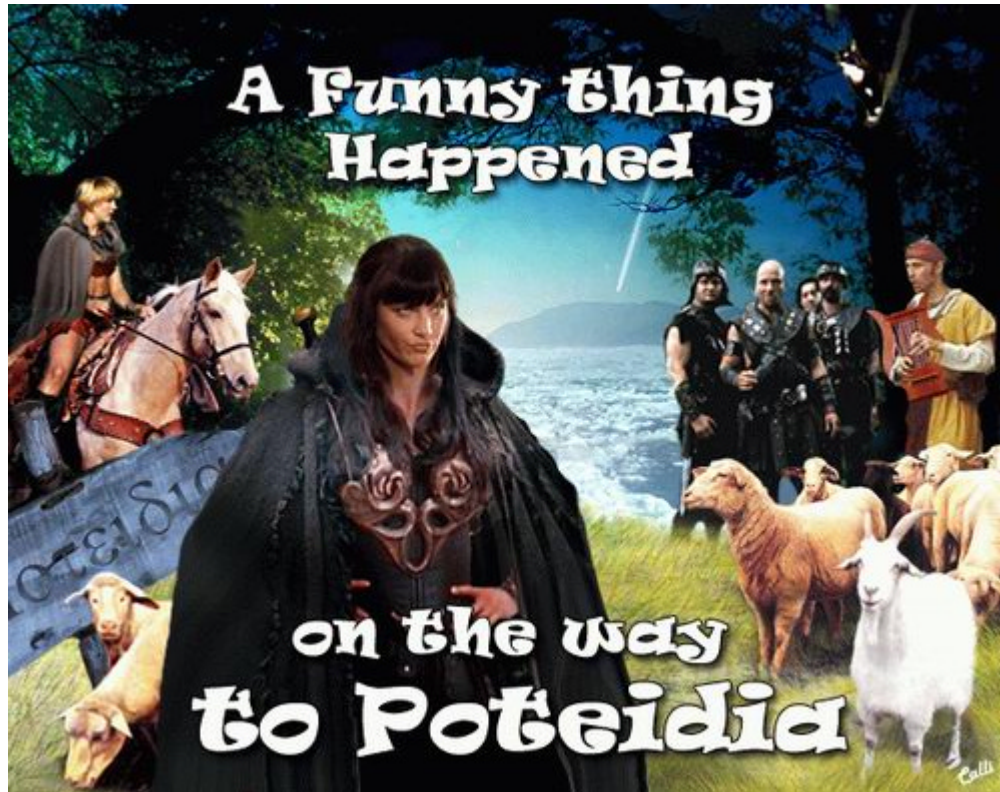


Xena: Warrior Princess - Subtext Virtual Season 8



Production #V806 - A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Poteidia

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TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. CAMPFIRE - LATE EVENING

GABRIELLE sits just outside of the fire circle. A jumble of half-written scrolls surrounds her. It's the first time in a while that she's had a relatively free evening to sit and record their many adventures over the past year. She scribbles a few lines in one, puts that carefully down, picks up another and another, repeating the process in a sort of endless cycle.

Laying down her sword and whetstone, XENA yawns and stretches. Rolling her neck from side to side, she groans as the bones pop, realigning her spine. Then she rolls her shoulders, wagging her arms, wrists and fingers, and listening to the snap-crackle-pop of her joints.

At the sounds, Gabrielle looks up from her scrolls and over at her partner, smirking.

XENA

Sorry.

GABRIELLE

For what? It's been a long day.

XENA

(grumpily)

Hmmph. I used to eat long days for breakfast.



Putting her scroll down in her lap, Gabrielle rolls her eyes.

GABRIELLE

Xena....

XENA

It's true, Gabrielle. Janos pegged it. I am getting old.

GABRIELLE

Xena, you're not getting old!

XENA

Sure I am! Look! Look at this!

Xena bows her head, running her fingers through her hair.

GABRIELLE

What?

XENA

This!! Look!!!

GABRIELLE

Where I come from, Xena,
that's called 'hair'.

Xena lifts her head, giving Gabrielle a look.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

We're not going through this again,
Xena. For the last time, there are
no gray hairs anywhere in that
head of yours. They wouldn't dare!

Xena's eyes light.

XENA

No? What's this, then, hmm?

She holds up one light strand of hair.

Narrowing her eyes, Gabrielle reaches out and snatches the hair from Xena's fingers.

GABRIELLE

It's mine, thank you very much.
And it's not gray. Just very,
very, very light blonde.



Xena snorts.

Gabrielle sighs.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Xena, you're not getting old, all right?
You just need some time to relax.
We've been through a lot this past year.

XENA

Hmmph.

GABRIELLE

All right. Fine. You asked for it.

Leaning back, she reaches for the first of the many scrolls surrounding her.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

I sing a song of Xena, a YOUNG Warrior
Princess who, in the past year, has:
died... again, gone to Hell... again,
come back to life... again....

Gabrielle picks up another scroll.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

...helped rescue a village from
a ravaging god... again....

XENA

Gabrielle....

Gabrielle blithely picks up another scroll.

GABRIELLE

....gotten me out of a stupid spell
cast by Aphrodite... again....

Gabrielle picks up yet another scroll.

GABRIELLE

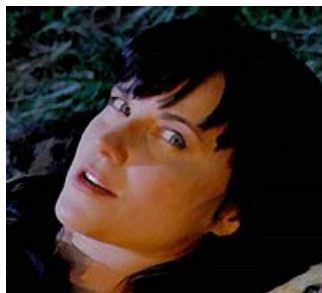
(cont'd)

...saved Greece from a plague—
hmm, that's a first, I'll have to
make a note of that one....

XENA

(a little louder)

Gabrielle....



Gabrielle picks up another scroll.

GABRIELLE

...helped prevent a war... again....

Gabrielle picks up still another scroll.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

...got split in two... again....

XENA

GABRIELLE!!!

GABRIELLE

...helped me reunite two... mmf!

Xena pulls back from the kiss she's just given her, grinning.

XENA

Sometimes, that's the only way to shut you up.

GABRIELLE

(dreamily)

Remind me to keep on talking later, okay?

Xena laughs softly.

XENA

Gabrielle?

GABRIELLE

Mm?

XENA

I know what you're trying to do, and.... Thanks.

GABRIELLE

(primly)

I'm only speaking the truth.

Smiling, she pats her lap. Xena looks at her questioningly.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

C'mon. Even Warrior Princesses need their rest.



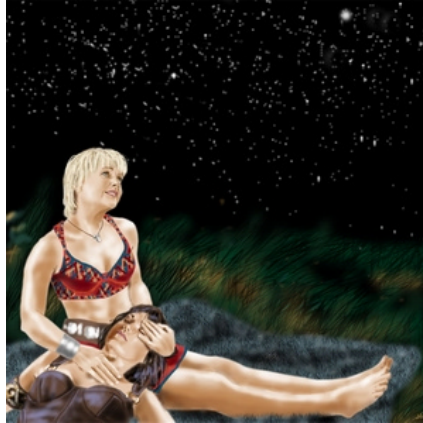
After a moment, Xena gives in and settles down across the furs, head pillowed in Gabrielle's lap. Gabrielle soothingly strokes Xena's hair, watching as her partner's eyelids grow heavy, and finally give up the fight.

Smiling tenderly, she tilts her head back and looks up at the sky. The first stars peek through the firmament.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd softly)

Star light, star bright, first star I
see tonight. I wish I may, I wish
I might, get the wish I wish tonight.



CUT TO:

INT. APRHODITE'S OLYMPIAN REALM

Loud, rocking disco music is playing as Aphrodite and several of her closest studly companions are celebrating another night on Olympus. Everywhere people are dancing, drinking, and partying. Aphrodite herself is lounging on a large pink divan with several incredibly handsome men, a regular Goddess of Love sandwich.

Suddenly, the room seems to dim, and she looks up just in time to see one of her night stars go shooting away.

Sighing, she sits up and elbows her muscular, oiled companions out of the way.

APHRODITE

All right, all right, who whacked
one of my faves outta here?

The crowd steps away from a particularly studly fellow who's wearing a blindfold and grasping a stick. He pulls down his blindfold and looks over at Aphrodite.

MAN

Oops!

Aphrodite rolls her eyes.

APHRODITE

As if!! It's not a piñata, you
loser! It's.... Oh, forget it.

Then she shrugs.

APHRODITE

(cont'd)

Oh well, I hope
nobody wished on it.

Laughing, she leans back on her couch and holds out her arms.

APHRODITE

(cont'd)

Now, where were we?



FADE OUT.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

EXT. CAMPSITE - MORNING

Gabrielle is very deeply asleep, having spent most of the night chasing away Xena's nightmares. It is only with the breaking of the dawn that she is finally able to close her eyes for some sorely needed rest.

Xena, on the other hand, is up and ready for the day. She's already killed and skinned several rabbits and is frying them in the pan after coating them with several spices stolen from Gabrielle's secret stash. A smaller pot is warming water for tea.

Crouched over the fire and poking at the frying rabbit with a thin, metal spatula-like item, she stiffens as she catches the sound of someone trying to sneak up on the camp.

Without looking, she holds up the spatula, pointing it in the direction of the still hidden-from-sight marauder.

XENA

I wouldn't, if I were you.

All sounds cease as the bandit freezes in his tracks, surprised at being noticed.

A moment later, he chances moving forward again, seeing Xena calmly return to her cooking duties.

XENA

(cont'd)

I'm not kidding.

Xena gestures behind her with the spatula.

XENA

(cont'd)

She gets really cranky when she doesn't have enough sleep.

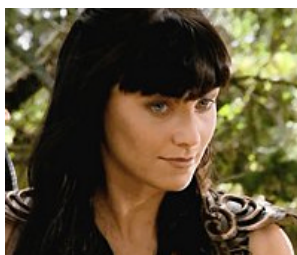
The bandit looks past the covering of trees and into the camp, where he sees Gabrielle peacefully slumbering on a jumbled pile of furs. He laughs and starts forward again.

Xena sighs, though her eyes are sparkling.

XENA

(cont'd)

Don't say I didn't warn ya.



Without looking up, Xena expertly flings the spatula, sinking it into the arm of the bandit, causing him to grunt and drop his weapon. His companions rush past him and into the clearing, their own weapons raised.

Diving over the fire, Xena rolls and comes up between two of the men, grabbing them by the fronts of their mismatched armor and slamming their heads together. Dropping one, she lifts the other and heaves him over her shoulder, where he lands, with a thud, to the left of a still sleeping Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE

Not now, Xena.

Gabrielle rolls on her other side and snuggles back down into her furs.

Grinning, Xena fells yet another attacker with a swift uppercut to the chin, then throws him over her shoulder where he lands unconscious on the other side of Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Xena... please?

Xena turns just in time to avoid being sliced open by the bandit leader who has retrieved his weapon and is striking at her with a clumsy, left-handed blow.

Ducking under the swing, she comes up, head-butts him, and pushes him backward. He stumbles back through the fire and lands in a heap at Gabrielle's feet.

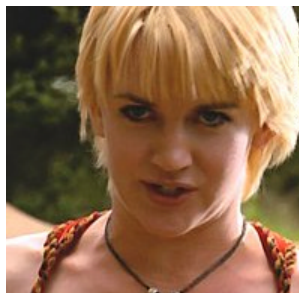
Gabrielle has had enough. Rolling onto her back, she sits up, angrily wiping the bangs from her eyes just in time to see a grinning Xena holding the frying pan she managed to rescue from the stumbling bandit.

