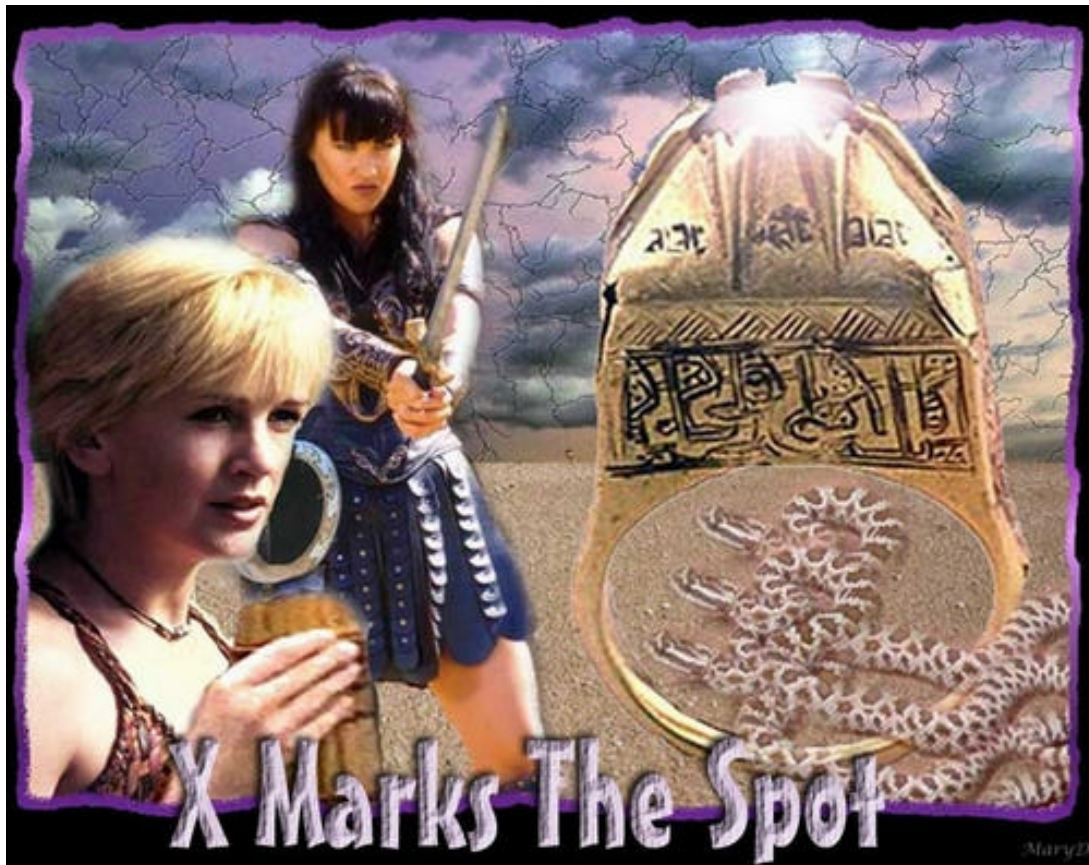


Xena: Warrior Princess - Subtext Virtual Season 9



Production #V906 – X Marks the Spot – Part 1

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TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. ROAD - EVENING

Xena and Gabrielle are walking hand in hand down the road. It is just wide enough for the two of them. The stately old trees that border it provide nice shade and a gentle breeze.

Argo II is walking along the side of the road slightly behind them, slowly munching the sweet grass she is finding there. The pace is leisurely and it's quite obvious that the trio isn't in anything that resembles a hurry.

GABRIELLE

Do you have hair?



Xena scratches her head and appears to think about it for a long moment before she answers.

XENA

Yes, in a manner of speaking.

Gabrielle narrows her eyes at Xena but continues to walk.

GABRIELLE

Hmm... long or short?

XENA

Both.

Now Gabrielle turns to gaze at Xena introspectively. Xena maintains a stoic expression, but her eyes are twinkling with mirth.

GABRIELLE

Both? What kind of animal
has long and short hair?

She holds up her hands when Xena opens her mouth to speak.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Wait... don't tell me. I still
have questions left to ask.

Xena grins at this pronouncement, but wisely does not say anything. Gabrielle looks around and notices it's later than she thought. The sun is starting to set and there is more of a night breeze picking up.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

You want to stop and make camp?

XENA

Nah, there's a town about a league up the road here. It has one of the best inns in the region and I thought I'd treat you to a warm bed and a hot bath.

GABRIELLE

(teasingly)

Are you starting to offend?

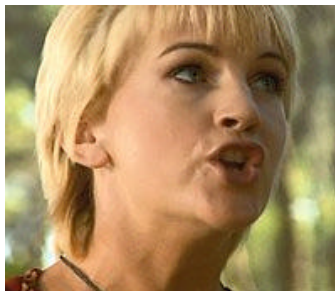
XENA

(teasingly)

Yeah, you're a little ripe.

GABRIELLE

Why you!



Xena anticipates Gabrielle's reaction and waits, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet. Gabrielle dashes over and tries to grab Xena, but she darts out of the way and the chase is on. They are both enjoying it immensely and Argo watches, seemingly amused by her humans.

CUT TO:

EXT. TOWN - EVENING

Entering into the town, Xena and Gabrielle find that there appears to be a festival of some kind in progress. The people are dressed in bright colors, eating, drinking and dancing in the streets. Everyone greets them with a smile. One young GIRL of about eighteen approaches them, she is carrying some wreaths made of bright flowers and others made of olive branches.

GIRL

Welcome to Argos....

The horse whinnies. Xena turns to the animal and whispers.

XENA

Don't get cocky. It was here before you were.

Gabrielle snickers and the girl looks a bit perplexed.

GABRIELLE

Her name is Argo.

GIRL

How grand! Well, welcome.

She places a flowered wreath on Gabrielle's head and gives her a kiss on the cheek. Then she looks at Xena and chooses an olive wreath. She settles it on her head but doesn't bother with the kiss.

GIRL

I am Areia and I welcome you to our city. Enjoy your stay and please partake in our festival.

XENA

What kind of festival is it?



AREIA

It is the festival of the people. King Nessos is a good and wise man and every year he holds this festival for us.

GABRIELLE

Well, that's a switch.

AREIA

Yes, we are very grateful to have such a man ruling us.

XENA

Thank you for your welcome. Are there any rooms available at the inn?

AREIA

Yes, of course. Just down the
road and on your right.
Perhaps you'll join in the quest.

GABRIELLE

Quest?

But the girl has walked away to greet the next person. Gabrielle looks up and smiles at Xena in her crown.

