Okay, okay, we get the point. Gabrielle scanned down to where the writer began getting to her point, if she had one.

Men will always want to pose as women, as we are the superior gender. But that does not condone his vile, despicable, lying acts. I, personally, feel used and betrayed. And to think that I had considered doing a dramatic reading of some of his stories at my upcoming gig at the Sword and Staff Tavern (open seven days a week, sun up to sundown, I perform at all mealtimes). All proceeds would have gone to charity, namely, the health care of my pet goat, Boots. As many of you know, Boots has been in precarious health recently, having been the victim of a rabid squirrel attack.

I think this is a perfect opportunity, however, to remind everyone of the five principles of ethics as set out by ...

Gabrielle rolled her eyes so far back she was afraid they might get stuck. She quickly began reading down the scroll.

And since I'm pontificating about ethics, I think it's also time for Sappho to come clean about her publishing contracts. The rest of us are committed to the purity of our art, but she has the unmitigated nerve to commercialize it and exploit those of us who once read her tripe. Of course, the mindless cultists who follow her around and grovel at her feet are happy.

Like we cared.

In the center of the scroll, a small flame appeared and quickly consumed the parchment.

Gabrielle sighed. Maybe seeing a live bard would help bring back some enthusiasm for writing. Ever since she'd joined the Society, she was having a hard time remembering exactly what it was she loved about her craft. _ _ _ _ _

Xena straightened her new silk dress with a nervous hand. Did she want to do this? Hades, no! But would she do it for Gabrielle?

In a heartbeat.

She couldn't give the bard a real home and the stability she deserved. But she could do the little things that made her partner happy. And attending ... Xena gulped ... scroll readings was one of those things. As Zeus is my witness, I'll stay awake for the entire performance. Even the boring parts. Which, to Xena, was everything between finding their seats and the applause at the end.

The warrior had left Gabrielle napping late that afternoon so she could make a quick trip to the clothing market. Gods, it was like going to Tartarus!

Again.

How did Gabrielle stand it?

When one particularly tacky-looking stall began something called a blue torch special, hordes of vicious, screaming women started shoving and cursing each other, all vying for the best positions at the table. Then the greedy little merchant yanked back a tattered cloth to reveal a table full of hideous, but undeniably cheap, garments, and the shoppers descended upon them like a pack of ravenous, wild dogs.

Xena shook her head in amazement. And she thought Callisto was a bitch. She would never again doubt her partner's ability to take care of herself. Xena hadn't witnessed such carnage since her warlord days. But, even then, there had been limits to her madness.

Tucking a bouquet of daisies behind her back, the warrior opened the door to their room.

"Hurry up and shut the door behind you, Xena," Gabrielle called, her back to her partner as she hurriedly laced her boots. "We need to head out right now if we want to make it on time. Where were you? I've been..."

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder. Green eyes settled on her lover, then widened with undisguised admiration. Uncharacteristically flustered, the bard found her jaw working for several seconds before she finally let out a long, slow breath. "Wow."

Xena's cheeks turned pink. "These are for you." She stepped over the bed and thrust forward the flowers, suddenly feeling like an adolescent on her first date. "Gabrielle?"

"Hmmm?" the bard responded dreamily, her eyes raking over Xena with carnal intent.

"Do you like it?"

"Oh yeah," Gabrielle breathed throatily.

Xena's blush deepened, and she scoffed, even as her heart eagerly drank up the praise. "I meant the flowers and the dress."

"Those are beautiful too." Gabrielle drew a languid finger up the cool material from Xena's waist to her collarbone. Standing on tiptoe, she placed a series of gentle kisses behind her lover's ear. "This is a sweet surprise." Her fingers lingered on the spots where the sheer material hugged the warrior.

Blue eyes closed helplessly at the feeling of soft lips. Oh Gods. Xena's voice dropped to its lowest register. "You've got exactly twenty years to stop doing that."

"Mmm ... not enough."

"Fifty then."

"Better." Gabrielle placed a final kiss on her partner's lips before pulling back. "What's the occasion?"

"Whaddya mean?" Dark brows furrowed. "We're going to that poetry thing tonight, right? Last time you didn't want me to wear my armor so..."

"Oh, Xena, that was in the Palladium. This is just a tavern reading."

The warrior moaned. She'd gone shopping for nothing?! "So we could've just worn our regular clothes?"

Gabrielle smiled apologetically and made a gesture toward her own outfit. "I know I should be sorry, Xe, but I'm not." Her eyes raked over Xena's lanky form again, appreciating every muscle and curve. "You look gorgeous." She leaned forward and rubbed her nose with Xena's. "I love the flowers. And I love you. Thank you."

"Oh, no, bard," Xena chuckled, moving away from Gabrielle. "Nice try. But if you're not dressing up, then neither am I." Xena crossed her arms over her chest, but they dropped to her sides at the sight of her lover's protruding lower lip. "Are you pouting because I refuse to be molested, or because I'm going to change clothes?"

"Yes." Her pout grew bigger.

"Gabrielle..." Xena warned. "Not fair."

"Please?" the bard begged earnestly. "I really like the way you look right now."

Xena sighed in mock-annoyance, but smiled affectionately.

Beaming, Gabrielle took her warrior by the arm. She resisted the urge for one more kiss. If they didn't leave now, the only performance Xena would see tonight would be a very private one. _ _ _ _ _

"Four dinars! Each?"

"Gods, you are cheap," Gabrielle grumbled, digging some dinars out of her pouch and paying the woman at the tavern door.

"Hades, Gabrielle! And you said she's not even performing her own material?"

"Xena," Gabrielle dragged the warrior to an open spot up front, "I've already explained this. Verbose is a bard herself, but tonight she's going to be reading other bards' greatest works."

"Parasite."

"Hush!" The younger woman smacked Xena's arm as she took her seat. "The performance is about to begin."