Gabrielle looks at their three guests, then back at Xena. Her eyes narrow, focused on the frying pan.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

You didn't.



Xena's grin is unrepentant.

XENA

Breakfast?

CUT TO:

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - MID MORNING

The weather has turned cold, and Xena and Gabrielle are both wrapped in their fur cloaks as they travel down the forest trail. Gabrielle, in deference to her recently healed back and legs, is riding Argo while Xena walks ahead leading the horse.

Gabrielle shifts in the saddle and sighs.

GABRIELLE

Xena.

XENA

Mm?

GABRIELLE

Can we stop now? I want to
get down and walk a little.

XENA

Gabrielle, I know you think I'm coddling
you, but if we want to make it to Poteidia
in time for Solstice, we need to move quickly,
and I don't want to overstress your muscles.

GABRIELLE

I know that, but....

Xena stops, turns and approaches her partner, laying a hand on her knee.

XENA

If you really want to walk, I won't stop
you. I just... don't like to see you in pain.

Gabrielle reads many messages in Xena's anguished features, and sighs once again.

GABRIELLE

Okay. I suppose a little more
time on this beast won't kill me.

Argo whinnies, highly offended.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Sorry, Argo.

Argo whinnies again.

Smiling, Xena pats Gabrielle's leg, but before she can turn, she freezes, head cocked.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

More bandits?

XENA

Six. Just ahead.



Gabrielle rolls her eyes.

GABRIELLE

What's going on? I thought we'd already used up our requisite one fight per day.

XENA

Apparently not.

(beat)

Gabrielle....

GABRIELLE

(heatedly)

Don't tell me to wait here, Xena, 'cause I'll bop you over the head with my staff if you so much as utter one word of that command.

Xena grins.

XENA

Just be ready.

The air is suddenly alive with the sounds of shouting men. Bandits charge at them, single file along the narrow trail.

Chuckling to herself, Xena grabs the first bandit, turns him and shoves him toward Gabrielle, who carries out part of her previous threat and bops him on the head with her staff. He falls in a puddle to the ground.

Bandits number two, three, four and five are dispatched in the same manner until Argo is all but surrounded by unconscious men. She voices her displeasure quite loudly.

Shaking her head, Xena grabs Argo's reins and leads both horse and rider away from the remains of their attackers.

CUT TO:

EXT. FOREST GLEN - EARLY AFTERNOON

A small stream, partially iced over, runs through the glen. Argo laps at the water while Xena and Gabrielle wrap up the last of their light lunch, preparing to get back on the trail. As they do, both hear the unmistakable sounds of yet another group of bandits heading in their direction.

GABRIELLE

Not again!

Gabrielle looks up at the sky.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Who peed in your
porridge this morning?



Two young men not even old enough to shave yet burst into the clearing, weapons raised. Their swords are almost as long as they are and it's obvious they've never seen a day's fighting in their lives.

Xena sidesteps the first, who runs past and almost into Gabrielle. She disarms him easily, then pokes his behind with the point of her sai, sending him yelping into the woods. Xena jabs the neck of the second boy, who instantly drops to his knees, with a tiny trail of blood trickling from his nose.

Xena crouches over him, glowering.

XENA

You know the drill.

YOUTH

(choking)

Thirty seconds... no blood... dead....

XENA

Smart boy. So smart, I'm sure you'll be able
to answer my question with no trouble at all.

The youth nods.

XENA

(cont'd)

Why the sudden interest in attacking us? Is
there another bounty that I don't know about?

YOUTH

S... soft.

Xena looks at Gabrielle, who shrugs.

XENA

Soft?

YOUTH

You! Gone... soft... no chakram...
easy to... kill... .be famous... please!

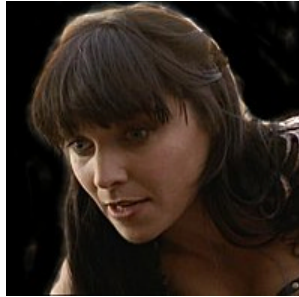
GABRIELLE

Xena....

Huffing out a breath of air, Xena takes the pinch off the boy, then hauls him up by the front of his jerkin, holding him easily two feet off the ground with no visible effort at all.

XENA

This look 'soft' to you, kid?



The boy's eyes are wide as saucers.

YOUTH

N-no.

XENA

Good answer.

Switching hands, Xena reaches down and unhooks her chakram from its clip. She holds it up so the youth can easily see it.

XENA

(cont'd)

Since you're so good at answering questions, I got another one for ya. What do you call this?

YOUTH

Your chakram.

XENA

Right again. I knew you were a smart kid.

(beat)

Sooo... if this is my chakram, what does that mean?

Silence as the young man thinks about it. The answer comes to him and his eyes widen even more, almost seeming to swallow his peach-fuzzed face.

YOUTH

You got it back!

Xena displays her teeth in a less than joyful grin.

XENA

Right again.

YOUTH

From the G-God of War! You... you
got your chakram back from Ares!!

Xena sets the young man down on his feet.

XENA

Congratulations. You win the prize.



YOUTH

My... my life?

XENA

Well, that, and a friendly piece of advice.

(beat)

Go back home till you're old
enough to shave. And after that....

The boy nods, looking anxiously at her.

XENA

(cont'd)

I'd choose another line of work
if I were you. You're too
smart to be a bandit.

YOUTH

(happily)

Y-yes, Ma'am!

Xena straightens and looks to Gabrielle.

XENA

(mouthing)

Ma'am?

Gabrielle crosses her arms and smirks.

XENA

(cont'd)

G'wan, get outta here before
I change my mind.

The young man runs away as quickly as his legs can carry him, which is rather quickly.

CUT TO:

EXT. MEADOW TRAIL - MID AFTERNOON

Xena and Gabrielle are walking down a rutted wagon trail that weaves its way through a vast meadow. The grasses are brown and brittle and a chill, biting wind whispers and moans. Shivering, Gabrielle pulls her cloak more tightly around her. Seeing this, Xena puts an arm around her partner's shoulders and pulls her in close.

Gabrielle smiles up at her.

GABRIELLE

Thanks.

XENA

My pleasure.

The two hear a faint rumbling sound, and stop, looking to the east.

GABRIELLE

Here we go again.

XENA

If they're raiders,
there's an army of 'em.

Another faint sound reaches their ears.

GABRIELLE

Riding sheep?



Argo whinnies and backs off, pulling at her reins. Xena and Gabrielle step back just in time to avoid being trampled by a small flock of stampeding sheep crossing their path.

A moment later, a young shepherd boy comes into view and stops in front of them, bending over and gasping for breath.

SHEPHERD

Help me. Oh please, help me.

XENA

Those your sheep?

SHEPHERD

Yes, and it's my first day. My pa told me not to let them out of the pasture, but something spooked them, and....

GABRIELLE

It's okay. We understand.

SHEPHERD

My pa'll tan my hide if I lose them, I know
he will! And they're headed for the cliff!!

Sighing, Xena releases Gabrielle and moves toward Argo.

SHEPHERD

(cont'd)

No! They're afraid of horses!
You'll spook em even more for sure!
Oh, my pa is gonna kill me!

Shaking her head, Xena hands Gabrielle Argo's reins and walks over to the boy.

XENA

Stay here and be ready to herd them
when they come back this way.



SHEPHERD

But how?

XENA

Leave that to me.

Yelling out her battle cry, Xena goes racing after the fleeing sheep. Her cry startles them, and they slow for just a moment before picking up steam once again. The momentary hesitation is all Xena needs. She reaches the rear of the stampeding flock and jumps, tucking into a tight flip and landing in front of them, mere feet away from the cliff's edge. She throws her arms up.

XENA

(cont'd)

HAH!!!

Unable to stop, the sheep plow into her, almost trampling her beneath their smelly, writhing bodies. Digging her feet in, she holds the line, almost choking on the stench. The sheep finally come to a confused stop. Xena's heels literally dangle off the cliff edge, and she spits out a mouthful of wet wool.

Resisting the almost overwhelming urge to turn her unwanted charges into lamb chops, she instead pushes the lead sheep around so that he is facing the Shepherd and Gabrielle.

XENA
(*cont'd*)
G'wan! Get!

The sheep look at her, bleating.

XENA
(*cont'd*)
NOW!!!

The flock turns as one and begins running back in the direction it came. Gabrielle backs Argo out of the way, and the young shepherd runs forward, pulling a pan flute out of his carry sack, and begins playing.

The sheep instantly calm and approach the boy, surrounding him and 'baaing' happily.

Xena walks up to the group, wiping sheep muck from her arms and legs and looking decidedly grumpy.



Gabrielle approaches her, then backs away, fanning the air in front of her face. Xena gives her a look. Gabrielle grins.

SHEPHERD
Thank you, oh thank you!
You saved them and me too!

XENA
(*smiling weakly*)
Not a problem.

SHEPHERD
Well, I have to go now before
Pa finds out I'm gone.
(*beat*)
Hey! Next time you're in this neck of
the woods, come by for a visit! We've
got the largest sheep ranch in the area!

GABRIELLE

We'll do that.



SHEPHERD

Can't miss us.

XENA

(dryly)

I don't imagine we could, no.

SHEPHERD

Just look for the sign that
says PEEP. That's my pa.

(beaming)

I'm Beau.

So saying, the young lad skips merrily back into the woods, leading his lost sheep home.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIVER BANK - LATE AFTERNOON

Xena and Gabrielle have reached a rather high mountain plateau and have stopped before a wide, frozen river.

Gabrielle looks doubtfully at the river.

GABRIELLE

Think the ice is thick enough
to hold us? It's pretty
early in the season.

XENA

It's not us I'm worried
about. It's Argo.



Argo whinnies in agreement.

Just as Xena steps off the bank to test the strength of the ice, a piercing sound is heard echoing through the air.

GABRIELLE

Was that a scream?

They look up as a gigantic CRACK is followed by more terrified screaming.

XENA

Come on!

The pair runs along the river bank and around a broad curve until they can see the cause of the screaming.

A group of young children are halfway across the river, but a gigantic crack in the ice has stranded them, making it impossible to move forward or back without risking a fall into the icy waters below.

As the duo watches, the ice cracks again, leaving the group stranded on an unstable ice floe that bobs in the turbulent, rushing waters. They scream again, holding tightly to one another to avoid being pitched off into the river.

GABRIELLE

Xena!

XENA

I see it. Hang on.

Reaching into the saddlebags, Xena pulls out a long length of rope. Tying one end around Argo's saddle horn, she cinches the other tightly around her waist. Then she goes back to Gabrielle.

XENA

(cont'd)

I need you to stay here and
guide Argo for me. Make sure
she doesn't spook, okay?

GABRIELLE

Couldn't I be more help going with you?



XENA

Yes, but the ice is already cracking.
I don't trust it to hold up the both of us.

GABRIELLE

Well, I weigh less than
you do. I should go.

Xena lays an urgent hand on her shoulder.

XENA

Gabrielle, please. Trust me on this.
The ice is very slippery. You can't
take the chance of falling while
your back is still healing. Then
I'd have to come out anyway,
to get you and the children.

Gabrielle looks down at her boots and sighs.

GABRIELLE

I hate it when you're right.

XENA

I promise. The next group of
stranded kids we come upon,
they're all yours, okay?

Gabrielle meets her eyes, smiling a little.