GABRIELLE

Wonder what that's all about.
Hey, it looks good on you.
And you didn't even have to
fight at the coliseum to get it.

Xena shrugs and takes Gabrielle by the elbow.

XENA

Bet we find out soon
enough. Come on.

FADE OUT.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

INT. INN - EVENING

Xena and Gabrielle enter the local inn, which is packed to the rafters with people. Everyone is talking and laughing and having a good time, but it is standing room only. They make their way through the crowd to the bar where the INNKEEPER looks up and greets them.

INNKEEPER

Welcome strangers. What can I do for you this fine night?

GABRIELLE

We need a room.

INNKEEPER

Ah yes, well with the festival taking place I only have one room left. It's not the best room in the place and I'd feel bad about charging you for it. Why don't you just go ahead and take it?
Third floor, last room on the left.

GABRIELLE

Why thank you.
That's very kind of you.

INNKEEPER

In the spirit of the festival.

As they walk away Xena watches everyone in the room and just shakes her head.

GABRIELLE

What's wrong?

XENA

These people are way too happy.



Gabrielle takes a good look around, noting that most everyone has one thing in common with everyone else there.

GABRIELLE

Nah, they're just drunk.

CUT TO:

INT.HALLWAY - EVENING

Finding the door to their room, Xena pushes the door open and stops dead before entering. The scowl on her face says more than words.

XENA

He wasn't kidding.



GABRIELLE

What?

Xena steps back and Gabrielle peers into the room which is just big enough to hold the small bed with just a few inches of room around it on either side-. It is debatable if the bed is large enough for one of them, much less both.

Their belongings will have to hang from the pegs jutting from the walls, and Xena looks doubtful as to whether or not the heavy saddlebags will stay without bringing the walls down around them.

GABRIELLE

Okay, it's small.

Xena raises an eyebrow and looks at Gabrielle incredulously.

XENA

Small? Gabrielle, we'll have to come out into the hall to change our minds.

Gabrielle laughs but tosses her bag on the bed.

GABRIELLE

We're only going to sleep in it Xena. It's not like we're going to host a festival party.

Xena agrees and tosses her saddlebags in before letting Gabrielle go in ahead of her.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - EVENING

The bag and saddlebags are now hanging precariously from the wall pegs on either side of the bed. Gabrielle lies down on the bed, because with her and Xena in the same room there just isn't a lot of choice.

GABRIELLE

Ugh, the mattress is lumpy.



XENA

Oh come on, how bad can it
be in this slice of Elysia?

Gabrielle scoots over to try and make room for Xena, discovering she can't roll off because the wall is holding her in place. She sighs and motions to the small space left.

GABRIELLE

See for yourself.

Lying down next to her partner, Xena wiggles around in the bed a little, trying desperately to find a comfortable spot. After a minute or so she stops and smiles at Gabrielle.

XENA

There ya go. You only had to find
the dents left by the last occupant.

GABRIELLE

Tell you what. You lay on the
mattress and I'll just lay on you.

Gabrielle climbs on top of Xena and smiles down at her. She wiggles a little getting into her favorite spot, and makes herself comfortable with a sigh.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Much better.

XENA

You're welcome to stay there,
but I have to tell you, the
mattress is not that bad.

GABRIELLE

That's okay... I really
prefer *this* mattress.

She pats Xena's chest.

Xena begins laughing so hard that Gabrielle and the bed are both shaking. Gabrielle joins in on the laughter and after a few seconds the bed collapses under them. They pause and look at each other and then break out into new gales of laughter.



CUT TO:

INT. INN - EVENING

They return to the common room to find it more crowded than before. Xena makes her way along the wall to the end of the bar where she manages to capture the innkeeper's attention.

She has to practically shout to be heard over the revelry.

XENA

Any chance of getting a hot bath?

INNKEEPER

Eventually, but there are about
a dozen people a head of you.

XENA

A hot meal?

INNKEEPER

Second seating is
in about two marks.

He sees the dark look on Xena's face and the rather disappointed look on Gabrielle's and makes another suggestion.

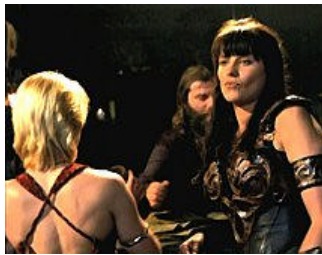
INNKEEPER

There are public baths two
streets over and a lot of vendors
for the festival have fine food
if you don't mind eating outdoors.

Xena and Gabrielle exchange a wordless look. Xena then turns to the innkeeper and nods.

XENA

Thanks. That'll do.



CUT TO:

EXT. STREETS - EVENING

Walking down the street, it's clear that the festival is in full swing, even more so than it had been earlier. There are bright colors all around them, and the people are singing and dancing. Music is playing from somewhere off in the distance.

Vendors are selling every manner of food and drink imaginable to man, and the smells are curiously enticing.

GABRIELLE

This is kind of nice. We
haven't been to a real
festival in a long time.

XENA

I think a break is in order.
We've been through
a lot this year.

GABRIELLE

I'm all for that. So what's
first, food or bath?

XENA

Food. Definitely food.

CUT TO:

EXT. VILLAGE - EVENING

Torches are being lit all around the village and the party shows no signs of stopping anytime soon. Xena and Gabrielle are sitting at a table eating from plates piled high with different types of food.

GABRIELLE

Well, you certainly get your money's worth in this village.

XENA

And the food is good too.
That's a switch.



As they eat, they notice a man dressed in armor take the makeshift stage that has been set up nearby. They watch as a crowd gathers around him. He has a staff in his hand and invites them to listen to him.

They turn their attention to listen as well, wondering if the man is some sort of bard.

MAN

Ladies and gentlemen, His Majesty, King Nessos of Argos, hopes all of you enjoy the festival. For those of you who are willing, King Nessos extends an invitation to join in the hunt for the Ring of Zeus.

There is an excited buzz at this pronouncement and the crowd becomes a bit more animated.

Xena and Gabrielle look at each other without speaking a word, then they rise from the table and move to where the man is standing. Others who have been listening to him file over to a table where two more guards are taking down names.

GABRIELLE

Excuse me?

MAN

Yes?

GABRIELLE

What is this about a ring?

MAN

You're not from around
here, are you?

XENA

Does that matter?

MAN

Not at all. I'm Ithlas, the
King's Chief Guard.

GABRIELLE

How do you do, Ithlas? I'm
Gabrielle and this is Xena.

His eyes widen and a smile comes across his face.

ITHLAS

THE Xena and Gabrielle?
From the legends?

XENA

The only ones we know of.