Several barmaids dimmed the lanterns, and the crowd broke out into scattered applause. Gabrielle squinted, taking in the room's occupants. It seemed to be an odd mix of neatly dressed women, who she assumed were here to see Verbose's performance, and surly-looking soldiers, who were undoubtedly here for the ale and whores. Her gaze drifted to a sign on the wall that proudly proclaimed, 'Buy One, Get One Free'. I wonder if they only mean the drinks?

"Xena, are you...?" Gabrielle discreetly slid a hand up the warrior's thigh and began feeling around.

"Gabrielle!" Xena squealed, then clamped her hand over her mouth. Warriors did NOT squeal. Even if they were wearing a dress.

"Shhh..." the bard chuckled softly and pressed her lips against a rapidly reddening ear. "Where are your weapons? Some of these guys look a little scary." She was already regretting leaving her staff in their room.

Xena feigned complete innocence, so the bard added, "And don't think I don't know about your thigh daggers."

"Do you feel any daggers?"

The small hand roamed higher, and Xena bit her tongue, but a tiny yelp still escaped her lips. Gabrielle had no mercy.

A puzzled look crossed the shorter woman's face. "No."

Xena's gaze dropped to her own breasts, and Gabrielle's happily followed along. "You want to check for my breast dagger?" The warrior leaned forward and wriggled her eyebrows at the bard.

"Behave."

"You started it."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Shhh!" Gabrielle turned to face the stage. White teeth flashed into a contented grin, when a long arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her close.

"Ladies and..." the announcer looked out into the audience and made a sour face. "... rapists, murderers, and thieves."

"You forgot lovers of sheep!" a slurred voice called out from the back of the room.

Ignoring the interruption, the woman lifted her chin. "Announcing the talkative, effusive, loquacious, garrulous, the one and only, Verbose!"

Gabrielle and several other patrons clapped loudly. Verbose was a member of the Lesbos Literary Society, and the young bard couldn't wait to see her perform in person. She glanced around the room again, wondering if any other Society members were present that night. The two Amazons in the corner, who were sucking each other's tonsils, were high on her list of candidates.

Xena pulled the bard a little closer. "Gabrielle, why are you staring at all the women's right breasts?"

The blonde jerked her gaze back to the stage. "No reason."

Gabrielle listened eagerly as Verbose rattled off the names of several accomplished bards whose work she would perform that night.

"But before I sing the song of Sappho and others, I'm going to treat you to a bonus performance of my own."

A bonus? Hades! "I thought you said she wasn't going to do one of hers," Xena offered in a feeble attempt to keep some sort of conversation going and stay awake. Her eyelids were already growing heavy.

"She's not." Gabrielle scanned her program. Her incredibly jam-packed, double-length program. Gods, if Verbose intended to do all this plus her own work, they'd be here all night. And Xena would kill her. "Don't worry, Xena. She's a respected bard, too, remember? I'm sure whatever story she does will fit in with the rest of the show."

Blue eyes suddenly widened, and Gabrielle's jaw dropped.

Verbose began dancing across the small stage like there was no tomorrow. Hips wiggled, breasts jiggled, jewelry dangled and arms flailed.

Xena turned a sharply arched eyebrow to Gabrielle.

"By the Gods, Xe, I swear I didn't know she'd be doing interpretive dance!"

And dance, and dance, and dance she did, until Xena's snores prompted one of the patrons to throw a mug up on stage, spraying its contents across the floor, and rousing the warrior.

"Fine," Verbose sneered at the simpleton's crass display. She took a breath to compose herself. "I shall now begin my regularly scheduled performance."

"'Bout damn time!" came the grumpy heckle.

Gabrielle turned to see who was so rude and wasn't surprised to find it was one of the women she suspected of being a Society member. Bacchae. The whole lot of them.

Verbose's performance lasted for over four candelmarks. Xena had held up miraculously

well for the first two. But somewhere into the third candlemark, Gabrielle took pity on her tall friend and encouraged Xena to lay her head on her lap and just listen. Since then, she'd only had to coax Xena out of the fetal position a few times. The bard ran her fingers through soft, raven tresses as Xena adjusted her position.

"It's over, Xena."

Xena jumped to her feet and began applauding wildly, the imprint from Gabrielle's tooled belt decorating her cheek.

"Wait!" Verbose stopped the milling crowd. "I will now do a special benefit performance for my beloved pet: Boots."

Xena turned round, pleading eyes on Gabrielle. The bard nodded. She was ready to go, too. As splendid as several of the readings were, even a lover of the arts could only take so much in one sitting.

"This is Boots!" Verbose shouted, trying desperately to regain the patrons' attention.

"Gods, is that what we've been smelling?" Gabrielle scrunched up her nose as an ancient-looking goat was dragged on stage by its horns.

"I thought it was Verbose," the warrior drawled.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Let's go."

"Wait! Wait! Boots is ill and needs medical treatment." Verbose patted the goat's back, and Boots dutifully coughed.

Gabrielle's steps slowed. Medical treatment?

Xena's eyes narrowed. She didn't like people manipulating her tenderhearted lover. Turning back toward the stage, she ran her hand down the back of her dress and pulled out a slender dagger.

"I knew it!" Gabrielle exclaimed. Xena wouldn't go anywhere without a weapon.

"I think I'm going to put her out of her misery."

"Xena, you can't kill Boots!"

"Of course not." What kind of barbarian did Gabrielle think she was? "I'm going to put Boots out of her misery by killing Verbose."

Gabrielle thought about that for a moment. "You're only kidding, right?"

"Do you want me to be?" Xena immediately countered. The warrior drew the blade back playfully, only to have a real knife sail over her shoulder and impale the ancient goat, ending its miserable existence instantly.

Collective gasps went around the tavern.

"It was the tall woman in a dress! I saw her do it!" a woman near the door called.

"It was the tall woman! She did it. She killed Boots!"