GABRIELLE

Just get going. And Xena?

XENA

Mm?

GABRIELLE

Be careful. Please.

Xena grins.

XENA

You got it.



As Xena carefully steps out onto the ice, Gabrielle looks once again up at the sky.

GABRIELLE

You know that wish
I made last night?
(beat)

This is not what I meant.

The sky remains prudently silent.

CUT TO:

EXT. FROZEN RIVER - LATE AFTERNOON

Xena slides carefully across the fragile ice, keeping her balance through sheer luck and skilled determination. Within moments, she has made it to the ice floe. It has grown precipitously smaller as the rushing water eats away at the remaining ice, melting it quickly. The huddled children stare at her, wide-eyed and shivering. The oldest child, a red-haired boy of about ten, draws himself up as best he can while still holding onto the others.

BOY

(suspiciously)
Who are you?

XENA

My name's Xena.

YOUNG GIRL

The Warrior Princess?

XENA

Some people call me that.

YOUNGER BOY

(scoffing)
You're lying. The Warrior
Princess is an old lady.

YOUNG GIRL

Yeah, that's what Thomus says,
and he knows everything!

XENA

He does, does he?

BOY

Yeah. He does. He says he can
whip Xena with both hands
tied behind his back.

The ice tips as a strong rush of water passes underneath it. The children scream in terror, and the youngest child, a girl of no more than four, slides off the edge.

Her feet never get the chance to touch the water as she is suddenly plucked in mid-air and brought over to Xena's side, safe and sound.

XENA

Are you all right?



YOUNGEST GIRL

You smell funny.

Xena sighs as she looks down at her sheep-muck covered cloak that she hasn't had the time to properly clean.

XENA

(tightly)

Are you all right?

The little girl holds her nose and nods.

Xena turns back to the rest of the children, still huddled on the rapidly diminishing ice floe. She holds out her arms.

XENA

Okay, let's go. C'mon.

OLDEST BOY

What?

XENA

Jump. I'll catch ya.

YOUNGER BOY

Huh-uh. I'm scared.

XENA

C'mon. Jump! You'll be fine.

YOUNGER BOY

NO!

XENA

JUMP!

The boy jumps.

Xena catches him easily and sets him next to the girl she's already rescued. She looks down at him.

XENA

(cont'd)

You see this rope?

YOUNGER BOY

Yes.

XENA

I want you to hold onto it very tightly
and follow it back to the pretty lady
over there standing next to the
horse. Can you do that for me?

YOUNGER BOY

Sure!

XENA

And take your friend, here.

YOUNGER BOY

(offendedly)

She's not my friend.

She's my sister!

XENA

Yeah. Fine. Just go.

As the two youngsters carefully grasp the rope and head back to shore, Xena turns to the rest of the group.

XENA

(cont'd)

You see what they're doing? That's what all of you are gonna do too, just as soon as you get over here. Now c'mon. Next person in line, jump.

The children move en masse, half jumping, half falling into Xena's arms. She manages to catch them and send them on their way.

All but the youngest boy who is huddled on what's left of the floe, shivering and crying pitiful tears.

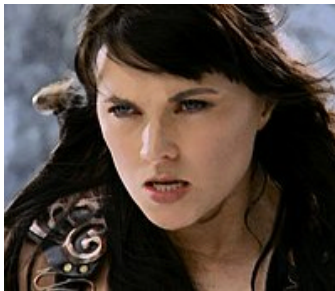
OLDEST BOY

That's Procis. He can't swim.

XENA

(angrily)

He can't swim!? What's he doing crossing a river, then?



The boy hangs his head.

Xena sighs. Untying the rope from around her waist, she wraps it around the youngster's waist and ties it off tightly.

XENA

(cont'd)

Make sure the rest of them get across safely.

OLDEST BOY

What are you gonna do?

XENA

Never mind that. Just go.

The boy goes.

Xena gingerly eases herself over onto the floe, taking care to be as gentle as possible so as to not cause it to tip and send them both into the water.

The floe shakes alarmingly and, just as Xena picks up the huddled boy, cracks down the middle, leaving behind a piece barely large enough for Xena to stand on.

The distance between the floe and stable ice is now too large for Xena to merely step back across, and its instability makes an attempted jump very dangerous at best.

Seeing this, Gabrielle quickly herds the children to shore, grabs her staff, and skitters out onto the ice, slipping and sliding and using the staff as a balance point. Within seconds, she's at the edge of the widening crack in the ice.

XENA

Gabrielle! Catch!

Gabrielle drops her staff and catches the child just in time to see the floe tip and Xena plunge down into the freezing river.

GABRIELLE

XENA!!



Juggling the struggling young boy, Gabrielle peers over the hole in the ice, staring down into the turbulent waters.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

XENA!!!

As if summoned by Gabrielle's cry, Xena surfaces, braces her hands against the ice, and hauls her body out of the water, completely drenched and chilled to the bone.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Xena! Thank the gods you're alright!!

Xena smiles through gritted teeth.

XENA

Yeah. Just peachy.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIVERBANK - LATE AFTERNOON

While the children surround Gabrielle, Xena stands off to one side, drying herself with one of their sleeping furs, then wrapping herself in a second. She's wet, freezing, and smells like a sheep. In a word, she's miserable, but being Xena is determined not to show it.

GABRIELLE

So, tell me again why
you were crossing the river?

OLDEST BOY

We were going to
pick berries for Solstice.

GABRIELLE

By yourselves?
Do your parents know?

OLDEST GIRL

We don't have parents.
We're orphans.

XENA

(sotto voce)

What is it with orphans
and Solstice anyway?



Gabrielle hears her and winks before returning her attention to the children.

GABRIELLE

You weren't running
away, were you?

OLDEST BOY

Running away? Why
would we do that?

GABRIELLE

Are you treated well?

OLDEST GIRL

Sure! We love our teacher!

YOUNGER GIRL

That's why we were going to pick berries! He loves berry tarts!

YOUNGER BOY

(sadly)

Yeah. And now we won't be able to make him one for Solstice.

Gabrielle looks over to Xena. After a moment, Xena nods. Gabrielle smiles at the children.

GABRIELLE

Well, we might just be able to help you with that.

Walking over to Argo, Gabrielle reaches into the saddlebags and comes out with a cloth covered bundle. Returning to the children, she unwraps the bundle, displaying a large cache of late-season berries. The children look on in awe.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Will these do?

OLDEST BOY

We couldn't take those.

GABRIELLE

Why not?

YOUNGER BOY

Because they're yours!

Gabrielle rewraps the bundle and presses it into the younger boy's hands.

GABRIELLE

And now they're yours. Consider it a Solstice gift from Xena and me.



YOUNGEST GIRL

Really?

GABRIELLE

Really.

CHILDREN

Thank you! Thank you!

GABRIELLE

You're very welcome.

(beat)

Now, give us a second and we'll
walk you back to your home.

OLDEST BOY

Oh no, you don't have to.
It's right through those woods.

GABRIELLE

Are you sure?

OLDEST BOY

Sure I'm sure. After all, we
got here fine, didn't we?

GABRIELLE

Well....

OLDEST BOY

We'll be fine. Come on,
guys. Let's go home.

(beat)

Thank you for the Solstice gift,
and thank you, Xena, for saving us.

Gabrielle smiles. Xena nods.

OLDEST GIRL

Happy Solstice!

GABRIELLE

Happy Solstice, you guys.
Be safe.

CHILDREN

We will!

After watching the children depart, Gabrielle walks over to Xena, who is shivering within the bundle of her furs.

GABRIELLE

(softly)

Hey.

XENA

Hey.

GABRIELLE

Pretty cruddy way to spend the
day before Solstice Eve, huh?

XENA
(*smiling slightly*)
I'll live.

Gabrielle grins.

GABRIELLE
Will these help?

Opening her hand, she reveals a small treasure trove of ripe berries, Xena's favorite. Xena's smile broadens.

XENA
Only if you feed them to me.

GABRIELLE
That can be easily arranged.



FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

EXT. PATH - EARLY EVENING

The sun is close to setting and the day has grown progressively colder. Still dressed in wet leathers, the chill hangs around Xena like a mist.

GABRIELLE

We need to start thinking about
a place to sleep for the night.

(beat)

And no camping out. You'll be an
icicle by morning. I already don't like
the way your voice is starting to sound.

XENA

(hoarsely)

There's a town on the sea coast, but it's
about a quarter day's walk from here.

GABRIELLE

That far?

XENA

Yup.

GABRIELLE

Nothing any closer?

XENA

Nope.

GABRIELLE

Great.

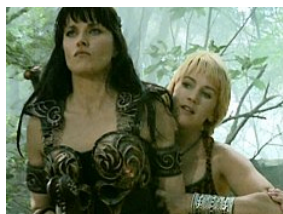
(beat)

Well, at least riding Argo
kept my legs pretty fresh.

XENA

We should both ride.
Get there quicker that way.

Gabrielle considers for a moment, then nods. Clasp the hand reaching down to her, she swings aboard, settling herself comfortably behind Xena, wrapping her arms tight around her partner's waist as Argo eases into a canter.



CUT TO:

EXT. FIELD TRAIL - MID EVENING

Xena and Gabrielle are riding along the trail in the deepening dark. As they ride, the faint sound of music comes to their ears, a sound that becomes louder and more frenetic the closer they come.

GABRIELLE

I thought you said there
weren't any towns between
here and the coast?

XENA

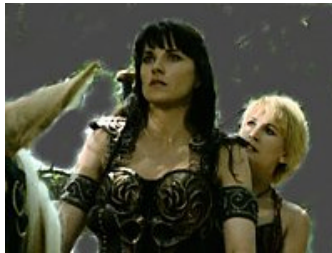
There aren't.

GABRIELLE

Then where's that
music coming from?

XENA

Looks like we'll find
out soon enough.



Argo crests a small rise and in the slight valley before them they can see a myriad of colorful tents, each with a banner fluttering in the cool breeze. Spread out from the tents are ten or more strange looking, six-wheeled covered wagons pulled by large draft horses.

A sizable group of men and women gather around a blazing bonfire, laughing, drinking, and shouting to one another. It is a scene of barely controlled chaos.

Slightly away from the central fire, a group of musicians plays while a group of colorfully garbed women twirl like wooden tops, around and around and around. As Xena and Gabrielle watch, the rhythm speeds up, and the dancers spin so quickly that they become a blur of color.

GABRIELLE

(wonderingly)
Who are they?

XENA

Czigany. Borias called
them gypsies.

GABRIELLE

Gypsies?

XENA

Yeah. Borias admired their merchant
skills and as you can see, they're
not bad as performers either.

GABRIELLE

I'll say. I'm getting dizzy
just watching them.

Suddenly, two men jump up from their seats on the ground before the fire and begin to shout at one another in an unintelligible language. Several more rise up followed by still more, until there is a swarming group of men pushing and shouting and brawling.

Behind them, the music comes to a cacophonous stop, but the women continue their frenetic dance, oblivious to everything around them.

A woman, gray-haired and heavy with years, pulls herself up to her feet and attempts to force her way between the combatants. She makes her way to the center just as one of the men withdraws a short sword and thrusts forward, unintentionally stabbing the old woman through the shoulder. She drops like a stone.

Needing to see no more, Xena urges Argo into a run.