ITHLAS

King Nessos would be delighted
if you two would join in the
hunt this year. If you could
find the Ring of Zeus, you
would be rewarded well.

XENA

Tell us more about this ring.



ITHLAS

Actually, why don't you
accompany me to the castle?
I'm sure that King Nessos would
be happy to tell you more about it.

Xena's raises one brow as she considerers the request.

XENA

Can we get a bath?

ITHLAS

Absolutely. The king would
be delighted to have
two heroes such as
you as guests for
this year's festival.

Xena and Gabrielle look at one another for a long moment before reaching a wordless decision. There is something almost comical in their expressions, and Ithlas watches them in fascination.

GABRIELLE

We'll have to go back to
the inn to get our....

ITHLAS

Nonsense! I'll be happy
to send a page to
fetch your belongings.
Please come with me.

CUT TO:

INT. CASTLE - NIGHT

Ithlas leads Xena and Gabrielle into a large, well appointed throne room. He gestures to a table and chairs.

ITHLAS

Please wait here. I'll
let the King know
you're here.

Ithlas leaves and Xena starts snooping around the room. She's peeking around statues and looking at the weapons and the tapestries hanging on the walls.

Gabrielle takes a seat and drums her fingers on the table, making her own assessment of the room. It is comfortable without being ostentatious, and show signs of loving care and use.

Xena drops into a chair next to Gabrielle and props her head on her fist.

GABRIELLE

So, do you think there's
a ring of Zeus?

XENA

I'm sure there is.
Zeus was a show off.

GABRIELLE

There's an understatement.
But how do you suppose
it ended up here?



Xena rises and walks back towards the window, crossing her arms over her chest as she considers the question.

XENA

Actually we don't even know
there is a ring. I overheard
conversations in the square
that Nessos has been holding
this scavenger hunt for years
and no one has found it.

NESSOS

But there is a ring.

They both turn to face the King who has entered without them noticing. He traverses the room with arms extended in greeting.

NESSOS

Welcome to Argos. It is a
pleasure to have you here.

GABRIELLE

Thank you, Sire.

The King moves to his throne and takes a seat. He studies them for a moment, then gestures to Xena to resume her seat. She does so with a bit of reluctance.

Gabrielle folds her hand on the table and leans forward in a listening position. Xena crosses her long legs at the ankles, and folds her arms across her chest, effecting an air of bored indifference.

NESSOS

I assure you Xena, there
is a ring and it is here,
somewhere. When the Gods
were in fear of the twilight....

He pauses and waits for a reaction from Xena and Gabrielle that never comes. They both continue to watch and wait for him to continue.

NESSOS

(cont'd)

As they prepared for the end,
various Gods spread their treasure
around the known world. The
Ring of Zeus was left here.

XENA

And you're sure of this why?

NESSOS

Because I have seen it.

Xena's eyebrow arches, but that is the sole indication that she heard the King's words.

XENA

So why don't you go get it?

NESSOS

I can't.

Gabrielle's face creases in a frown.

GABRIELLE

Why not?



NESSOS

I tried, but despite my best efforts,
I don't know where it is. Every
time I think I have it figured
out, well, it's not there.

Xena looks at Gabrielle and then to Nessos. Not surprisingly, the more they learn, the less understandable it is becoming.

XENA

Then how did you see it?

NESSOS

As a boy, my education was conducted under the tutorship of Zeus' priests. I was in the temple the day he left the ring and instructions with his high priest Emanus. I only caught a glimpse, but I know it is real.

GABRIELLE

Why do you want it?

NESSOS

Because with the Ring of Zeus will give me the power to be a great king. A king of kings.

XENA

I need to talk to my partner for a moment.



NESSOS

Of course. Take your time.

Xena gestures to Gabrielle, and they move to the other side of the room for a more private conversation. Gabrielle leans her head in toward Xena to whisper softly.

GABRIELLE

What do you think?

XENA

I think we need to find this ring before he does. Nobody needs that much power, especially if they want it.

GABRIELLE

I can't argue with that logic.
Besides, there is something
almost... familiar about this
ring story... something
important. I guess we're in?

XENA

Yeah, I think so.

They both turn back to Nessos and smile.

XENA

It sounds... intriguing.

NESSOS

Excellent. Please allow me
to offer you the hospitality of
my home. Chambers have
been prepared and your
things are waiting for you.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is cozy. The bed is large and soft, and takes up the better part of one wall. Aside from the table with two chairs, there is also a low-slung couch in front of the fireplace. The bathing chamber is off to one side, emitting the delicate scent of jasmine. The sound of running water comes from that direction.

Gabrielle is seated at a table, peeling an apple with a small knife. Xena is tending to the fire, poking it and carefully putting on another log.

GABRIELLE

I need to do some research.
I am sure there is more to this
than just being able to become
a king of kings. Zeus would never
have made it possible for a
mortal to become so powerful
without some sort of catch.

XENA

Agreed. We were a little too
busy at the time of the twilight
to pay attention to all the stories
and rumors floating around then.

GABRIELLE

You're really worried about
this ring thing aren't you?
That it might be true.



XENA

Yeah, the gods themselves
were bad enough. Can you
imagine what the world would
come to if mortals possess the
things that hold that power?
(beat)

Can you imagine what the
world would have been like
if *I* had had that kind of
power before I met you?

GABRIELLE

You really think the world would
be that much different?

XENA

So much so that if the ring
does exist and we find it...
I'm going to destroy it.

GABRIELLE

Try to destroy it, you mean.
If it really is the Ring of Zeus,
destroying it may not be possible.

XENA

This is true, but if I can't destroy it, I
can certainly put it someplace no one
will ever find it. There's still an active
lava flow near the old Amazon village.

A knock on the door stops further conversation. Xena strolls over and pulls it open to find a small man who looks like he is about to have a nervous breakdown. He is holding an arm full of parchments.

Xena motions him in and he steps over the threshold... barely. She doesn't have room to close the door.

She looks at Gabrielle who shrugs in return.

MAN

Good evening Madam. I am Laramont, the King's Chief Advisor. I have brought you the map and the list for the hunt.

XENA

List?



LARAMONT

The scavenger hunt? The king indicated you had agreed to participate. People find different items that have a point value and the person with the most points get a prize.

XENA

Oh, right. The hunt... I'd forgotten about the list.

He looks at her strangely for a moment, then pulls two pieces of parchment from the stack and a sealed envelope from the King and gives them to Xena.

LARAMONT

Good luck.

Closing the door, Xena turns and holds up the papers. Gabrielle holds out her hand for them. Xena obliges and gives them to her, looking over her shoulder as Gabrielle opens them and begins to study them.