"MURDERER! MURDERER! MURDERER!" the forming mob chanted.

"It wasn't her!" Gabrielle shot back, placing herself between her best friend and the crowd. "She's still got her knife in her hand!" The bard pointed over her shoulder to Xena, who held up her dagger.

The mob paused for several seconds, before collectively shrugging its shoulders. This was no time for logic! "MURDERER! MURDERER! MURDERER!"

"This is why we abhor the warrior kind and their filthy ways!" Verbose hissed, taking her place at the head of the mob.

"All warriors aren't evil! Surely, you know that," Gabrielle argued reasonably.

"Gabrielle," Xena laid a hand on the bard's shoulder and whispered into her ear, "back door. Now!"

"But they think you're a goat killer, Xena!"

"I've been called worse. Sweetheart, I appreciate your wanting to defend me, but now may not be the best time for a philosophical discussion." She motioned to several of the mob members, who were now holding pitch forks.

Gabrielle sucked in a breath. How'd they get those?

The mob took a step closer.

"Outta my way! Move it! Move!" A burly HSDS deliveryman elbowed his way through the crowd, stopping directly in front of Gabrielle. "Gabrielle of Pooptopia?"

Gabrielle was about to say no when Xena stopped her. "That's her." She tugged a lock of pale hair. "This is Gabrielle."

More gasps.

"You're Gabrielle of Utopia? With the cold-blooded goat murderer?" Verbose asked in horror. This was even worse than the Homer scandal. And she didn't feel bad about Homerita's cottage having gone down in flames.

"It's Galloping Gabrielle! Lover of Centaurs!" a voice from the left shouted.

Xena's eyebrows shot skyward. "Why, Gabrielle, I never knew you..."

"Don't be ridiculous!" the bard interrupted exasperatedly.

"MURDERER AND GABRIELLE! MURDERER AND GABRIELLE! MURDERER AND GABRIELLE!"

"Quick, the scrolls!" Xena grabbed an armful of scrolls from the messenger, which burst into flames as soon as she cracked their seals. Then she threw the flaming parchment into the shrieking crowd.

Quickly catching on, Gabrielle opened several more. But the last scroll in her hands wouldn't combust. She shook it. A dud? Unable to resist, she began reading.

Subject: Big Fun From: Your Pal

Are you looking for a little kinky fun? Visit the eunuch palace. All eunuchs. All the time!

"Gods-be-damned SPAM!!" Gabrielle roared, ripping up the useless parchment.

Soon the tavern was filled with smoke.

Gabrielle felt a firm tug on her arm. She raised her fists to pummel her attacker, only to have them covered by Xena's soot-stained hands.

"Back door..."

Gabrielle nodded. "Now!" _ _ _ _ _

Xena checked the position of the sun again. After last night's performance from Tartarus and the nasty ugly mob scene, which had given Gabrielle nightmares all night long, Xena was more than ready for the peace of the open road. Well, as peaceful as it could be, being attacked every day.

The bard had left some time ago to finish picking up supplies, but she should have been back long ago. The warrior looked to her mare. "She's never been this late before."

Argo snorted, giving a nod.

"Time to worry?"

The animal agreed again, scuffing the ground a little.

"Admit it, Argo, you miss her too."

This time Xena got a swat as the horse snorted.

"Okay, I won't push it. Come on, let's find our bard." She tugged on the reins heading straight into the dreaded market area.

It wasn't long before she found her first trace of the bard, and her heart dropped to

her stomach. The bard's staff was leaning against the side wall of a merchant booth. Xena stowed the staff with the rest of their gear, then turned to the merchant who was waiting on other customers.

"I'm looking for someone..." the warrior began.

"Aren't we all?" he mumbled, taking a few dinars from a shopper.

"Look, you..." Xena was all ready to put the pinch on him, but rethought that plan of attack quickly, taking a deep breath. "I'm looking for my friend; a short, blonde woman, wearing a green top, brown skirt - talks a lot."

"Lady, do you..." He glanced up and gulped when he got a look at the irritated warrior standing there with her arms crossed. "I'm sorry. I don't remember your friend. I deal with a lot of people."

"Right," Xena grumbled. "You'd remember her. If she'd made a purchase here, she'd have argued the price with you until you were ready to pay her to take the stuff."

"Oh yeah!" The merchant perked up a bit. "I do remember her. She left with two other women."

"How long ago? And which way did they go?"

"Not sure how long ago, but they headed for the docks," he replied, looking around and holding out his hand.

Xena rolled her eyes, but reached into her pouch and retrieved a few dinars, placing them in the man's hand. If something had indeed happened to Gabrielle, now was not the time to be cheap. "Thank you."

She mounted Argo and used the warhorse to cut through the thick crowd. She considered briefly using her sword, but abandoned that idea when she realized she'd have to apologize to the bard afterward. Well, that and she had already paid good dinars for the information. Saying 'I'm sorry' would just be too much.

Xena was careful to keep an eye out for Gabrielle. It was possible everything was all right, but she had a feeling in her gut that that wasn't the case. Once she arrived at the docks, it didn't take her long - through inquiring, lying, and plain threatening a few people - to find out that three women, one of whom matched the bard's description, had boarded a boat headed south. She also found out that Gabrielle hadn't boarded the ship, but was taken by force. One man had said it looked like a lovers' quarrel, and he wasn't willing to get involved.

"Take a good look at me!" Xena had hissed at the man. "I'm her lover. If anything has happened to her, I will make you wish you had gotten involved. And trust me, even if you run, you can't hide. There isn't anywhere in the Known World you'll be safe!"

She moved along quickly, finding a stable for Argo and gathering their equipment. "I'm sorry to leave you alone, girl, but I have to go get her."