CUT TO:

EXT. CZIGANY CAMP - MID EVENING

Bodies fly like sacks of wheat as Xena and Gabrielle break their way through the melee and into the center. Gabrielle squats down and examines the fallen old woman. She nods up at Xena. The woman is alive.

A YOUNG WOMAN kneels beside Gabrielle and applies a clean cloth to the old woman's bleeding wound.

Xena stares down the man who started the fight.

XENA

What's going on here?

MAN

This is none of your business.

Xena grabs him by the front of his vest and pulls him close.

XENA

The minute you stabbed that
old woman, I made it my business.



The man looks at her for a long moment, then nods. Xena releases him. He then points to a SECOND MAN standing across from him.

MAN

He put a spell on our women!!

MAN #2

I did not!!

MAN

You did!!

MAN #2

Prove it!

XENA

Enough!!

The feuding men fall silent.

XENA

(cont'd to first man)

What do you mean? What kind of spell?

The man turns and flings his arm out pointing in the direction of the wildly twirling dancers.

MAN

Look at them! They've been like that since the sun was high in the sky! He says this is normal, but I say they've been spelled. By him!!

Xena looks at the women. Her eyes narrow.

XENA

Wait here.

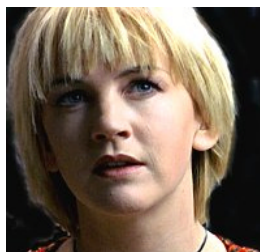
With confident steps, Xena approaches the dancers, taking care to keep out of their way while observing each one very closely. What she sees concerns her greatly. What could be taken for laughter and shouts of joy are instead screams of agony and pleas for help. Each woman's face is frozen in a horror's mask of naked pain, mouths twisted into cruel shapes, eyes wide and pleading.

Assured that the old woman is in no immediate danger, Gabrielle leaves her in the care of her young tender and slowly approaches the dance circle, watching Xena watch the dancers.

After another moment, Xena comes to Gabrielle's side, her expression grim.

GABRIELLE

Do you know what's wrong?



XENA

Tarantism.

GABRIELLE

Excuse me?

XENA

Tarantism. It's what some people call this... condition. Uncontrollable dancing movements. They literally dance until they die.

GABRIELLE

By the gods....
What causes it?

XENA

Some think a shaman's spell.
Others say it's caused by
the bite of a spider.

GABRIELLE

A spider?

Xena nods.

XENA

However, in this case, I'm pretty
sure the culprit's right there.

Gabrielle looks over to where Xena is pointing. Her eyes widen.

GABRIELLE

Xena, that's Hemlock.

XENA

(grimly)
I know.



CUT TO:

EXT. CZIGANY CAMP - EARLY EVENING

The entire camp, save for the still dancing women, gathers around the fire, where Xena is carefully pouring a boiling cauldron full of water and herbs into another deep pot covered by a thin cloth.

Gabrielle is kneeling next to the second pot, moving her face away from the noxious fumes coming up from the hot liquid.

MAN

(belligerently)

How do we know you're not trying to finish the job he started?

XENA

You don't.

MAN

Then....

Having had enough of the man's constant bickering, Gabrielle stands up, pulls her sais, and faces him head on.

GABRIELLE

Look, I've heard just about all I want to from you today. Xena is the best chance those women have, so just sit down and be quiet, or I'll put a 'spell' on you you won't forget.



The man, and indeed half the camp looks at Gabrielle, aghast. He begins slowly reaching for his sword, only to be stopped by a look from Xena.

XENA

I wouldn't.

His eyebrows rise in twin question marks.

Xena slowly shakes her head.

He relaxes his arm.

Xena smirks, then grins at Gabrielle, who returns the smile. She deliberately re-sheathes her sais and squats back down next to the pot, removing the straining cover.

GABRIELLE

I think it's ready.

XENA

Good.

MAN #2

How are you going to give it to them?

XENA
You'll see.
(*beat*)
Gabrielle?

GABRIELLE
Right behind you.

CUT TO:

EXT. DANCING CIRCLE - EARLY EVENING

Gabrielle stands outside of the circle, pot and a crude wooden drinking cup in hand. Xena steps forward toward the dancers. Ducking and dodging away from swinging arms and legs, she patiently awaits her opportunity. When it comes, she steps forward, lashes out her own arms, jabbing her fingers into the neck of one of the women. The woman collapses to her knees, gasping for breath.

Gabrielle steps forward and lifts a cup of Xena's concoction to the laboring woman's lips while Xena steadies her head.

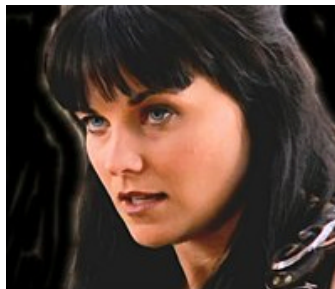
GABRIELLE
It's okay. Swallow.
(*beat, smiling*)
That's it. Good job.

Gabrielle steps back and nods to Xena, who removes the pinch, and releases the woman to lie on the ground, limbs still spasming slightly. A moment later, the drink comes back up in a violent rush, along with the last vestiges of poison in the woman's system. She collapses back to the ground with a grateful sob, her muscles relaxing at last.

Two young women come forward with robes and cloths to aid the stricken woman.

GABRIELLE
(*cont'd*)
Thank the gods.

XENA
Ready for the next one?



Gabrielle nods.

GABRIELLE
Ready.

CUT TO:

EXT. CZIGANY CAMP - NIGHT

The recovering dancers are clustered in a small group, watched over and cared for by women and men from the clan. Xena and Gabrielle, well fed and finally warm, stand close by, receiving the heartfelt thanks of the group.

The old woman, her arm in a brightly colored sling, presses a bundle of food into Gabrielle's hands.

OLD WOMAN

Thank you both for saving our women. You will always be a friend to the Czigany.

GABRIELLE

Thank you.

Gabrielle looks around as various men and women hurry around the camp, quickly packing their stores into the oddly shaped wagons that ring the perimeter of the camp.

The old woman notices Gabrielle's interest and smiles.

OLD WOMAN

They believe the ground here is cursed. We will travel on to the coast and seek our fortunes there.

GABRIELLE

That's where we're headed too. Maybe we'll meet again.

OLD WOMAN

If it is willed, we shall. Goodbye to you, and thank you both.

Xena returns from a final check on the women, walking to Gabrielle's side and nodding to the old woman as she takes her leave and returns to her family. Xena sniffs interestedly at the warm bundle in Gabrielle's hands.

XENA

What ya got there?

GABRIELLE

Dessert. And if you're very good, I'll let you have some of it later.



Xena smirks.

XENA

I'm always good.

Gabrielle laughs, and the two leave the camp, leading Argo by the reins.

CUT TO:

EXT. FARM - LATE EVENING

Having traveled another hour, Xena and Gabrielle have chanced upon a lone farm sitting among the vast rolling fields that dot the way to the sea. At Gabrielle's suggestion, they have stopped to ask for lodging for the night. Xena's chest congestion has worsened, and Gabrielle is concerned.

Gabrielle stands before the stout wooden door, hand poised to knock, when the door flies open and a gaggle of giggling young women and girls brushes past them as if they weren't even there. The women head toward the large barn and soon disappear inside.

Xena and Gabrielle look at each other, the barn, and each other again.

Gabrielle shrugs.

GABRIELLE

Could have been worse.

(beat)

They could have been sheep.

XENA

Don't start.

Smirking, Gabrielle returns her attention to the doorway, which is now filled with the form of a large, middle-aged farmer who is scowling at them both.

Gabrielle gives him her best smile.

GABRIELLE

Beautiful daughters you have.



The farmer's scowl deepens.

Gabrielle's smile fades a bit.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

We....

FARMER

Don't have nothin' for no beggars.
(beat)
Come back tomorrow with honest
coin, and I'll deal with ye.

GABRIELLE

No. No. We're not
asking for anything.
(beat)
Well, sort of, but not really.
(beat)
What I mean is....

FARMER

Ye deaf, then? Didn't ya just
hear me tell ya ta get lost?

Xena steps out of the shadows. The farmer stiffens. Gabrielle hastily reaches out and lays a
calming hand on Xena's wrist.

GABRIELLE

Please, sir. We're not beggars
and we don't want your food.
(beat)
We're cold, and tired, and looking to
take shelter for the night, that's all.

FARMER

I've got a full house. You'll have
ta look somewhere else.

GABRIELLE

Your barn, then? We'll gladly pay
you for the use of your hayloft.

Gabrielle removes her money pouch and gives it a little shake. The farmer's eyes light up with
greed. A smile twitches the corners of his seamed mouth.

FARMER

Five dinars.

GABRIELLE

(loudly)
Five dinars?!?

The farmer's scowl reappears.

GABRIELLE

A very fair price, wouldn't
you say, Xena?

Xena's scowl outdoes the farmer's, and Gabrielle squeezes the wrist in her hand. She then pulls
the dinars from her pouch and hands them over the farmer. He makes them disappear.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

You're an incredibly generous man.
Thank you. Solstice Blessings on you.

FARMER

Just don't go touching my daughters,
or you'll wish you never saw this place.

GABRIELLE

Don't worry, we....



She finds herself talking to a slammed door.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd sotto voce)

Well aren't you just Mr. Sunshine?

As they turn toward the barn, Xena grins.

XENA

Ya know, this reminds me
of a traveling merchant joke
Salmoneus once told me.

GABRIELLE

(falsely)

Sounds like it must
have been a funny one.

Xena opens her mouth to respond.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

But I don't want to hear it.

Xena closes her mouth.

CUT TO:

INT. HAYLOFT - NIGHT

Xena and Gabrielle are snuggled into the warm hay, their exhausted bodies all but groaning with relief. The young women are still beneath them, laughing, singing, and tending to the animals in the barn in an almost mindless manner.

Despite the din, the duo's eyes grow heavy, and they nearly find sleep when Xena stiffens. Gabrielle notices, and looks up at her partner questioningly.

XENA

Do you smell something?

Gabrielle takes an experimental sniff.

GABRIELLE

You mean aside
from cow sh....

Her last word is cut off by Xena's fingers across her lips. Gabrielle grins and takes another sniff.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)
Sheep sh....

XENA

(interrupting)
Don't go there, Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE

FIRE!

Xena grabs hold of Gabrielle, stands, and jumps down from the hayloft. Releasing Gabrielle, Xena grabs the first young woman from her milking stool and hauls her up.

XENA

(calmly)
The barn's on fire.
Time to go.



The woman gives a vapid giggle as Xena shoves her toward the barn's open doors.

Smoke begins filling the barn and the animals start to panic.

XENA

(cont'd)
Gabrielle! Go out and get some
buckets of water from the well! Try
to put the fire out! I'll be right there!

Nodding, Gabrielle races off with a second woman in tow. Several animals follow her outside and she narrowly misses being trampled by lowing cows.

Xena rushes further into the barn, grabbing the young women away from their mindless tasks and shoving them in the direction of the door. All the while she moves adroitly to avoid being trampled herself. The smoke is getting steadily thicker, and she draws an arm across her nose and mouth, attempting to filter some of it away.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARNYARD - NIGHT

A blazing fire on the barn's dried, thatched roof lights the night. With the help of the farmer, Gabrielle has managed to form a bucket brigade of sorts from the large well to the barn itself.

Young women and animals rush out of the barn, coughing and covered with soot.

As the group watches, part of the roof collapses, sending sparks high into the sky.