XENA

No wonder no one can find the ring. He treats it like a party. No focus.

GABRIELLE

Xena, I think his focus is on his people and not really the ring. When was the last time we were in a village where EVERYONE loved their king?

XENA

Good point.

GABRIELLE

So while everyone else is looking for all the other stuff, we're going to be finding the ring.

XENA

You know me so well.

GABRIELLE

(grinning)

After all these years?
I should.



Xena's attention shifts to the still running bath water then back to Gabrielle. She smiles invitingly.

XENA

Now, since we're not doing anything tonight, how about that bath? We're both overdue.

GABRIELLE

I thought you'd never ask.
Maybe I can remember what the stories said about that ring.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

EXT. VILLAGE - MORNING

The day is clear and warm with only the slightest hint of a breeze. Xena and Gabrielle watch as several groups of people gather and prepare for the hunt. There are people working in pairs and small groups, looking at their lists and collecting supplies. A man standing on the dais is giving last minute instructions to the participants.

Xena and Gabrielle are hanging back watching as everybody seems to get ready for the start of the competition. Gabrielle has a handful of grapes that Xena occasionally filches from.

There are a few people that Xena is keeping a close eye on, recognizing the type. She knows they could be trouble if their paths cross later.

She nudges Gabrielle, who is looking at a map that has been provided to all the teams. They didn't have a chance to study it much the previous evening.

GABRIELLE

Yeah?

Xena discretely points to three fellows standing near a wall and keeping to themselves, but watching everyone else carefully. Then she turns and glances away from them nonchalantly, apparently absorbing the words from the man on the dais.

XENA

Trouble.

Gabrielle watches them and nods, turning in a circle to take a good look around.

GABRIELLE

Yep.

XENA

We need to keep
an eye on them.

GABRIELLE

Or we could just take them
out of the picture now.

Xena's eyebrows shoot to her hairline, even as her face breaks into a grin.

XENA

Before they do anything?
Am I rubbing off on you?



GABRIELLE

Yes. To both. I mean come on
Xena. Look at them. They're
trying to decide who
would be easiest to rob.

Xena looks around again, seeing a second group of the same nature. She glances at all the people preparing for the hunt, noting that they are all well-dressed and sturdy.

XENA

Well, the pickings are
sure good in this town.

GABRIELLE

Yep... lots of choices.

XENA

And even though I am intrigued
by your idea, I think it's best to
let them tip their hand first.

GABRIELLE

(grinning unrepentantly)
If you insist.

XENA

Come on. Let's have
a look at that map
and put together a plan.

Taking a seat next to Gabrielle, she looks at the map. Gabrielle unfolds the third piece of parchment they were given the previous night, and shows it to Xena.

This is also a map, but it is more comprehensive than the hunt map, and has several markings on it that form an interesting pattern. There is a note written under it.

Gabrielle reads it and turns to Xena.

GABRIELLE

Here's the kicker. Apparently Zeus wanted to keep mere mortals from getting their hands on it, so the location of the ring changes from year to year. Maybe he had plans to reclaim it later.

XENA

Clever.

Gabrielle just shakes her head and points to a spot on the map.

GABRIELLE

This is where they THINK it was last year. According to these notes someone saw it but couldn't get close to it. These notes record all the sightings and I've found a pattern.

XENA

Well that's handy.

GABRIELLE

And if my calculations are right, it should be here.

She taps a spot on the map. Xena looks at it carefully.

XENA

It's a swamp.

GABRIELLE

Nobody said it was going to be easy.



XENA

Riiight. What was I thinking?

Gabrielle laughs and folds up the papers, putting them into a pouch at her waist.

Xena nods and stands up to see the first three men seemingly follow a man and his family as people move out to begin the hunt.

XENA

We need to take care
of something first.

GABRIELLE

Can you handle it? I have one
more place to check out.

XENA

Meet you at the swamp?



GABRIELLE

See ya shortly.

FADE TO:

EXT. ROOF TOP - MORNING

Xena is walking along the edge of a roof, watching as the three bandits get closer to the family.

One of the men reaches one of the children. Xena anticipates the move and executes a forward flip, kicking him away from the child and landing between the other two thugs. Her hands reach out in a quick efficient motion, each hand coming to rest behind the head of a thug. She quickly brings her hands and their heads together leaving them to slump in a pile at her feet.

The man she kicked away from the child struggles to his feet and comes rushing at her from behind. Xena hears his approach, grins, and forcefully lifts a fisted right hand to meet the third thugs face as he reaches her. She steps to the side, allowing him to join his partners.

CUT TO:

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

Gabrielle approaches the TEMPLE. It is unkempt and in disrepair and it's no longer clear exactly which deity the building was dedicated to. It is littered with leaves and the floors are cracked and broken in places. Gabrielle steps over fallen debris and ducks under crumbling pillars before reaching the altar area. Her eyes wander to the altar itself.

GABRIELLE

(mumbling)

If I was a priest trying
to hide something....

She moves around slowly, careful of all the marble fragments strewn liberally around the floor as she continues to search for clues. She vaguely wishes for a chance to study the murals at greater length while her eyes wander the room. Her hands lightly glide along the edges of the altar, searching for the trigger she is sure is there.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

C'mon. It's gotta be
here some... Gotcha!!

With a snick, the top slides away to reveal a hidden space on the right side of the altar. Gabrielle leans over cautiously to examine the marble tablet lying within the niche.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Well, let's just see what
this says, shall we?

MALE VOICE

Yeah, why don't we just do that?
Then we can go claim this treasure.

Gabrielle whirls in place, peering into the gloom. She can see the man's undisguised leer from where she is.

GABRIELLE

What makes you think
I'm here for treasure?

The man steps into the temple with two of his comrades. These are not the same men Xena and Gabrielle saw earlier, but their purpose is identical.

MAN

C'mon, blondie. We know
you're treasure hunting just
like the others. We saw you at
the starting line. We're just
gonna take what you've found.
You be nice, and we'll go on our way.

Gabrielle looks down at the tablet and then back at the man. She nods her head, and steps away from the altar to give herself a bit of breathing room. They don't seem to take the hint and step onto the dais. She takes another step away from them.

GABRIELLE

I don't want trouble. Just
take it and leave me alone.



The largest man reached his hand into the space and finds it caught in a vise grip. He screams as the trap crushes his bones. His two compatriots stand still, shocked by the turn of events.

MAN

GET HER!!!

The other two men approach her from either side, figuring to get the drop on her.

GABRIELLE

You really don't want to do this.