Xena paused briefly when she retrieved the bard's scroll bag. Opening the flap, she quickly looked through the contents. She had a feeling that whatever was going on had something to do with that silly scroll club the bard had joined. Their lives hadn't been the same ever since that fateful day when the first HSDS rider found them on the road to Athens.

The warrior found a scroll with the initials 'LLS' pressed into the wax. She unrolled it and read carefully. It was an invitation to a literary festival taking place in southern Greece. That had to be where those two women were taking her! The coincidence was too much to ignore.

Xena did a few quick mental calculations and realized if she rode hard, she could be there faster than if she waited for another ship. She'd be a day behind the bard, but it was better

than nothing.

She looked to her mare. "You wanna stay here, or are we in this together?"

The horse seemed to consider the question, then gave the warrior a shove and followed her out of the stable.

"Thanks, girl. I owe you. Let's go find our bard." _ _ _ _ _

Gabrielle opened her eyes, feeling two things almost immediately: groggy and seasick. The feeling of nausea only intensified the grogginess. "Oh, Gods," she groaned, alerting her captors to her wakefulness.

"Great Muses, she looks positively green," one voice said.

"It's only a reflection from that Gods awful top she's wearing," another commented.

"Xena likes this top," the bard mumbled. "It's the laces she has a problem with." The bard tried to sit up, only to fall back to the mattress. "Kill me now."

"Gabrielle, we don't want to kill you." One of the women took a seat on the side of the bed. "We're taking you somewhere so you can see the error of your ways."

One bleary green eye opened and tried to focus on the person sitting above it. "Excuse me? The error of my ways? I didn't realize I had erred."

"Of course you didn't realize it. You had no way of knowing that tolerating inter-species love and traveling with a warrior was a bad thing. But we're going to take you someplace safe. There, we will help you discover your inner Amazon and find a place of peace and love and joy."

"Look, I really don't have any problems that an over abundance of sex and dinars wouldn't cure. Since you can't fulfill either, I'll be going now." She tried to get up again, but didn't have the strength. "Oh Gods!" she groaned into the pillow, sending a mental message to Xena to come rescue her. Soon. _ _ _ _ _

Xena realized with the storm blowing in that she was going to have to find shelter. She dismounted Argo even before the mare came to a full stop and headed for a thick grove of trees.

"First time in years there hasn't been a cave close by when I needed one," she grumbled, pushing Argo back a bit when the rain started coming down hard and fast. "We're stuck here for the duration, girl." She patted the mare.

Thus, Xena was truly and utterly dumbfounded when a HSDS came crashing into her small shelter. He was breathing hard as the water ran down his face, dripping off his ears and nose. "Some storm, huh?"

"Do you guys have some sort of tracking method I'm not aware of?"

"Huh?"

"You seem to be showing up in my life a lot." That was an understatement.

"Are you Gabrielle of Poteidaia?"

Xena slapped her forehead. "Great Zeus! One of you finally gets it right, and she's not here to hear it."

"I'm from there, too. It's not like it's hard or anything." He dug through his bag. "It's not like Ample fish, eh, Am fitten leaves...un..."

"AMPHIPOLIS, you idiot!"

The rider looked at the woman. "Uh, yeah, I'm sorry. Listen, do you know this Gabrielle chick?"

Xena yanked him from his horse, holding him close to her face. She growled, "She is not a chick! Nor is she, to make it perfectly clear to you, a babe, a dame, toots, or a wench. And, while I'm at it, don't ever refer to her as the annoying little blonde, shorty, blondie, or stacked. You

got me?"

"Got... got it..." he stammered. "So can you sign for her scrolls?"

Xena dropped him to the ground. "Do you really want to waste more of your escape time by making me sign for them?"

The rider dumped the contents of the bag, grabbed his horse's reins and scurried off into the storm. He'd rather face its fury than the warrior he had somehow managed to annoy.

Xena crouched down, looking through the pile of scrolls. She knew she should put them away, but something told her there might be more clues as to where Gabrielle had been taken. She settled down and cracked the seal on the first one.

A dark brow arched as she read through one scroll only to find that it was speculation about her relationship with Gabrielle. It was a long and detailed explanation of how the warrior and bard could be friends and soulmates without being lovers in the physical sense. However, the writer was concerned about Gabrielle's violation of The Rule.

"Who in Tartarus would want that?" Xena mumbled. And what rule was the writer referring to?

She finished the scroll and opened the next one. This one felt oddly warm and was very adamant that there was no way they could not be lovers. To be true soulmates they had to share everything, including their bodies.

"There you go." Xena grinned. She liked sharing with Gabrielle. A lot. Often. All the time, actually.

The third scroll not only argued they were sleeping together, but also provided a few sketches of how it was possible. Xena's brows came together as she turned the scroll sideways to study the first sketch. "Only if we were both double-jointed and drunk." She rolled up the scroll, but tucked it away for later. "We'll have to give it a shot." _ _ _ _ _

"This had better work, Argo. Or, despite Gabrielle's loving influence, I'm simply going to start killing people."

The horse whinnied loudly and stamped her foot.

Xena rolled her eyes. "I was only kidding!"

Argo swung her head toward her mistress, glaring at her in disbelief.

"Okay, I was mostly kidding," Xena grumbled. "Wuss." She patted the horse's belly.

"Looks like Gabrielle's rubbed off a little on you, too, eh?" Xena poked the firm and ample belly again. "Mostly here, I'd say." When it was safe, she scratched the velvety skin of the mare's nose and reluctantly packed away her sword and chakram. She wouldn't be wearing them tonight.

"Be ready for a quick get away, girl. Gabrielle needs us." Xena swallowed hard, thinking about how lost and lonely she'd been without her best friend. "And we need her." Gods, she was even starting to miss that hideous, bilious, green, sports bra! Okay, she really missed what was inside the bilious, green, sports bra. But, to the bra's credit, it did appear to be shrinking.