Gabrielle drops the full bucket she's holding and runs to the doorway, almost overcome by the heavy smoke billowing out.

GABRIELLE
XENA!!!

A split second later, Xena emerges from the smoke, soot caked and black as night carrying an equally soot covered young girl in her arms.

Gabrielle gazes at her with profound relief. Then she looks down. Her eyes widen, then narrow at the blood-streaked, already darkening bruise on Xena's thigh just above her leather armor.

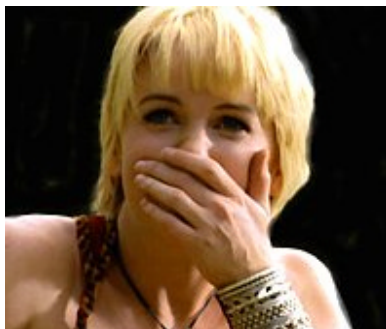
GABRIELLE
What happened?!?

The answer, a small, white and foul tempered goat trots out bleating. It swings its wickedly horned head and stares at Xena, seeing its favorite human still in the warrior's arms. It bleats again and paws the ground. Baring her teeth, Xena growls.

The goat turns tail and runs.

Xena sighs.

Gabrielle hides a laugh behind her hand.



CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS TRAIL - NIGHT

The full moon spreads a ghostly light over the bitterly cold night. A chill wind moans through a forest of denuded trees. To the north, a small mountain shines with granite whiteness. Caves dot the base of the mountain like empty eyes, black and blank against the stark white of the moonlit stone.

Xena and Gabrielle ride through this forest on their way to the coast. Gabrielle is driving, while Xena sits behind in light meditation trying to restore the energy sapped from a long day and a burgeoning cold which she won't admit to having.

Gabrielle hears a sound that seems out of place among the rest and waits for Xena to react to it. When she doesn't, Gabrielle relaxes, then tightens again when the sound is repeated.

GABRIELLE

Xena?

XENA

Mm?

GABRIELLE

Remember when you taught me to listen
for the sounds behind the sounds?

XENA

Yeah.

GABRIELLE

Well, I think that cave we're
passing is talking to us.

Xena's eyes pop open and she stares at the back of Gabrielle's head as if she's lost a marble or two.

NOISE

ALOOOOOOO!

GABRIELLE

Do you hear that?

XENA

It's just the wind.

NOISE

ALOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

GABRIELLE

I know wind, Xena, and that's not it.



XENA

A denning coyote, then.
It's a full moon.

Gabrielle looks at the cave in question for a long moment, then shrugs.

GABRIELLE

Guess you're right.

XENA

'Course I am.

GABRIELLE

Ha. Ha.

NOISE

ALOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

(beat)

ISANNEEBODEEEEOUTTHEEEEEEEEEEEEE???

Gabrielle turns her head to look over her shoulder.

GABRIELLE

Unless that denning coyote of
yours is really, really lonely and
looking for some friends, I think
maybe we'd better investigate.

XENA

(through gritted teeth)
Great.

CUT TO:

INT. CAVE - NIGHT

Guided by their torches, Xena and Gabrielle make their way to the center of the smallish cave, where they are greeted by a most unusual sight.

What appears to be half a man, visible only from his protruding belly up, is sitting on the cave floor. He wears clothing that none of them has ever seen before, a round glass object propped against one eye, and a strange looking hat that has a still burning candle strapped to the wide brim.

The man smiles and his teeth are barely visible beneath his wide, bushy mustache.

MAN

Well, jolly good to see you ladies!

(beat)

You are ladies, aren't you?
It's so hard to tell these days,
you know. Why, with all that
weaponry and armor....

He smiles at them

MAN

(cont'd)

Of course you are.
Smashing. Simply smashing!

Xena and Gabrielle look at one another, then back at the man.

MAN

Oh, how rude of me!
Randolph Nigel Smytheson Carruthers,
spelunker, at your service, ladies.

Silence.

CARRUTHERS

Oh my. Don't speak Greek,
then? This is a bit of a dither.

XENA

We speak Greek just fine.

GABRIELLE

We're just not sure
what you're speaking.

CARRUTHERS

All right! Well, you must think
me a bit daft, but I'm not
going to argue the toss.

(beat)

I need a spot of help, you see.
In a bit of a sticky wicket, yes?

Beginning to regret her decision to make this detour in the first place, Gabrielle carefully walks closer to the strange man, looking him over carefully.

GABRIELLE

Where's the rest of you?



CARRUTHERS

Ah! Well, that's the
problem, you see. It's....

The man points down.

GABRIELLE

In Tartarus?

Carruthers laughs heartily.

CARRUTHERS

Oh, you are a jolly one, aren't you?
Yes, I suppose you could say that
the rest of me is in Tartarus.
At least, that's the way it feels.

XENA

Fell through the floor did you?

CARRUTHERS

Ace! You're the cat's
whiskers, you are! 'S'truth!

XENA

Mm.

GABRIELLE

You actually understand him??

Xena smirks.

CARRUTHERS

Bit of a balls-up, it was. My mates
and I were exploring these wonderful
caverns when the floor caved in.

GABRIELLE

Where are the others?

Carruthers points down again.

CARRUTHERS

I was the last one to go, you see.
Got stuck, tight as a cork. They
tried to push me up, but....

He shrugs.

CARRUTHERS

(cont'd)

Help a sport out, then?
I'd be ever so obliged.

Xena looks at Gabrielle, who shrugs, then nods. Xena rolls her eyes.

XENA

Fine.

As Xena approaches the man, Gabrielle removes his hat. Squatting down, Xena wraps her arms around his considerable bulk, then gradually stands, pulling the caver out of the hole.

CARRUTHERS

Dear gods! You're a strong one, aren't you? Amazon?

XENA

Amphipolitan.

Carruthers hesitates before replying

CARRUTHERS

Yes. Quite.

Setting Carruthers aside, Xena looks down into the hole. Several dirty, tired faces stare back up at her.

XENA

Are you all all right?



MEN

Yes!

Moments later, Xena has pulled them all up from the hole, and they surround her, offering their devout thanks. Shrugging off the praise, Xena returns to Gabrielle's side. Gabrielle wraps an arm around her waist and squeezes, then steals a kiss from her cheek.

GABRIELLE

A hero's work is never done, huh?

XENA

Yeah. Right.

Gabrielle chuckles.

GABRIELLE

C'mon, hero.
Let's find an inn.

CUT TO:

INT. INN SLEEPING ROOM - NIGHT

After another hour of traveling, Xena and Gabrielle have finally found lodging for the night. Freshly bathed, Xena lays out on the large bed and watches Gabrielle, who is sitting on the room's lone chair. She is holding a scroll in her lap, and looking out the slightly open window.

XENA
Aren't you tired?

GABRIELLE
Exhausted.



Xena lifts her arm and takes an exaggerated sniff.

XENA
I think I'm safe enough
to sleep with now.

Gabrielle smiles.

XENA
(*cont'd*)
Well?

GABRIELLE
Xena... I think I'm the reason
we had the day we did today.

Pushing herself up, Xena sits on the edge of the bed, looking at her partner questioningly.

GABRIELLE
(*cont'd*)
Remember last night, when we
were having our little discussion?

XENA
(*slowly*)
Yeah?

Gabrielle blushes slightly.

GABRIELLE
Well, after you went to sleep,
I... kinda... wished on a star.
(*quickly*)
It wasn't a bad wish....
It just came out that way.

XENA
What did you wish for?

Gabrielle sighs.

GABRIELLE

(softly)

Some way to prove to you
that you weren't getting old.



Smiling, Xena rises to her feet and walks over to her partner, gathering her in a warm embrace.

XENA

It was just a coincidence, Gabrielle.
You didn't do anything wrong.

Xena nuzzles Gabrielle's neck.

XENA

(cont'd)

In fact, I think it's kinda nice that
you would wish that for me.

GABRIELLE

Yeah?

XENA

Yeah... so, are you
ready to come to bed?

GABRIELLE

(flushed)

Oh yeah.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

INT. INN SLEEPING ROOM - DAWN

Xena and Gabrielle are up and packed for the remainder of their journey. If luck is with them, they will reach Poteidia by late evening Solstice Eve. Both appear well rested and much more relaxed than the night before.

Gabrielle smiles and removes her hand from Xena's forehead, pleased at the lack of fever.

XENA

Finished, mother?

Gabrielle shoots her a withering look. Xena makes a face, eyes twinkling. Hoisting the saddlebags over her shoulder, she turns to face her partner.

XENA

(cont'd)

Shall we?

GABRIELLE

Let's.



VOICES

Thief!! Help!! Thief!!!
Stop thief!!!!

Xena and Gabrielle look at one another. Xena slams open the door and the two go rushing out into the hallway toward the stairs.

CUT TO:

INT. INN - DAWN

The scene in the Inn's main room is one of complete chaos. Several well-dressed men and women lay on the floor, seemingly stunned. Others mill around, talking and arguing among themselves and pointing toward the now wide open doors.

Gabrielle quickly kneels by a very large, obviously wealthy woman, who is bleeding profusely from a small wound to her head. The woman's husband, as thin as she is stout, sits next to her moaning and wringing his hands on an ornate, useless lace handkerchief. With a smile, Gabrielle plucks the handkerchief from the man's hands and presses it against his wife's wound to slow the bleeding.

Xena grabs one of the milling men at random and pulls him close to her.

XENA

What's going on?

MAN

T... they took everything!!
Jewels, money, everything!!!

XENA

Who? Do you know them?



MAN

Never saw them before in my life!

XENA

How many where there?
Which way did they go?

MAN

Four, maybe five?

MAN #2

I saw six!!

LADY #3

Eight for sure!!

MAN #4

Ten at least!!

MAN

They went east,
toward the mountains!

MAN #2

No, they went toward the sea!!

MAN

East!

MAN #2

WEST!!!

MAN

EAST!!!

XENA
Gabrielle?

Looking up, Gabrielle sees just how close Xena's temper is to snapping. She turns to the husband of the woman to whom she's tending. Grabbing his hand, she presses it over the bloodied handkerchief on the woman's forehead.

GABRIELLE
Hold that.
(beat)
Thanks!

Jumping to her feet, she nods to her partner, and together they leave the Inn at a run. The rest of the people inside look at one another, then take off after the fleeing women.

CUT TO:

EXT. COASTAL TOWN - DAWN

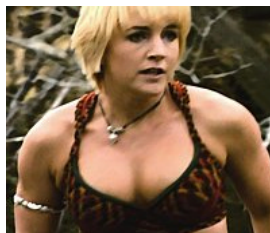
Despite the early hour, the town is packed with people and goods that have been offloaded from the large ships that line the harbor. The thieves' trail is obvious from the path of destruction they've left behind. Broken carts, ruined merchandise, and bruised bodies litter the narrow streets leading to the docks.

XENA
C'mon!

Xena runs over, under, and around the debris littering the street. Gabrielle is right at her heels until she reaches the point where four men are trying to set a large, overturned cart upright. Xena leaps the cart and men. Gabrielle skids to a stop just before smashing into them.

Gabrielle moves to the left, the men move to the left. She tries right, they move right. Left again, same thing.

GABRIELLE
Freeze!



The men obey.

Gabrielle grins.

GABRIELLE
Thanks!

Juking to the left, she runs around the obstacle just in time to see a large ship pull away from the harbor. A group of men who are obviously the thieves laugh and wave to the angered crowd.