MAN #2

(leering)

Just stand still. This
won't hurt too much.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY

Xena dusts her hands off and glances at the bandits, now unconscious and tied up at her feet. The looks from the family watching her are filled with something akin to awe and they make her twitchy.

XENA

They won't be giving
you any more trouble.

The woman, a well-dressed middle class type citizen, swallows hard and nods her head. She clasps her children closer to her.

WOMAN

How can we repay you?

Xena looks around in vain for Gabrielle, hoping she will appear to do the sensitive chat thing with these people. Knowing that is impossible, she sighs and clears her throat to answer.

XENA

Just be more aware of your surroundings. There's a lot of bad characters around looking to take advantage of unsuspecting folks. Now, if you'll excuse me....



The twitchiness has become a full out roiling of her guts, and she takes off at a jog in the direction Gabrielle had gone in.

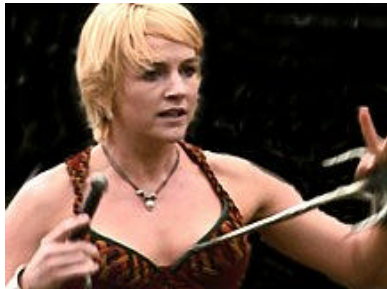
CUT TO:

INT. TEMPLE - SAME TIME

Gabrielle draws her sais and shrugs, shaking her head. The men continue to advance on her.

GABRIELLE

Don't say I didn't warn you.



She reverses the sai in her hand and swings her right hand with the hilt forward, aiming for the man's face closest to her. The crunching sound of the contact makes her wince a bit and the man stumbles backward, holding a now bleeding nose.

The second man moves closer, extending both arms to grab her in a bear hug. Gabrielle ducks his arms and brings her right hand forward into his groin as the left hand pushes him backward. She then tucks and rolls beneath the legs of the altar and comes up to a standing position.

Both men are now standing on the other side of the altar facing her. As they each move around opposite ends to attack her again, Gabrielle sees a long rod on the floor in front of the altar that once held a tapestry. She bends and replaces her sais, and in the next motion, picks up the rod firmly holding it against her body.

As they round the altar, she spins and connects with one, then the other, knocking them both to their knees. She flips the rod up and crashes the end of it first on the man on the right, then twists, reversing position and crashing the end on the other man. They both fall to the floor unconscious.

When it is all over, she looks at the heap of humanity on the floor, drops the rod and dusts her hands off.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

They never learn.

Gabrielle looks back at the man still trapped in the vise grip. He is trying to snarl at her, hoping to intimidate. The best he can do is grimace in pain.

Gabrielle peeks into the altar, wincing at the damage that's been done to his now mangled hand.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Easy way or hard way?

MAN

Bite me, bitch!

Gabrielle crinkles up her nose at the visual offered.

GABRIELLE

Ew! No thanks.

She looks at him contemplatively.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Ya know, you're just
not worth the effort and
I've got things to do.

She hits him in the back of the head with the butt of her sai. Then she moves him out of the way so she can study the tablet.

CUT TO:

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

Gabrielle emerges from the temple just as Xena arrives on the steps. Xena is only slightly winded, but she still stands still for a moment breathing.

GABRIELLE

Xena?



XENA

(sheepishly)

I finished, and thought I'd see how you were doing.

GABRIELLE

Checking up on me, huh?



She smiles at the blush that tints Xena's face. Xena smiles back at her with the crooked half-smile Gabrielle loves so much. Gabrielle takes Xena's hand and begins to lead her towards the swamp.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

I'm glad you're here. We've got quite the dilemma.

FADE TO:

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The woods are old, and the foliage is so thick that it is cool in spots. The trees have grown together over the paths, forming a canopy that keeps out most of the light and warmth.

As they approach the swamp, the ground begins to soften and grow mushy, and the air becomes dank and earthy.

XENA

So the power of the ring
really is Zeus' power?

GABRIELLE

That's what the tablet said.
And there was a warning...
but it was pretty vague.

XENA

(drolly)
Naturally.



GABRIELLE

I'm not sure it can be
destroyed, Xena. Or what the
consequences will be if we try.

Xena wraps an arm around Gabrielle and smiles at her affectionately.

XENA

Well, I guess we'll find
out when we find it.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP EDGE - DAY

Gabrielle and Xena arrive at the swamp to discover they are not the only ones there.
Apparently the King is hedging his bets and has several searchers hunting for the ring.

Everyone seems to be looking in the same general direction, and Xena notes that while each party is somewhat separate from all the others, no one seems to want to be out of sight completely.

XENA

This has all the earmarks
of a disaster.

GABRIELLE

Umm, and we're not
even to the hard part yet.



Xena makes a show of looking around in one direction while Gabrielle looks in the other. They count two couples and a trio of people studying their maps and making preparations to go deeper into the swamp.

XENA

We need to get the rest
of these people out of
here before we go after
the ring. Suggestions?

Gabrielle looks thoughtful before her lips crinkle into an evil grin and her eyes twinkle mischievously. Xena recognizes the signs and waits expectantly.

GABRIELLE

Yeah, you've heard of
the swamp monsters
that live here, right?

The expression on Xena's face is a combination of disbelief, surprise and mirth. Whatever she had been expecting to come from Gabrielle's mouth, this wasn't even on the list.

XENA

Um, no. But I'm sure you'll
be happy to share that
with me, won't you?

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP INTERIOR - DAY

It is darker here. The trees are thick and covered with moss. The ground is slick and treacherous, and several people show signs of having fallen. By unspoken consent, everyone is traveling fairly close together. Gabrielle decides to use this factor to her advantage.

Gabrielle looks around pointedly, surveying her surroundings. She clutches at Xena's bracer when she hits an unexpectedly slippery patch, grateful for the steady support she feels under her hands. She draws a deep breath and catches Xena's eye.

GABRIELLE

Ya know, Xena, when we were at the Academy there was an entire section dedicated to monsters the gods created for their amusement.



XENA

Oh?

GABRIELLE

Yep. The Chimaera was a fearsome beast that was part lion, part goat and part dragon. It breathed fire. The Gryphon was another. It was a combination of a lion and an eagle, and was used to protect the gods' treasures.

A screech at that moment coming from deeper in the swamp makes one couple turn and flee. Gabrielle is hard pressed to keep from smiling. She continues talking, knowing she has everyone's attention.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

We know about Achindnea from Iolaus' stories. Hercules defeated her and her children. And of course there was Medusa.

One of the women listening speaks up.

WOMAN

Perseus defeated Medusa, didn't he?

GABRIELLE

Yes, he did. But Medusa was only one of many of the gorgons created, and the scrolls said that the worst of them live in the swamps.