The warrior hiked her dress a tad higher and adjusted her cleavage as she exited the public stables. She was on her way to the biggest loser and freak congregation in the Known World, the tavern adjacent to the Festival Center where the Southern Greece Literary Festival was taking place. Xena suspected that damn near every geek in Greece was there. I wonder if I'll run into Joxer? Nah. These are literate geeks. She smirked. It was a great Greek geek gathering. Ha! Not even Gabrielle could say that three times fast.

Xena was wearing the purple silk dress she'd purchased for the scroll reading in Athens, but had used her sword to make a few alterations. It was sexy before. The drool that had

pooled in the corners of Gabrielle's mouth had convinced her of that. But now - she glanced down at herself and smiled wickedly as she sashayed down the street - if the dress wasn't illegal, it should've been.

Xena smiled wistfully. If Gabrielle were here, she would be on her warrior like white on rice. Of course, Gabrielle would never let Xena go out in public in her current state of slutty undress. True, the bard did seem to have a few jealousy issues. Xena ignored them, confident nothing would ever come of it.

Blue eyes took on a predatory glint as she approached the tavern. Xena consciously allowed her natural sensuality to seep into her every movement. She wasn't sure whether the geeks could handle this much raw sexuality. Most likely they hadn't been laid in a long, long time, if ever. She usually reserved this level of potency for when she and Gabrielle played gladiator and slave girl. Sometimes she even got to be the gladiator. Xena felt a heady surge of lust and carnal power. Gods, she hoped she found the bard soon!

And that Gabrielle was in the mood for a little warrior taming.

Xena entered the tavern and the room when dead silent. A small, sexy smile played on her lips and was greeted by multiple gasps and catcalls. Oh, yes. Tonight she was going to find out the location of her bard. Even if it meant bringing these literary cows to their knees. Xena winced inwardly. I sure hope they don't like that. _ _ _ _ _

"Can't you make her shut up?" The woman gestured toward a very pissed off, but obviously resolute, Gabrielle. "No, skip that. Let's just cut her tongue out. That might get her to stop talking."

Magentria thought hard for a moment. How mad would Vulture really be? Magentria wanted to cut out Gabrielle's tongue in the worst way. But then she might not be invited to Vulture's next fish fry! And that was the event that Vulture's friends waited all year for. What better place to get together in person and talk about Vulture behind her back? There was no way that Magentria was going to miss that! "Umm.... much as I'd love to maim the bi-species loving blonde, I don't think we can do that." She stared at her captive. "Yet."

Gabrielle gulped. Yet?

"Then gag her!"

"I've tried. But that's the third gag she's chewed through!"

"I don't want to hear excuses, Magentria," chastised Loser Number Fourteen. She was new to the scroll list, and nobody bothered learning new scroll members' names for at least the first two or three years. Unless, of course, there was a reason to flame them.

"You are not the leader here! Vulture is. At least, until someone meaner stabs her in the back. And that would take some doing. Anyway, while Vulture's out of the room, I'm in charge." Magentria crossed her arms and puffed up her chest proudly. "I know Vulture. We're best buddies. My name even made a cameo appearance in one of her stories." She paused dramatically. "And, bard, you're no Vulture."

Well and truly chastised, Loser Number Fourteen hung her head in shame. Actually, she was looking down at her feet wondering if she'd be quick enough to draw her boot dagger and stab Magentria between the eyes before she could retaliate. Nah. She couldn't afford to dull her blade. She too was hoping for a fish fry invitation. "You're right, Magentria, I shouldn't have expressed my opinion. I'm only a lesser known bard. I'm simply not worthy."

"That's a given."

"You really are all soul-devouring Bacchae! I can't believe I ever admired you!" Gabrielle hissed. If she was going to get her tongue cut out, she wanted to get in a few digs first.

"Of course you admired me. Who wouldn't?" Magentria gloated.

Loser Number Fourteen and Gabrielle both rolled their eyes. "I didn't mean you specifically. I still don't know who you are." That was a lie. But a blow to the ego was worse than a blow to the groin with this bunch.

Magentria gasped indignantly, and Loser Number Fourteen didn't bother to disguise her sniggers.

"I meant you in the plural sense."

"I think I will cut out your tongue." There goes the fish fry, Magentria thought sourly.

"Go ahead!" Gabrielle taunted. "It's only because you're afraid of what I have to say."

"Afraid?" Magentria's face turned red. "Of a purveyor of drivel whose companion is a goat killer? I think not."

"Bitch."

Magentria drew her blade, and Gabrielle's eyes widened. Oops. That was out loud, wasn't it? "Since you're not afraid, you won't mind if I tell you all about how the cycle of hatred can only be broken by love?"

And with that, Gabrielle began an impassioned speech about forgiveness and love. She really didn't believe it applied to the scroll list. They were simply too evil to be helped. Only a chakram up the ass, or silver-tipped arrow, could stop them. But hopefully, this would keep them occupied until Xena rescued her, which had better be damned soon.

These fools wouldn't even be thinking of harming a single taste bud if they knew how attached Xena was to her tongue. Despite the fact she was right in the middle of her speech, Gabrielle's eyes glazed over as she started reminiscing about exactly why. _ _ _ _ _

Xena took a deep breath as she entered the inn. Just as she had expected there were lots of women, and they were all at various stages of intoxication. Hopefully, she would be able to get information out of them by means other than painful extraction.

Since the moment she had entered the tavern, nearly every pair of eyes had fallen on her. Oh, yeah, this was going to be as easy as slicing up a Roman soldier.

She stopped at the end of the bar and ordered wine. When the barkeep placed the cup in front of her, she heard the clatter of dinars hitting the bar beside her. "I've got this one," a female voice offered from behind her.

Before turning around to thank her benefactor, she took a sip of the wine. She then turned around very slowly, allowing a sultry smile to cross her lips. "Thanks."

"My pleasure." The woman smiled in return.