CUT TO:

EXT. DOCK XENA'S POV - DAWN

Continuing down the narrow street, Xena flips easily over yet another overturned wagon and lands on her feet in time to see the ship begin to pull away from the dock.

Coming to the edge of the dock, she looks down and sees a small two-man skiff, sails hoisted and ready to move. Xena jumps down into the skiff, neatly displacing a rotund man bent over at the waist as he tries to tie his shoes. With a squawk, he falls into the shallow water, and comes up sputtering.

XENA

(grinning)

Give it right back. Promise.



With that, she trims the sails, and the quick little boat is off.

CUT TO:

EXT. HARBOR - DAWN

As the thieves watch, Xena's borrowed skiff catches quickly up to the larger ship as it tries to lumber out of port. Jumping from the boat, she grabs the cargo netting hanging over the side of the ship and shimmies up the side, completely ignoring the thieves' attempts to shake her off.

CUT TO:

EXT. SHIP - DAWN

Releasing the netting, she flips over the side, landing directly in front of the head thief. He swings at her with his cutlass. She ducks and grabs the bag of loot he has in his other hand.

XENA

Lose something?

HEAD THIEF

Give that back!!!

XENA

Want it?

She takes a step back.

XENA

(cont'd)

Come and get it.

HEAD THIEF

ARRRRGGGGGHHHH!

He manages exactly one step forward before being walloped upside the head by his own bag of booty. He drops like a stone, and the fight is on.

THIEVES

ARRRRGGGGGHHHHH!!!!

The thieves surround Xena, lashing out at her with swords, feet and fists. Xena avoids each blow, returning blows of her own with the bag in her hand. She then spins in a quick circle and the bag pounds each man across the face, knocking them down in turn like the spokes of a wagon wheel.

One less than smart man rises back to his feet and wobbling, swings his sword at the three Xena's he sees.

Xena grins.

XENA

Catch!

Dropping his sword, the thug manages to catch the bag. The force of the throw pushes him backward until he slams against the hard wooden ship's rail and sits down hard, pretty stars and tweeting birdies spinning circles over his head.

Crossing the deck, Xena snatches the bag.

XENA

(cont'd)

I'll take that, thanks.



Running back across the deck, she begins to swing the bag in ever widening circles.

XENA

(cont'd)

GABRIELLE!!

Looking up, Gabrielle catches sight of the bag spinning end over end across the water. Throwing her arms up, she jumps and catches the bag to the cheers of the robbed citizens surrounding her on the dock.

Grinning, Xena turns and eyes the passed out thieves.

XENA

(cont'd)

Nice party, boys. We'll have to do it again sometime.

Then she jumps over the side, landing neatly in the skiff and turning for home.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROLLING VALLEY TRAIL - EARLY MORNING

Having extracted themselves from the clutches of an overly enthusiastic populace, Xena and Gabrielle continue on the way to Poteidia. Though the sun is up and shining, its light does little to banish the bitter chill from the air, and both women walk quickly in order to keep warm.

With an idle glance off to her left, Xena spies a tall, well-built man running along a perpendicular trail. He's immediately recognizable, and the corner of Xena's lips twitch in a hint of a smile.

Gabrielle notices as well, and grins.

GABRIELLE

Is that who I think it is?



XENA

Looks like it.

GABRIELLE

(waving)

Hercules!! Hey, Hercules!!!

Looking up, a broad smile crosses Hercules' handsome face, and he speeds up his already fast pace, heading directly for them.

Springing from the wood that Hercules has just left is a group of very colorfully dressed men, all bearing strange, stringed instruments that neither Xena nor Gabrielle has ever seen before.

Gasping and panting for breath, the men catch sight of the legendary hero and start off after him again.

Seeing this, Xena immediately drops her hand to her chakram, but, sensing no malice coming from the oddly dressed men, she allows the weapon to rest on its hook, content to watch events play out.

Gabrielle meets him half way, stopping Hercules and wrapping him in an enormous hug, which he easily returns, smiling down into her hair.

Finally unwrapping herself from him, Gabrielle takes his arm and leads him down to a smiling Xena. Hercules eyes the hand stuck out toward him and grins.

HERCULES

Oh no you don't. Come here.

Xena is drawn into a bone crushing hug, then released. Hercules grins at the both of them.

HERCULES

(cont'd)

It's great to see you guys.
You look like you're doing well.

GABRIELLE

We are. How 'bout you?

Massive shoulders lift in an offhand shrug.

HERCULES

Not bad.

Oddly dressed men finally catch up to Hercules and collapse on the ground, completely worn.

XENA

(smirking)

New friends?

Hercules runs a hand through his hair.

HERCULES

Not... exactly.



XENA

Mm.

Hercules brightens.

HERCULES

I'm glad I found you guys.
I... um... I need a little favor.

Xena's eyes narrow. Her hands find her hips and plant themselves there.

XENA

What kind of favor?

HERCULES

Well, you see, these
guys are singers.

One of the brightly clothed men sits up with an expression of extreme offense on his face.

MAN

Singers?? Singers, he calls us!

MAN #2

We're not singers!

MAN #3

We're minstrels!

MAN #4

Wandering minstrels!

HERCULES

Uh... yeah. That.

(beat)

Anyway, I was supposed to escort them to a Royal Wedding where they're going to perform.

XENA

And?



HERCULES

And... well... I just got word that a giant, three headed Hydra is attacking a village in the other direction.

He cocks a thumb over his shoulder, back the way he came.

XENA

And you want us to baby sit them for you, is that it?

Hercules smiles.

XENA

No.

The smile fades.

HERCULES

But....

XENA

Sorry, my friend, but we're headed to Poteidia to celebrate Solstice with Gabrielle's family.

Hercules brightens again.

HERCULES

Poteidia! That's perfect!
The wedding is in Pilates.
That's practically on your way.

XENA

(firmly)

Not practically enough.

HERCULES

Xena, this wedding could ensure peace
in the region for a long time to come.
Isn't that worth a little inconvenience?

Xena stiffens, beginning to anger. Seeing this, Gabrielle moves beside her and slips an arm around her waist.

GABRIELLE

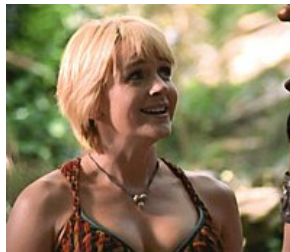
We'll do it, Hercules.

She tries out her brightest smile.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

After all, Solstice isn't
until tomorrow, right?



XENA

Gabrielle....

GABRIELLE

It's okay, Xena. I know of King Robbins.
He's a very fair and decent ruler. He's
always giving really great speeches on how
they can help themselves and one another.

(beat)

If this wedding can make the area safer
for my family and their friends, I'm
willing to be a little late for Solstice.

After a long moment, Xena nods.

XENA

(to Hercules)

Fine.

Hercules gives them both a look of such profound relief that Xena's hackles immediately go back up. Hercules, of course, notices this, and with his most charming smile, he nods, turns, and runs back in the direction he had just come, leaving a fuming Xena and a confused Gabrielle behind.

As Hercules leaves, the strange men jump up in unison and begin strumming the strings on their strange instruments.

MINSTREL #1

Me... me... me... me...
memememememememe.

He nods.

The group takes a deep breath, then....

MINSTRELS

*(The song "The Mighty Hercules"
is written by Johnny Nash)*

Hercules, People Are Safe When Near Him!
Hercules, Only The Evil Fear Him!
Softness In His Eyes, Iron In His Thighs,
Virtue In His Heart, Fire In Every Part of
The Mighty Herculeeeees!!

Xena turns to Gabrielle, head cocked.

XENA

(softly)

"Iron in his thighs?"



Gabrielle smirks.

GABRIELLE

(primly)

You'd know that
better than I would.

Her smirk broadens at the look she receives from her partner.

MINSTRELS

Hercules,
Hero Of Song And Story
Hercules,
Winner Of Ancient Glory....

Xena clears her throat. Loudly.

MINSTREL #5

(loudly)

Fighting for the Right

Fighting with his Might

(beat, softer)

With the Strength of Ten

(beat, softer still)

Ordinary... Men....

Dropping his hand, the minstrel looks at his fellows, who are all staring back at him.

MINSTREL #5

(cont'd)

What?

As a group, the minstrels swivel their heads to look at Xena, whose arms are crossed over her chest, and whose booted foot is tapping on the ground.

MINSTREL #5

(cont'd)

Oh.

(beat)

Sorry.

XENA

Let's go.

MINSTREL #3

Wait!!

Xena spins on her heel, leveling him with a glare.

XENA

What?



Gasping, the minstrel takes a step back, cradling his lute against his chest like a shield.

XENA

Well?

MINSTREL #3

W... W... We... We... uh....

MINSTREL #1

(haughtily)

We never travel with strangers.

XENA

Fine. Pilates is that way.
Have fun at the wedding.

Gabrielle steps forward.

GABRIELLE

Xena....

MINSTREL #2

Xena!

MINSTRELS

XENA???

GABRIELLE

Is there an echo out here?



MINSTRELS

(singing)

Xena, she is the Warrior Princess
Xena, her words she never minces
With her chakram and her sword
Behave or you'll be gored
Be you thug or mean warlord
Oh yes, she's Xena, the Warrior Princess!

Xena is staring at the men. Gabrielle is bent over at the waist, arms crossed over her belly, laughing at the look on Xena's face.

MINSTRELS

(cont'd)

Oh yes, she's Xena....

XENA

All right.

MINSTRELS

The great and mighty
Warrior Princess, Xena....

XENA

Enough!

MINSTRELS

She'll jump around and
cut your head off, Xena....

XENA
CUT IT!!

Voices and lutes stop in a discordant jangle.

XENA
Move. Now.

The men move.

Quickly.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROLLING VALLEY TRAIL - MID MORNING

MINSTRELS

She is the Warrior Princess known across the land, the land
When you are in trouble she'll lend a hand, a hand....

The minstrels have been singing for hours, and it has gotten on Xena's last remaining nerve. Stopping suddenly, she pulls her sword from its sheath, eyes blazing.

GABRIELLE
Xena....

Gabrielle giggles over the atrocious lyrics.

GABRIELLE
(*cont'd*)

It's not nice to kill them.
They're just doing their job.

Xena's smile is as cold as a marble statue in winter.

XENA
Oh, I have no intention of
killing them, Gabrielle.
(*beat*)
I'm just gonna chop off their
hands and rip their throats out.



MINSTRELS

She's known in every land
As one to lend a hand
Or foot or knee or thigh
She'll even lend an eye....

Xena growls.

Gabrielle restrains her with a hand to the wrist.

GABRIELLE

Xena, take a break. Go for
a walk ahead, or something.
I'll keep an eye on these guys.

XENA

Fine.

Gabrielle watches, doing little to hide her mirth as her frustrated partner stomps ahead.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROLLING VALLEY - MID MORNING

The minstrels and Gabrielle finally catch up to Xena, who is finished attending to business from behind some covering foliage.

MINSTRELS

A bush, a bush, she's gone behind a bush
Will she use Gabby's scrolls to wipe her....

XENA

Go there and die.



MINSTREL #4

...hands?

Lowering her chakram, Xena steps around to Gabrielle's side and they continue their walk to the kingdom of Pilates.

Gabrielle is still laughing.