Her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. The woman's eyes grow wide. The sound of hissing makes her swallow loudly. Gabrielle looks around, and the woman does the same.

WOMAN

You don't suppose....?

The woman straightens and joins her compatriots, slogging back towards the edge of the swamp. She turns after having moved a couple steps and motions to her companions. It doesn't take much for the rest of the people to join her.

WOMAN

(cont'd)

I don't think there is enough
reward in the world for this.

C'mon. We can win the
hunt with what we have. We
only have a few more things
on the list left to find.

Xena and Gabrielle watch as the five turn and swiftly go back the way they came. They don't even glance back in their haste to get out of the swamp. Gabrielle waits until Xena's hand falls on her shoulder before bursting into laughter.

GABRIELLE

Do I wanna ask
how you did that?

Xena looks at her, batting her eyelashes and blinking her innocent blue eyes.

XENA

I have no idea what you're
talking about, Gabrielle.
I was just listening to you
talk about the monsters.



Gabrielle rolls her eyes, but continues to wonder.

GABRIELLE

Uh huh.

XENA

C'mon. We've still got a lot of ground to cover and we're burning daylight.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - MID AFTERNOON

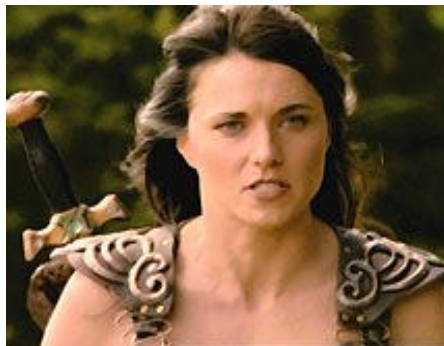
It has been quite a trek, and though not filthy, neither of them are as fresh as daisies either. The gloom of the surrounding area isn't helping matters either.

The sunshine is quite bright when Xena and Gabrielle come to a sudden break in the trees. They take a moment or two to allow their eyes to adjust. What greets them makes their eyes widen in disbelief.

Before them is a flat expanse of sand, and beyond that, a small island. On the island there is a tree, and in the tree near the top rests what appears to be the ring... on the largest snake either of them have ever set eyes on.

XENA

It's never easy.



GABRIELLE

Of course not. We wouldn't know what to do if it was easy.

They both look at the sand then at each other.

XENA

Odds?

GABRIELLE

No way. I know better.

Xena looks around for a long moment before finding what she needs. She picks up a rock the size of her fist and hurls it into the middle of the sand. They wait for all of about five seconds before it begins to slip below the surface.

XENA

Quicksand.

GABRIELLE

Great. Now what?

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

EXT. SWAMP - MID AFTERNOON

The discussion has gone back and forth on the best way to approach this new set of circumstances. Xena is scouring the surrounding area for vines, but there aren't any of an appreciable length within reasonable walking distance.

Gabrielle is pacing back and forth. Without warning, she drops her bag, and begins digging frantically through it.

GABRIELLE

(mumbling)

I know it's here.

XENA

(distractedly)

What? Did you say something?

GABRIELLE

Ah hah!

Gabrielle holds up an object. It is her old pan flute. Xena flinches involuntarily, then puts on a fake smile. Her ears still ring at the thought of Gabrielle's early efforts with the instrument.

XENA

That's nice, but, um... how is that going to help us get over there?



She points to the tree where the snake still sits eyeing them warily. Gabrielle laughs.

GABRIELLE

It's not. It's going to bring the snake to us.

Xena turns and fixes her with a perplexed stare.

XENA

How so?

GABRIELLE

You remember India? And those snake charmers? Well, one of the girls in Gurkhan's harem taught me how to do it.

XENA

Do tell. Another of *your* many skills, hmm?

Gabrielle blushes.

XENA

(cont'd)

Ya know, Gabrielle. He's not gonna get far before he starts sinking.

GABRIELLE

I figure he can get far enough for you to lasso him out of there.

Xena thinks about this for a moment, before nodding. She figures her ears will recover with time.

XENA

Good plan. Go for it.

Gabrielle puts the flute to her lips and begins to blow. The snake raises its head, fixing its eyes firmly on Gabrielle and the sound. Slowly, she beckons it with her music, and he makes his way down the tree.

The tempo and melody changes slightly, and he wavers. Another change, and he slides across the sand more rapidly than expected, and is halfway to them.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - XENA CLOSE-UP

We see Xena's eyes widen. Her mouth drops open in surprise.

XENA

I think we have a problem.



CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP – GABRIELLE CLOSE-UP

Gabrielle's eyes widen as well. For a moment, she almost drops the flute as her surprise makes her gasp. She resumes playing almost immediately when she sees the snakes' reaction to the lack of music.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP – QUICKSAND

The snake is moving so rapidly across the sand that there is no time for him to sink. His weight doesn't remain in any one place long enough.

Worse still, the single snake has become several, and even as we watch they continue to multiply.

XENA

And the hits just
keep on coming.

She turns to Gabrielle

XENA

(cont'd)

You think this is what the
vague warning was about?

Gabrielle manages to shrug her shoulders while she continues to play her flute. Xena removes the chakram from its clip and hurls it towards a section of incoming snakes. She neatly decapitates them, but more spring up in their place.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - DRY GROUND

Xena and Gabrielle are completely surrounded now, though the snakes have left a two foot berth around them. Xena has quickly given up the idea of slaughtering them, as she cannot kill them faster than they can multiply.

Gabrielle is growing winded from her constant playing, and Xena decides to go for the ring. At her first movement towards him, the original snake lunges for her, nearly impaling her hand with his fangs.

XENA

(cont'd)

Well, that's not gonna work.
I wonder.... Gabrielle,
do you trust me?

Gabrielle gives Xena an incredulous stare as if to say, "You're kidding me, right?" but she continues to play. Xena takes that as the confirmation she needs and nods.

XENA

(cont'd)

When I say so, I want you
to stop the music. All right?



Gabrielle nods, and they slowly rotate around again until they are standing back to back and Xena is facing the original snake. She pulls a dagger from her boot.

XENA

(cont'd)

Steady... steady... NOW!

The sudden cessation of music stuns the reptiles for the seconds Xena needs to gain the advantage. With a lightening swift move, her dagger is embedded in the heart of the snake, pinning it to the ground. The snake screams; the remainder of the snakes simply vanish.

For a long moment, only the sound of Gabrielle's breathing is heard.

GABRIELLE

How did you know?

XENA

I didn't. But it was
worth a shot.

Gabrielle's eyes widen as she realizes the implications if Xena had guessed wrong.