Xena did a mental rolling of the eyes. Just as bad as the men. She took another drink.

"So, are you here for the festival?" The woman moved closer, letting her eyes take a long and lustful tour of the warrior's body.

"In a manner of speaking. I'm actually here more for the extracurricular activities. I've heard this group really knows how to have a good time."

"We have our moments. Care to tell me what you consider a good time?"

Xena grinned. At the top of her list was having her bard rake her fingernails down her back in the heat of passion. This was closely followed by the slow and painful torture of the idiots who had kidnapped her bard and were keeping her from enjoying her favorite thing. "I'm game for just about anything." She swirled the wine in her cup. "Keep these coming, and I will be game for anything." _ _ _ _ _

Gabrielle worked the ropes which bound her to the pole. "How silly is this?" she grumbled. "I've had more than enough of this nonsense." She struggled with the ropes a bit more, feeling

them give with each tug. "And if these people are ever going to get serious about kidnapping, they'd better learn how to tie a knot that will hold." With a final jerk of her wrists, the rope gave way.

It didn't take her long to free herself from the ropes around her torso. She stood quickly, which was a mistake. Between the drugs she had been given, and the fact that she still hadn't recovered from being on a ship, she felt a tad woozy. The only thing keeping her upright was her urge to slap a certain warrior silly for taking so long to rescue her. Gabrielle had a sunlight rule for rescues. Xena had until the sun either appeared or left the sky, as the case might be, to rescue her in any situation. After that, Gabrielle was free to take things into her own hands. The bard had found this a reasonable accommodation in the past, making her warrior feel useful. Xena was way overdue at this point.

"You are so sleeping on the other side of the fire for the next two months. Or until I need to get laid, whichever comes first," she grumbled at her absent warrior. Taking a deep breath, she began taking inventory of the room, looking for a suitable weapon. _ _ _ _ _

Xena sat at a table with the woman. She moves her hand any damn higher up my thigh, and I'm gonna snap it off at the wrist. The warrior wanted to glare, but knew that she'd get more information if she let this woman cop a feel. She held back the glare, offering a smile instead.

"So tell me, beautiful, how about you and I head up to my room and play a game of slave trader and naïve village girl?"

Xena nearly choked on her wine. "I heard that your group didn't particularly care for warlords and warriors."

"Ooo, we don't," the woman slurred a bit. "But a good, healthy fantasy life never hurt anyone."

"Wanna bet," she growled from behind her cup. "I wouldn't know how to go about something like that. I'm afraid of warlords," Xena lied. You loaf of nutbread. "Actually, now that you mention it, I do have a fantasy I'd like to try out."

"Tell me more," the woman whispered, leaning in to Xena's neck and giving it a little kiss.

The warrior shivered. She didn't particularly care for what was happening here. It was like when Ares showed up, wanting to play his silly, little games. She really wished he'd learn to play with himself. "I really have a thing for little, submissive blondes." Yeah, right, submissive. The last time Gabrielle was submissive about anything, Sappho still liked guys. "Know anyone who might like to come play with us?"

"Ooo, darlin', are you into group gropes?" The woman's breath was hot in Xena's ear, then came the bite.

"Small groups, but lots of groping." Aww, Centaur poop, that's gonna leave a mark. _ _ _ _ _

The only thing that annoyed the bard more than being kidnapped was not being rescued in a timely manner. By her calculations, Xena was a half day late. This did not make her happy. "I gave you your chance to be the hero here, Warrior Princess, and you blew it. So I'm gonna stop playing victim and kick myself a little ass."

She hefted the weight of the makeshift staff she had managed to find. "Handy how this stuff is always lying around when we need it," she observed. "Hey, somebody? Anybody?"

"Aw, shut up already!" somebody growled from the other side of the door. "Do you ever stop talking?"

"Come in here and say that, Butch." The bard had noticed her abductors all seemed to

share qualities which were less than feminine. At least I can put Xena in a dress, and she looks like a woman.

The door opened and an extremely large, well-built woman stood between the bard and her freedom. Me and my big mouth. Gabrielle shook her head, then launched herself at her captor. _ _ _ _ _

Xena looked at the woman now bound and gagged in the corner of the room. Okay, so she had had to bring the woman upstairs and put the pinch on her, but at least now she knew where the bard had been taken. This scroll club was over the top. The warrior couldn't figure out why the Scroll of the Month Club would want to re-indoctrinate her bard. Why were they so biased against ex-warlords? And why did they care about her and Gabrielle's relationship? This all made as much sense as her chakram sometimes being razor sharp and sometimes a blunt instrument.

She pulled the strap of her leathers over her shoulders. "You really shouldn't have taken my bard. If I don't get my fix on a daily basis, I get really cranky. Bard withdrawal is an ugly thing."

"We took her because she is a creative type who should not be influenced by someone as ... as ... primitive as you."

"Primitive?" Xena echoed.

"Not a lover of the Muses -"

Xena held up a hand, not able to conceal the smug expression on her face. "I wouldn't go that far."

The woman glared. The warlord had defiled one of the Muses! She bet it was that slut, Erato. She continued on her litany of warlord vices, "Crude, smelly, approvers of bi-species relationships -"

"What's that?" Xena scratched her left cheek, her lower left cheek, confirming her prisoner's low opinion of warlords.

"Pony love!"

Xena frowned. She knew Eponin too? That Amazon really had gotten around since she had disappeared from the village several seasons ago. "You are all Greek, geek freaks. If this is what reading does to you, I'm glad I've found other uses for the scrolls."

Then, as she stared at the mutant, Greek geek before her, realization hit her squarely in the gut. She understood what the letters on Gabrielle's festival invitation stood for!