CUT TO:

EXT: SPARCE WOODLAND - MID AFTERNOON

Xena and Gabrielle walk side by side. Xena grasps Argo's reins loosely in her hand. In addition to her usual load of gear, Argo now carries several lutes which hang over the saddle. Behind Argo, the minstrels follow, rags stuffed in their mouths. Xena is smirking. Gabrielle looks like she wishes to do serious bodily harm.

XENA

(unrepentantly)

They were just doing their jobs, Gabrielle.

Gabrielle gives her a look hot enough to vaporize a volcano.

Xena's smirk becomes more pronounced. She opens her mouth to speak.

GABRIELLE

Don't go there, Xena. I'm warning
you, I still have more rags in my
bag and I won't hesitate to use them.



Giving an evil chuckle, Xena speeds up her pace, quickly outdistancing the rest of the group.

XENA

(singing, O.C.)

Gabrielle, Gabrielle, she's
so swell, Gabrielle...

GABRIELLE

XENA!!!!

CUT TO:

EXT. EDGE OF WOODS - MID AFTERNOON

As Xena, Gabrielle and their gagged charges continue toward Pilates, they hear a commotion just ahead.

As one, the minstrels sniff the air and joy suffused their faces. The gags pop out of their mouths, and they begin running pell-mell toward the commotion.

MINSTRELS

(singing)

Ale! It must be Ale!

Amber boch or Grecian Pale

Be it ever so yummy, there's no taste like Ale!

It's Ale!!

GABRIELLE

Well, that's one way to
get rid of them, I guess.

XENA

Mm.

Exiting the woods, the cause for the commotion becomes immediately obvious.

A large crossroads appears just ahead, and in the center of the crossroads, four wagons have obviously collided. Two are overturned, and one stands on only two wheels. The other appears unscathed. All four wagons carry large casks of ale. Several of the casks have broken in the collision, and ale has spilled out all over the ground.

Dozens of men parade about in various stages of drunkenness, having taken immediate advantage of the fortuitous circumstances. Two are trying to walk a straight line while reciting the Greek alphabet and touching their noses with the tips of their index fingers. Several more are running about with their arms spread wide, making buzzing noises.

MAN

Hey, look at me!
I'm Icarus!! Bzzzzzz....

MAN #2

No, I'm Icarus!!

MAN

No, I am!! Bzzzzzzzowwwwzzzz.

MAN #2

No, I am!!! Whoooooshhh.
Whoooooshhhhh.

The two men collide and fall rear first into a puddle of ale. They laugh uproariously, holding onto one another for support.

Several men are kneeling like dogs, lapping up the pools of ale that saturate the sodden ground. Others have given up lapping and simply lie in the pools, trying to absorb the liquor through their pores.

The minstrels have appropriated wooden mugs from somewhere and are toasting one another while singing.

MINSTRELS

How dry I am! How wet I'll be!
If I don't find the privy key!

The only sober person is a thin, wizened old man who scowls at the others and raps his walking stick hard on the ground. He is, of course, roundly ignored by the revelers.

Gabrielle chuckles softly. Xena rolls her eyes. They head for the logjam to offer their assistance.



The old man sees them and relief washes across his face like an ocean wave.

OLD MAN

Oh, thank the gods and goddesses.
Please, could you help me?

GABRIELLE

Looks like you've got
some trouble, huh?

OLD MAN

You could say that, yes.

He holds out his hand.

OLD MAN

(cont'd)

I'm Barley Hopseus, Royal
Alemaker to King Robbins.

GABRIELLE

Pleased to meet you, Hopseus.
I'm Gabrielle, and this is Xena.

HOPSEUS

I'm grateful to meet you both.

XENA

This all yours then?

HOPSEUS

Some of it is. The King ordered the best ales
from the four corners of his kingdom to
be brought in for the Royal Wedding.

XENA

Looks like you all got together
a little sooner than expected.

HOPSEUS

Exactly! And if I can't get these
wagons righted, we'll all be a
lot later than anyone expects!

He draws a finger across his throat.

GABRIELLE

The king wouldn't kill you
for that! Would he?



HOPSEUS

(ominously)

His Majesty loves his Ale.

Taking in a breath, Xena looks around, shaking her head as she realizes that every single one of the able bodied men are too blindly drunk to do her any type of good whatsoever.

XENA

Gabrielle, you and Hopseus keep
an eye on the... Icarri over there.
Argo and I will take care of the rest.

GABRIELLE

Are you sure? I
could help, you know.

XENA

Oh believe me, you will.

CUT TO:

EXT. CROSSROADS - EARLY EVENING

An hour later, hot, sweaty and covered with sticky ale, Xena finally straightens and stretches as she looks over the job she's done. All four wagons are standing on their own wheels, and the remaining ale casks are secured in their beds.

Hopseus rushes over and pumps Xena's hand as hard as his feeble arm is able.

HOPSEUS

Thank you, oh thank you. You've
saved my livelihood. And likely my life.
I don't know how I'll ever repay you.

XENA

I do.

HOPSEUS

You do?

Xena gestures to the drunken minstrels.

XENA

Yup. Those... gentlemen are minstrels
ordered to sing at the wedding. I'd
consider it a personal favor if you
would escort them the rest of the way.



HOPSEUS

No sooner said than done.

The Alemaster claps his hands, and the drunken men jump to, wavering their way over to their wagons and trying, with varying degrees of success, to climb aboard.

HOPSEUS

(cont'd)

Minstrels! You're with us!

Swaying and staggering, the minstrels finally manage to retrieve their lutes from Argo's back. Grinning drunkenly, they salute Xena and Gabrielle.

MINSTREL #1

Thanks, Sheena. Thanks, Babrielle.

GABRIELLE

(grinning)

You're welcome.

MINSTREL #2

Sappy Holstice to you!

GABRIELLE

Um...sappy holstice to you too.

MINSTRELS

(badly off-key)

We're wandering minstrels
We love to shing
We'll sherenade the gride and broom
On their wedding....

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. WESTERN ROAD - EARLY EVENING

The kingdom of Pilates receding behind them, Xena and Gabrielle are on the last leg of their journey. The large, relatively smooth western road skirts Amphipolis and dips down into Poteidia.

Off to the left, a short distance ahead, a tall outcropping of bushes sways in a non-existent breeze. Gabrielle cocks her head.

GABRIELLE

Rabbits?

XENA

(grinning)

The two-legged kind, maybe.

Dropping Argo's reins and gesturing for the horse to stay, Xena moves silently toward the shaking bushes. Gabrielle follows just as quietly behind.

GABRIELLE

(whispering)

Xena....

XENA

(whispering)

Shh.

(beat)

Listen.

VOICE #1

Take a look out there.

VOICE #2

I'm not gonna look.

You look!

VOICE #1

I'm not gonna look.

VOICE #3

Shut up, both of ya.

The bushes rustle slightly.

VOICE #1

Ya see anything, boss?

VOICE #3

Nothin'.

VOICE #2

(plaintively)

How long we gotta wait, boss? I'm
gittin' stiff kneelin' here like this all day.

VOICE #3

Shut up, ya stooge. We're waitin' till
that namby pamby prince rides by,
and we're gonna nab him and bring
him back to Gluteus, just like he said.

VOICE #2

And then we'll be rollin'
in dough, right boss?

VOICE #3

More than you ever saw
in your life, buddy boy.

VOICE #1

Wow. Gluteus is really smart, ain't
he, boss? Kidnappin' the prince on
his wedding day. That takes brains.

VOICE #3

He's smart, all right. Smart like a fox.

Holding a finger to her lips in a signal to Gabrielle, Xena steps silently in front of the bush, then very softly clears her throat.

VOICE #2

Did you hear that??

VOICE #1

I didn't hear nothin'.
Did you, boss?

VOICE #3

Hear what?

Xena clears her throat again.

VOICE #2

That! That!! Didja hear it??

VOICE #1

I heard it, and I ain't lookin'.

VOICE #3

Idiots!

The bushes slowly part to reveal the balding head of a well-built, if extremely dirty, man. His eyes widen as he spies a pair of armored legs. His gaze travels slowly up very long legs, along leather and brass armor, and up into the sky blue, and not very kind gaze of Xena.

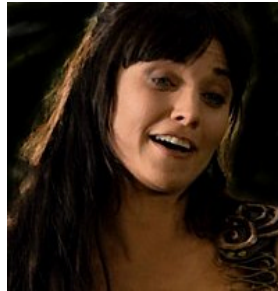
MAN #3

Who are you??

XENA

(smirking)

Me? Oh, I'm the Solstice Fairy.



Two more heads quickly pop out of the bushes.

MAN #1

The Solstice Fairy! Really?

XENA

Yup.

(beat, sensually)

And I'm about to make all
your dreams come true.

The last thing the men see is a booted foot which sends them into an early Solstice nap.

CUT TO:

EXT. WESTERN ROAD - NEAR SUNSET

Xena and Gabrielle are on the last stretch for Poteidia. They come upon a very familiar and quite wide river that seems to be missing an important accompaniment.

GABRIELLE

Uh... Xena?

XENA

(preoccupied)

Yeah?

GABRIELLE

Didn't there used to
be a bridge here?

Turning from her examination of Argo's hooves, Xena scans the river. There's no bridge in sight.

XENA

Used to be.

A second later, her hand darts out and grabs Gabrielle by the back of her cloak, pulling her to Xena's side. Gabrielle looks at her strangely.

GABRIELLE

I wasn't planning on
falling in, you know.



Suddenly, the ground shakes and quakes and rumbles. Gabrielle grabs Xena tightly, using the taller body to help her keep balance.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

What in Tartarus?

VOICE

(off camera)

FE! FI! FO! FUM!

I SMELL

A pause as a giant, and blind, Cyclops stomps from behind the large rock outcropping to the left of them.

CYCLOPS

(growling)

XENA!!!!

Xena grins, completely unsurprised.

XENA

You remembered. I'm touched.

CYCLOPS

How could I forget?

You blinded me!

XENA

Can't say I'm sorry I did, either.

CYCLOPS

You will! You'll be screaming
your apology after I get through
ripping your flesh from your bones!

Xena laughs.

XENA

That'll be the day.

CYCLOPS

I'm serious! There's no escape for you now, Xena. I've taken the bridge out, as you can see.

Xena shrugs.

XENA

So? We'll just go back the way we came.



The Cyclops laughs.

CYCLOPS

I don't think so!!

The ground rumbles again. Xena and Gabrielle turn in time to see a second blind Cyclops come out of hiding, blocking the road.

CYCLOPS #2

GRAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!

XENA

Aw. You've found a friend. How... nice.

CYCLOPS #2

GRAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!

XENA

Not very talkative, is he?

CYCLOPS

He's just hungry! For YOU!!



XENA

Sorry, but I already have a partner.

Gabrielle smirks.

CYCLOPS #2
GRAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!

The ground moves again as the second Cyclops lumbers forward, his massive arms held out in an attempt to grab Xena and Gabrielle. The pair merely step to one side, and the Cyclops stumbles into his friend, driving them backwards almost into the river.

Xena's eyes light up.

GABRIELLE
I know that look.

Xena grins.

XENA
Gimme a quill.

GABRIELLE
What?

XENA
C'mon, c'mon. A quill.

Looking at Xena strangely, Gabrielle pulls a quill from her bag and hands it to her partner. Xena snatches it up with a grin.

XENA
Thanks!

The two Cyclops have managed to disentangle themselves and are facing the women, heads cocked as they try to sniff out their prey. Xena darts over to the first, inverts the quill, and begins running the feathered end over the Cyclops' instep.