GABRIELLE

Good aim.

They both look at the dead snake. The ring is about a third of the way up his body, and the flesh on either side is much thicker than the space where the ring is. They just look at each other.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Ya know, I'm almost afraid to know what will happen if we touch it, to say nothing of cutting it in half.



XENA

Umm, I had the same thought. But we're not gonna get that ring without doing both of those things, ya know.

GABRIELLE

You want to hold or cut?

XENA

You hold. I'll cut.

GABRIELLE

Works for me.

Gabrielle takes hold of the snake just below the head and close to, but not touching the ring. She flinches just slightly at the cold, clammy feel of the dead reptile. Her eyes meet Xena's and wince reflexively.

Xena takes her second boot dagger and slices the snake through, turning her head as a noxious smell assaults her nose.

XENA

Damn, that stinks!

(beat)

Gabrielle?

Gabrielle doesn't answer. Xena holds her breath and turns to ask again. Gabrielle is lying crumpled beside the snake's body, apparently having passed out from the fumes.

XENA

(cont'd)

Gabrielle!!

Xena moves over to Gabrielle, feeling for a pulse and patting her face gently to bring her around. Soon she is rewarded with a fluttering of eyelashes and a soft moan.

XENA
(*cont'd*)
Hey, you okay?



Gabrielle glances around trying to get her bearings. She smiles at the concern reflected in Xena's eyes. She sits up on her elbows.

GABRIELLE
Ow. Yeah, I'm fine.
Gods, what was that smell?

Xena nods back towards the snake's body, still running her hands lightly along Gabrielle's reclining body.

XENA
Our friend. Guess Zeus was
serious about wanting to keep
humans away from his treasure.

GABRIELLE
(*snorting*)
No wonder it was always moving. You
think he would have been more careful
in hiding it though. I mean, the pattern
is pretty easy to figure out.

XENA
Well, I never said he was terribly bright.
Wait here a minute. I need to get
the ring so we can get outta here.

Xena crosses back over to the snake, and uses the dagger to slip the ring off the snake's body, watching in fascination as the snake disappears into nothing.

GABRIELLE
First time I ever saw a god
clean up after themselves.

Xena chuckles.

She looks at the ring closely, noting that it seems rather ordinary. It is gold in color with slim lightening bolts of silver on either side. The stone is a green not quite the shade of Gabrielle's eyes, but beautiful nonetheless.

XENA

Let me just put
this sucker away....

GABRIELLE

(thoughtfully)
You probably shouldn't
touch the ring directly.

XENA

(teasingly)
Yeah, that would be the
perfect end to this day....
Xena, Destroyer of
Nations on the loose.

GABRIELLE

Not funny, Warrior Princess.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - DAGGER CLOSE-UP

We watch in slow motion as the ring slides down the blade, missing the open pouch and falling into Xena's outstretched palm.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - GABRIELLE CLOSE-UP

Gabrielle sees the ring headed for Xena's hand and jumps up from the ground. We watch in slow motion again as she makes a leap for Xena's body.

GABRIELLE

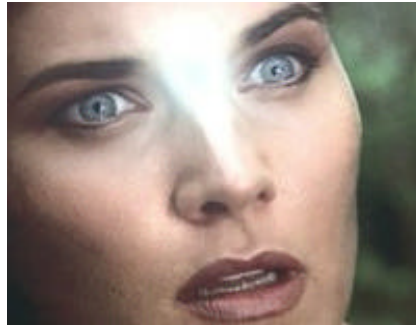
NOOOOOOOO!!!



CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - XENA CLOSE-UP

Xena's head swivels in slow motion towards Gabrielle when Gabrielle starts to move towards her. She hears the beginning of her scream just as the ring touches the skin of her hand.



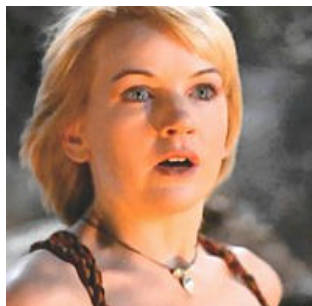
CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - XENA AND GABRIELLE

When the ring lands in Xena's hand, lightening shoots down from the clear blue sky. Gabrielle is blown back several paces. Instinctively, she shields her eyes from the brightness, but even so, it is several moments before she can see.



When her vision clears, Gabrielle sits up and looks around. She is alone.



GABRIELLE

Xena??

Gabrielle stands and runs back to the spot where Xena had last been standing. There is nothing there, save a black burn mark.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

XENA?!?!



FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. SWAMP - SAME TIME

Gabrielle is pacing, and muttering under her breath.

GABRIELLE

There are just some days
it doesn't pay to get
out of bed in the morning.

She runs her hands through her hair, distraught.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

C'mon, Gabrielle. Think. There
has to be an explanation for
all this, and a way to fix it.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNDISCLOSED LOCATION - DAY

Xena sits up and looks around, disconcerted. Everything has a familiarity, but at the same time, it feels completely foreign.

She has been here before, but when? If she could place the time, she might be able to place the location. She wonders why she is suddenly aching.

XENA

Gabrielle??



The ring has fallen from her grasp and is lying neatly beside her on the ground. She looks at it disdainfully.

XENA

(cont'd)

Why do I get the feeling *you*
are probably responsible for
whatever is going on here?

Pulling the dagger from between her breasts, she retrieves the ring from the ground and drops it in her pouch. Then she straightens and takes another good look around.

She is in some sort of meadow. There are trees in the distance and the sounds of birds and wildlife, but the place seems relatively uninhabited otherwise. It looks nothing like the swamp she clearly remembers being in before.

XENA

(cont'd)

Well, let's go see if we can
find Gabrielle. Or at least
figure out where we are.

Xena looks again, and notices a break in the tree line. She chooses that as a direction and begins a slow jog towards what appears to be a heavily trafficked road.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - LATE AFTERNOON

Gabrielle is making her way slowly out of the swamp. It is growing increasingly darker, and it is slowing her down. It helps that she is following the path they made coming in, but it is still treacherous.

GABRIELLE

Damn, Xena! Couldn't it
be easy for a change?

She steps from the swamp with a sigh of relief, and shakes the mud from her boots, turning towards the temple.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Let's see if we can
find some answers.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY - DAY

Xena recognizes the city. It is the same as she remembers it, and yet different too.

It is walled and the parts that are visible are scrupulously neat. A smell wafts downwind causing Xena's nose to crinkle in distaste. Apparently the not-so-well-to-do areas exist out of sight.

The banners flying look all too familiar, and she shudders with the chill that runs up her spine. This is not the Greece she knows.