Blue eyes closed in frustration. It all made sense. The kidnapping and the indoctrination. The continuously singed fingers that Gabrielle had so lamely tried to explain. After all, how much henbane could one small bard smoke? The pieces of the puzzle came together with a sickening snap. Her sweet and loving bard had 'accidentally' joined the most diabolical, fiendish, feared, wicked, utterly vicious cult in all of Greece! Scroll of the Month Club, my ass.

Gods! Couldn't Gabrielle have just sold her soul to Bacchus, married Joxer, or joined the Horde? But, noooooo... she had to go and join...

... it hurt even to think those four evil words ...

The Lesbos Literary Society!

Xena stormed out of the room. Please don't let it be too late. _ _ _ _ _

Xena jumped from her panting horse as they screeched to a halt. She raised her hand to give her horse a slap to the rump, but received a tail to the face first. "All right, I get the message. Go do whatever it is you do, while I go do my rescue bit." Xena hoped that the LLS had traveled by land instead of ship to get here. If not, she was reeeeeeally late. And Gabrielle was

going to be pissed.

The mare whinnied, then galloped toward the corral she had noticed on the way to this old temple of Cornucopia. There had been a rather handsome looking stallion in that corral.

Xena drew her sword, moving quickly and quietly up the steps. She took a moment to adjust the bandage at her throat. The plan was to tell the bard she had received a small wound while searching for her. It was nearly true. A hickey was a wound, of sorts.

The warrior made it to the top of the steps, but when she reached for the door it burst open, and more than a dozen women came rushing out. They all seemed panicked, forcing the warrior back down the steps as they ran into her in their attempt to flee whatever had scared the Tartarus out of them.

By the Gods, it must be one of the Gorgons! I hope Gabrielle is all right!

"Make it stop!" she heard several of them cry as they continued to run from the temple into the surrounding forest.

Watching them rush away, she hurried back up the steps. She needed to get inside and save her bard from the horror that had caused these women to retreat. Once again, just as she was about to enter, her eyes landed on her bard. She was inside the temple, wielding a crude staff, sweating and breathing hard.

Oh yeah! Now that's the way I like to see my girl. Wonder if battle lust has made its way to the surface yet? She's a Fury in bed when she's upset like this!

"You!" Gabrielle growled, storming down the steps toward the warrior. "Where in the name of Artemis have you been?"

"I..." the warrior stumbled a bit, backing away from the fuming bard.

"I don't want to hear some lame excuse about how you've been looking for me, and it took time to find out where I was."

"I..."

"Uh huh! Don't even let that cross your lips." Gabrielle continued to back the warrior up. "For every other person, monster, God or undead being in the Known World, you seem to naturally know where they are, but for me, for me, you have to search! Makes no damned sense, Xena. None at all!"

"Plot device?" the warrior postulated, bringing her sword up to block the blow from the bard's staff.

"Bite me!" Gabrielle hissed.

"Where and how hard?" the warrior teased, using her sword to parry another strike from the bard's staff.

"Xena, I swear, you are the most frustrating person..."

"Last time I checked, that was one of the big reasons you loved me."

"I love you in spite of it!" Gabrielle stopped her advance, finally taking note of the bandage around the warrior's neck. "Are you hurt?"

"Hurt? No. Disappointed maybe..." The warrior stopped, realizing the bard was referring to the wrapping. "Uh, yeah." She cleared her throat, allowing her fingers to graze the bandage.

Gabrielle let the staff fall from her hands, moving to her warrior. "I'm sorry." The bard immediately started to look at the wound to see how bad it was. "Gods, Xena, I'm sorry, I should have..." She stopped when she saw what the bandage covered. "A hickey! A hickey? You have a hickey?!"

"It's not quite..." Xena felt the bandage twist around her throat, effectively cutting off the rest of her reply and most of her air.

Gabrielle used the cloth to pull the warrior down and close to her. "I'm being held captive, they're threatening to cut my tongue out, and you're carousing with some slut and getting hickies? Now I know why it took you so long. They made me go on a boat, Xena. A boat! You know how I hate boats!"

The warrior could only choke and gasp. "A... Ai... Air..."

"Oh, don't even tell me it was Ares! Please don't add insult to injury."

The warrior continued to choke, tugging at the bandage. "Air... I... need..."

"What you need, Warrior Princess, is a lesson in appreciating your friend, companion, lover and supposed soul mate. I am not a sex toy, and I am not someone who appreciates..." Gabrielle ranted. She had had enough. She was tired, hungry and horny. She needed sleep, food and sex, and not necessarily in that order. And now she was faced with this?

Xena was starting to feel a little lightheaded, but she was reluctant to break free for fear of accidentally hurting Gabrielle. However, she knew something would need to give soon. "Gabrielle..." she whispered.

Hearing her name drawn out in that sexy, low voice caused Gabrielle to relent. Especially when she realized the sexy voice was due to Xena's being choked to death. Releasing the bandage, she stepped back and surveyed the sturdy frame of the warrior, inspecting her for other injuries. "Are you all right?"

The warrior threw the bandage far away, lest anything else upset her temperamental bard. "I am now." She picked up her bard and spun her around in her arms, kissing her thoroughly as she did so. "I'm glad you're okay. I'm sorry I was late."

"What kept you?"

"Scroll deliveries. I had to read through several bags of them before I figured out where they were taking you." Xena set the bard down and gave Gabrielle her best intimidating look. "You didn't join the Scroll of the Month Club, did you?"

Gabrielle looked down at her feet and kicked a rock. "No."

"What was it then? Some underground terrorist group? A cult too wicked for Tartarus? The legion of the undead?" Xena, of course, knew the answer, but didn't want to pressure the bard. Gabrielle would tell her when she was ready.

All of those descriptions fit, Gabrielle realized sadly enough. "It was supposed to be a literary discussion group, for those of us bards not affiliated with the Academy. But it wasn't! They hardly ever discussed writing, unless they were trashing some poor slob who sent something in for commentary."

The tone of Gabrielle's voice let Xena in on who the 'poor slob' was. "Which story did you send in?" she asked gently.