CYCLOPS
Stop that!

Grinning evilly, Xena only rubs harder, darting the feather all over his foot.

CYCLOPS
STOP THAT!!!

His threats are to no avail. Finally he lifts his foot up, grasping it with his hands as he begins laughing. Xena darts over to the other foot and applies the same treatment.

A second later, a wildly laughing Cyclops begins to fall.

GABRIELLE
Timber!!

The ground shakes hugely, and by the time the dust has cleared, the Cyclops has formed a "human" bridge across the water.

Gabrielle nods to her partner.

GABRIELLE
(cont'd)
I'm impressed!



CYCLOPS #2
GRAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!

XENA
You got somethin' to say?

CYCLOPS #2
That won't work with me!!

Xena grins again.

XENA
Maybe not, but this will.

Reaching into Gabrielle's bag, she pulls out a scroll, checks carefully to make sure it has no writing on it, and then opens it up fully. Holding it completely extended side to side, she runs over to the second Cyclops and begins to saw the sharp edge against his big toe.

CYCLOPS #2
No! Not a parchment cut!
I HATE THOSE!!!

Laughing, Xena just keeps up the torture until the second Cyclops joins his friend, spanning the river with his body.

With a pleased smirk, Xena returns to Gabrielle's side, handing her back the parchment and quill.

GABRIELLE
Bard tools as weapons.
Who knew?



XENA

I have....

GABRIELLE

Don't remind me.

(beat)

C'mon, we've got a
Solstice to celebrate.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF POTEIDIA - NIGHT

Xena and Gabrielle have finally arrived at their destination. The last hour of the journey has been taken up with Gabrielle's observations on Poteidia's unique Solstice Eve celebration. The whole town comes out on Solstice Eve and circles the largest tree in the town. The Solstice Tree, as it is called, is gaily decorated with ribbons, pinwheels and candles. The townspeople hold hands in a circle and sing Solstice carols as the night draws on.

As they arrive in the town, Xena notes that, indeed the townspeople are circled around a huge tree in the center of the town square. It doesn't seem like much of a Solstice Tree, however, given the only decorations are a few scattered, ugly, clumps of dead leaves barely hanging on to naked, peeling branches.

All the townspeople are staring up, and Xena looks up as well. She can't see anything amiss, and looks to Gabrielle with a question in her eyes. Gabrielle shrugs.

LILA

Gabrielle?? Gabrielle,
is that you?!?

GABRIELLE

Lila!!!

Xena gets left behind as Gabrielle races across the square and into her sister's wide, welcoming arms. Xena smiles as she watches the two women embrace tightly. She moves forward when Gabrielle finally pulls away and beckons her.



Lila looks a bit uncomfortable, given her part in Janos' plans against Xena.

Xena gives her a smile and with a gentle hand, pulls the older woman into a hug.

XENA

Happy Solstice, Lila.

LILA
(crying)
I'm so, so sorry,
Xena. I....

XENA
Shh. It's all right.
It's all right.

LILA
Xena, I....

Pulling away slightly, Xena cups Lila's chin and tilts her head up so that their gazes meet.

XENA
It's all right, Lila.
(beat, smiling)
You did what you thought you
had to do to protect Gabrielle.

LILA
I should have trusted you!!

XENA
You wanted what was best for
your sister. I can understand that.
(beat)
It's what I want, too.

LILA
Can you ever forgive me?

About to demur, Xena realizes how important this is to Lila, so she nods.

XENA
There's nothing to
forgive, but... yes.

A look of profound relief sweeping over her face, Lila pulls Xena back into a hug.

LILA
Thank you, Xena.
Thank you.

The women break apart as Gabrielle steps in, putting a hand on each of their shoulders.

GABRIELLE
(smiling)
Is this a private party,
or can I join too?

Laughing, Lila hugs her sister, and Xena completes the circle. They stand together for a long time before finally breaking apart.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

So, where's Sarah?

LILA

Over at the in-laws. They'll be back tomorrow morning.

GABRIELLE

I can't wait to see her.



Looking up, she sees that the rest of the townspeople are staring at them.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Oh! I guess we're holding up the festivities. What song are we gonna sing first?

Lila blushes a little.

LILA

No, not quite.

GABRIELLE

What?

LILA

This year's Solstice Tree is over there.

Lila points to a gaily decorated tree some fifty feet to the left.

GABRIELLE

(confusedly)

Then why is everyone standing around this one?

LILA

Well, you see, there's a little... problem.

GABRIELLE

Problem? What?

LILA

A cat.

(beat)

It's stuck way up at the top.

(beat)

And we can't get it down.

Gabrielle looks over to Xena, who shrugs.

XENA

I'll come down when
it's hungry.

LILA

It's been up there
for three days!

XENA

It'll come down
when it's cold, then.

LILA

Xena, it's supposed
to snow tonight.

XENA

So? It's got a fur coat.



GABRIELLE

Xena....

XENA

Gabrielle, if they want the cat,
they can climb up and get it.

LILA

Um... we tried that. No one's strong
enough to climb that high. There
aren't any branches low enough.

Xena and Gabrielle look at one another. Gabrielle's eyes get big and round, imploring in a way that she knows Xena can't resist.

Xena is wavering.

Suddenly, a little girl of no more than three steps forward, holding her mother's hand. Her eyes are as big and as round and as green as Gabrielle's as she looks up at the tall warrior.

LITTLE GIRL

Pwease?

Xena sighs.

XENA

Fine.

Walking over to the tree, she slips through the human chain, gently pushing the bystanders away. Taking a few breaths, she swings her arms, squats down and, releasing her battle cry jumps straight up. Catching the lowest branch a dozen feet over her head, she swings around and lands on it feet first.

She nimbly climbs the tree until she is at the very top. A tiny, orange ball of fur hisses at her, baring its fangs and puffing up to twice its size.

XENA

(cont'd)

Listen, buddy, this isn't exactly
Olympus for me either, so if you'll
just cooperate, I won't have
to turn you into a muff.

The cat hisses again and backs off a step.

XENA

(cont'd)

We're gonna have to do this
the hard way then, huh?

(beat, sotto voce)

Why am I not surprised?



She holds out her fingers, encouraging the cat to sniff them.

XENA

(cont'd)

C'mere, cat.

Another hiss. Another backpedal.

Xena reaches out to grab the feline, but the cat anticipates her move and darts backward.

Only to find itself in thin air.

XENA
(*cont'd*)
Oh, goody for me.

Reaching out again, she manages to snare the cat before it falls too far, but her movements shatter the already dead branch and she, too finds herself in thin air.

The cat, frightened out of eight of its nine lives, hooks into her with its claws. It leaves bloody scratches as it scrambles around for a safe perch on her body.

Grimacing, Xena allows herself to fall through the air, hitting and breaking branches on the way down, until she is finally able to grab the lowest, stoutest branch. She hangs on, swinging slightly, as the cat sinks its claws into her chest just above her armor.

Letting go of the branch, she makes a graceful landing on the firm ground. Plucking the cat off with an internal wince, she hands it to the little girl, who beams and cuddles the now purring and totally friendly little monster.

LITTLE GIRL
Tank you.

XENA
(*falsely smiling*)
You're welcome.

As the little girl toddles off, Gabrielle runs over and embraces Xena, then pulls back at the slight hiss from her partner's lips.

GABRIELLE
Xena! You're bleeding!

XENA
I'll live.



Gabrielle grabs her hand.

GABRIELLE
Come with me. Lila's staying with some friends of hers tonight, so we have the whole house to ourselves. Let me get you cleaned up and in bed.

Xena pulls back slightly.

XENA

I'm fine, Gabrielle. Let's just watch the Solstice festivities and I can clean up later, okay?

GABRIELLE

But you're bleeding.

XENA

I've had worse bug bites. C'mon.

GABRIELLE

Are you sure?

Xena smiles, touches her partner's face, and leans in for a kiss.

XENA

Very sure.

She takes advantage of their close proximity for another kiss, followed by a warm, loving embrace.

XENA

(cont'd)

Happy Solstice, Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE

(eyes shining)

Happy Solstice, Xena.

Thank you.

(beat)

For everything.



Hand in hand, Xena and Gabrielle slowly walk with the others until they have taken up places around the Solstice Tree. They join in as the townspeople sing on the longest night of the year.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FOUR

TAG

FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A freshly bathed, scrubbed, and medically tended Xena lays sprawled across Lila's rather large bed, smiling at her partner. Gabrielle, also freshly bathed and wearing a silken robe is standing by the fireplace. Her fingers move almost reverently across the gorgeous hand tooled leather scroll satchel Xena has just presented to her for Solstice. She looks over at Xena, eyes shining.

GABRIELLE

This is absolutely beautiful, Xena.

(beat)

You made it yourself, didn't you?

Xena nods.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

But how? When?

XENA

I have....

GABRIELLE

(laughing)

Yeah, yeah, I know.

(beat)

Thank you. I love it.

(beat)

I love you.



XENA

(grinning)

Double for me.

Placing the satchel on a sturdy table, Gabrielle walks toward the bed, one hand held behind her back.

GABRIELLE

Ready for your presents?

Xena sits up, her back resting against the wall.

XENA

Gimme.

GABRIELLE

Behave.

XENA

Or?

GABRIELLE

Just behave.

Xena pouts, then she grins and crosses her arms over her chest.

From behind her back, Gabrielle produces a scroll. Untying the leather ties, she opens the scroll and peeps at Xena over the edge.

XENA

A story?

GABRIELLE

Mm. More like a poem, I think.
Actually, I wrote it to be sung, but
I'll do us both a favor and just read it.

Xena laughs softly.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Ready?

XENA

Yup.



Gabrielle clears her throat, then begins to read.

GABRIELLE

My true love has so many skills
As she often says to me
But even with those many skills
She's harder on herself than she should be.
She thinks she's old and over the hill
But I know that's not the case
And since she just won't listen to me
I'll tell this to her face.

Gabrielle looks up smiling at Xena's gentle laughter.



GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

On the days before Solstice my true love fixed for me...
Twelve Nasty Bandits, Eleven Fleeing Sheep,
Ten Stranded Orphans, Nine Dancing Ladies,
Eight Milking Maidens, Seven Spelunkers Spelunking

Xena laughs out loud. Gabrielle grins widely, and continues.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Six Thieves A'Weighing

XENA

GROAN!!

GABRIELLE

(smirking... singing)

Five Wand'ring Minstrels!

XENA

(laughing hard)

Oh, gods.

GABRIELLE

Four Broken Wagons, Three Henchmen
Two Blind Cyclops

Gabrielle eyes Xena. Xena grins.

XENA AND GABRIELLE

(singing)

And a Cat Stuck Way Up In A Tree!

In the distance, they hear an outraged cat yowl, and they collapse against one another in laughter.

After a long moment, Xena pulls back, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes.

XENA

Thank you, my love. That's the best
Solstice present I've ever been given.

Kissing Xena on the cheek, Gabrielle rises.

GABRIELLE

You're welcome.

Placing the scroll on the nightstand, she turns again to Xena.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

So, do you believe me now that you're not old and you just need a little vacation?



Xena pretends to think about it.

XENA

Maybe.

GABRIELLE

What will it take to convince you?

XENA

Whadda ya got?

Smiling, Gabrielle steps back to the bed, presenting the tie to her robe.

GABRIELLE

You'll just have to open it and find out.



FADE TO BLACK.



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