XENA

Corinth?

She hears travelers approaching, and instinctively ducks out of sight.

It is a royal caravan. It flies the same banners that flutter above the city walls. There are six guards dressed in royal livery riding fore and aft of a finely crafted carriage. It stops and a personage emerges. Xena stares.

It is herself, yet not. The beautiful blue robes are silk from Chin, and the golden phoenix headpiece identifies her as a ruler of some sort. A page announces her as she approaches the dais.



PAGE

All hail the Conqueror!

CROWD

Hail, Xena! Conqueror of Nations!

XENA

Conqueror?!?



CUT TO:

INT. ARGOS TEMPLE - EARLY EVENING

It is quite dark inside the temple, and Gabrielle has had to light several torches left in the few remaining walls. She carries one with her as well.

Gabrielle is standing at the altar looking for a second tablet. The men are gone, though one did leave a bit of skin and blood behind when he loosened himself from the vice. She crinkles her nose up slightly in disgust.

GABRIELLE

(muttering)

There has to be something else...
something I missed the first time.



She slowly walks around the altar area, occasionally running her fingers over the walls. She is looking for a second hidden trigger.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

You'd think they'd have gotten
tired of the games eventually.

She pushes against the wall, hoping something will give. A step on a corner tile causes it to drop slightly and she just shakes her head.

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

No, I guess not.

She watches as a panel in what remains of the wall groans and shifts. Picking the rod from the floor where she dropped it earlier, she carefully prods the area. Nothing snaps or hisses or crawls out, but a small parchment falls to the floor. Gabrielle looks at it speculatively.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORINTH - DAY

The population of Corinth is turned out for judgment day. The smell of fear is choking, and it is deathly silent except when the conqueror speaks.

Xena has "borrowed" a cloak to hide her identity and watches as her doppelganger doles out judgments. Xena's jaw tightens with each passing sentence. The cold deadness of the Conqueror's blue eyes astounds her. The fact that the people around her accept the severity without question is simply unnerving.

XENA

(muttering)

This is what it is to have everything?
Cold... calculating... heartless??
This is wrong. This is not how
things are supposed to be.

She has slowly been making her way around the edges of the crowd, and is now standing very close to the temple.

The edifice is quite imposing. Clean lines and very well kept. Apparently the gods here have not suffered the Twilight.

XENA

(cont'd)

Time to see if we can
get some answers.

FADE TO:

INT. CORINTH TEMPLE - DAY

A majority of this temple is reserved for Ares, but there is a small space partitioned off for the other gods. Xena makes her way into that alcove. She looks around with interest.

The sole priest for this area looks up in surprise at the hooded figure.

She walks over to stand next to the man, keeping her hood firmly in place.

XENA

What can you tell me
about the Ring of Zeus?



The priest grabs her by the arm and hisses at her in a harsh whisper.

PRIEST

How do you know about that?
Such things are not spoken
of in the Conqueror's city!!

She jerks her arm from his grasp, resisting the urge to backhand him into next week.

XENA

But....

PRIEST

NO!! She is powerful enough.
The Conqueror does not need
the key to ultimate power.

XENA

She doesn't have it?

The priest is vehement in his protestations

PRIEST

NO! Life would be unbearable then.
It is hard enough to live with what
she does as Ares Chosen. She
gave up her heart to be where she is.
The ring would take her soul.

XENA

What if mortal hands obtain it?

The man shakes his head.

PRIEST

It would be best for the
world if it were destroyed.

XENA

(glaring)

Why am I sensing a 'but' here
that I'm just not gonna like?

PRIEST

Because there is no way to destroy it.
The best we can hope for is to keep it
hidden and away from human hands.

He pushes her from the alcove.

PRIEST

(cont'd)

You must go now, and
NEVER speak of it again.

The priest leads her to the door and watches her exit. Then he goes back to the alcove and kneels in prayer.

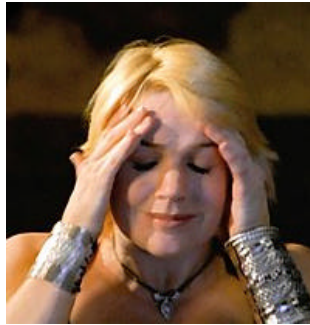
Xena steps from the darkness of the temple into the sudden brightness of day. She blinks against the harsh light, then again as she witnesses the scene playing out before her.

XENA
(*whispering*)
Gabrielle??

CUT TO:

INT. ARGOS TEMPLE - EARLY EVENING

Gabrielle is sitting on the dais steps, holding her head in her hands.



The parchment rests in her lap while she rereads it yet again, trying to make sense of what she is seeing.

GABRIELLE
The Cronos stone?

She slaps her hands on her thighs and stands, catching the scroll as it falls. She walks to the front of the altar.

GABRIELLE
(*cont'd*)
Well, let's see what we
can do to fix this.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORINTH - AFTERNOON

Judgment is continuing, and Xena cringes as she sees a familiar form step up to the dais defiantly.

XENA
(*harshly whispering*)
NO! No, Gabrielle!!

She watches as her partner's doppelganger makes a stand against the Conqueror. She is torn between the need to intervene and the knowledge that the only way to make things right is to get back home.

XENA

(cont'd)

The Conqueror didn't just give up her heart... she... *I* would have given up my soul had I followed this path. And how many more lives would that have destroyed... my own included?



She watches Rebel Gabrielle being placed on the cross to be crucified. Then she sees the Conqueror call for her legs to be broken and flinches.



XENA

(cont'd)

No one should have this much power.
Especially someone as evil as I am here.
I need to make things right. But first....

Xena reaches for her chakram, but is not quick enough to rescue Rebel Gabrielle before her legs are broken. Rebel Gabrielle screams in agony, and the tears flow silently down Xena's face.

XENA

(cont'd)

I will fix this, my bard. I'll make things right for you here before I go home.



Xena turns and moves back toward the temple, knowing she can accomplish nothing till the sun sets. She needs to speak to the priest again.

CUT TO:

INT. ARGOS TEMPLE – EARLY EVENING

Gabrielle has searched the temple quite thoroughly and has started a small fire. She moves back into a hidden alcove, and we hear the sound of running water.

She closes her eyes for a moment.



Then they pop back open abruptly, and she shudders, fear etched into the lines of her face. She grabs herself in a tight hug and whispers....

GABRIELLE

(cont'd)

Xena, be careful, please?

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FOUR

To be continued....

DISCLAIMER

No snakes were harmed in the production of this motion picture, so Xena will have to wait a while longer for those fashionable snakeskin boots.