"Ephiny and Phantes."

That explained all the bi-species comments Xena had read in the scrolls. "Why don't they want us to be lovers?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Because you're a warrior."

"Not real open-minded, are they?"

"To hear them talk about it, they are." Gabrielle looked around and realized what a beautiful day it was. The sun was shining brightly, the grass was a vibrant green, the breeze was soft on her skin. Even the decrepit temple looked good. "But forget about them. We're together again."

"Are you going to resign from the club?" Please say yes! "Or do I need to kill every HSDS rider that comes near us in the future?" Xena was reluctant to do that. She was pretty

impressed with their tracking capabilities. They might be handy in the future.

"You've seen your last HSDS rider, Xe." Gabrielle crossed her heart and kissed the warrior soundly. "I promise you that."

They began walking toward the corral. Gabrielle's eyes rolled toward her companion. "Xena, about that hickey..." _ _ _ _ _

Xena's eyes were closed as she leaned back on her bedroll, one hand braced behind her to keep her upright. Her leathers were mostly unlaced and the long fingers of one hand were threaded tightly in Gabrielle's hair, urging onward the soft kisses that were working their way down her throat. And then she heard them; the words she never wanted to hear for as long as she lived.

"Is one of you Xena of Ambidextrous?" a psychotically cheerful voice boomed from the bushes. A young man dressed in an HSDS uniform poked his head out. "'Cause if you are, then this is your lucky day, lady. You've got scrolls!"

Gabrielle's forehead dropped to Xena's chest with an unceremonious thump.

The warrior reached for her chakram. She was going to solve this little problem real quick.

"Well, which one of you is it?" This time the voice was a little more impatient. "I'm looking for Xena of Anthraxcillias."

Gabrielle pushed away from her partner, warning her against using her chakram with a stern look. Now had Xena been working her way down HER body, then the chakram would have been appropriate. But, as it was, the warrior was going to have to wait. She jerked a thumb at Xena. "She's your victim."

"Here ya go." He dumped a pile of scrolls on the bedroll at Xena's feet.

The warrior remained silent, simply glaring at the deliveryman, who now had his hand sticking out, waiting for his tip. Couldn't the fool see that he'd interrupted something? Her grip on her chakram tightened.

"I'll take care of this one, Xe." Gabrielle jumped in. "Here's your tip: Get the Hades out of here before Xena of Amphipolis takes her chakram and sticks it right up your a..."

"Fine. Fine. I get the picture," he grouched, disappearing back into the bushes. Cheap ass warrior. Oh well, at least I got to see her nipple.

Gabrielle plopped back down next to Xena and poked the pile of parchment. "So?"

The warrior frowned. "At the festival there were all these booths with free baklava and meat pies. All I had to do to get them..."

"Was give them your name," Gabrielle finished glumly, shaking her head. Why did everyone think that SHE was the chow hound of the pair?

"Well, let's see what lists you've been added to." The blonde picked up a scroll and looked at the name printed on the top. She raised an eyebrow. "To The Known World's Best Lover and Fiercest Warrior?"

Xena shrugged. "I got tired of writing 'Xena'."

Gabrielle dumped that scroll and fished another from the pile. She began reading. "Oh my!"

"What? What is?" Xena peered at the words interestedly.

"It seems that some chick made a big splash at the festival." Gabrielle dug out another scroll. "Oh yeah! Some slut was really working the crowd." Green eyes moved to the next scroll. "There are tons of stories about her."

"Really?" Xena asked weakly.

"Uh huh." The younger woman looked up from her reading. "Did you see her while you were there?"

"NO!" Xena cleared her throat and lowered her voice. "I mean no," she said calmly. "I was only there for a candlemark. Actually, half a candlemark at the most," the warrior lied.

Gabrielle nodded absently, already engrossed in the next scroll. "Ooo, Xe. This is a good one. Looks like the tramp made quite the impression and is now somewhat of an erotica darling." She chuckled as she read a graphic love scene that even she was too embarrassed to read out loud. Gotta try that, though. When it was finally over, she got to a part where the author was more descriptive and less gross.

Her full, red lips called to me, beckoning me with their ripeness. Her long, raven hair glistened like moonlight on the clearest mountain lake.

Gabrielle paused and looked up at Xena who was suddenly picking a few leaves out of her dirty hair. Her mouth was drawn in a tight line. "Huh." Gabrielle shook her head and continued.

She wore a tight-fitting dress that my fingers itched to remove, my mouth watering at the thought.

Very quietly, Xena removed her greatly altered dress from their saddlebags, flinging it over her shoulder and behind the nearest bush.

When Gabrielle looked up from the parchment, the warrior was wearing a wide-eyed, innocent look. Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "What are you up to, Xena?"

Xena pointed a thumb at her chest. "Who me? I'm not up to anything. Gabrielle, let's use these scrolls as fire starters and be done with it."

"Un unh. Not a chance." Her gaze flicked back to the page.

But her amazing blue eyes...

Gabrielle immediately looked up to find Xena with her eyes firmly closed. "Is there something you want to share with me, Warrior Princess?!" she asked menacingly.

Xena shook her head furiously. This was bad. So bad. "Gabrielle, do we really have to..."

"Yes!" she barked, smoothing out the scroll and continuing.

But her amazing blue eyes were rivaled only by the sexiest birthmark I had ever seen. It was on her chest, just above the swell of her breast and was in the shape of...

Xena suddenly jumped up and took off through the woods, wishing she were wearing her boots. "Ouch! Ooo! Ouch! Hades!"

Gabrielle threw the scroll down into their fire as though the parchment itself were contaminated. "Damn scroll clubs!" And with that, she started after her partner. "You can run, Xe. But you can't hide!"

"Oh, yes, ouch, ouch, I can!" came the laughing reply.

The parchment burned rapidly, the ash rising into the night air.