

SHIPPER SEASON EIGHT

“The Challenge”

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Logline

When Xena and Gabrielle head back to the Amazon lands in search of the bandits who raided Darion's village, a young, ambitious warrior shows up and is eager for a fight. But it isn't Xena who he wants to prove himself to—it is Gabrielle who he desires to cross swords with.

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TEASER

FADE IN

Xena riding through a densely wooded forest. Darion is seated in the saddle behind her. Gabrielle can be seen to the rear, guarding their backs. Xena and Darion ride in silence a few moments before he yanks on her scabbard to get her attention.

XENA (twists her head to look back at him):
What now?

Darion lifts himself to whisper in her ear.

XENA:

Again? (he nods frantically and with a sigh, she slips down out of the saddle and holds out her arms, lifting him to the ground.) Okay--but this is going to be the last stop for awhile. Make it last.

DARION:

I will! Promise, Xena!

Darion runs off into the bushes and Gabrielle comes up alongside Argo. She glances in the direction that Darion has run and frowns with a shake of her head. Her reaction doesn't go unnoticed by Xena.

XENA:

What?

GABRIELLE (a little annoyed):

Xena, I wish you wouldn't always let him run off by himself like that.

XENA:

What do you want me to do? Follow him into the bushes?

GABRIELLE:

You could at least have taken a look before you let him run in there. How do you know there isn't a--

XENA:

Gabrielle, you're way too overprotective of Darion and it's not going to do either one of you any good. You're going to end up smothering him--or...

Darion comes out of the bushes.

DARION (cheerily):

All done!

Xena and Gabrielle glare at one another a moment. After a long, tense moment, Xena turns away.

XENA:

Okay. Let's get moving. (she takes a step towards Darion in order to help him up into her saddle)

GABRIELLE:

Darion--come ride with me for a while.

Xena shakes her head in disapproval as Gabrielle lifts Darion into the saddle in front of her.

CUT TO

The three of them riding through the forest. Darion is quiet, clearly thinking of something.

DARION:

Won't the Amazons be mad that you're taking me back to their land?

GABRIELLE:

Of course not! Their queen is a very special friend of yours.

DARION:

You mean Eve, right? Eve is really nice--but I like Klymene more. She plays with me. (he is quiet a moment) Gabrielle, do you...do you think we're going to find Lykia?

GABRIELLE:

I'm sure we will. That's why we're going out there, remember? We'll track down the bad people who took her and then we'll find out where Lykia is.

XENA (gently):

Would you be able to help us, Darion? Can you tell us anything about the man that took your sister?

Darion bites his lip, the memories clearly still terrify him. Finally, he screws up his courage enough to speak.

DARION:

He was wearing a mask.

XENA:

A mask? What kind of--?

GABRIELLE (pointing up at the sky):

Look, Darion! That cloud looks just like a fish. Don't you think so?

Darion squints up at the sky.

DARION:

Where? I don't see...

GABRIELLE (points):

There! See?

DARION (laughing):

That's not a fish! That's a bear!

Xena sighs in frustration. It's obvious she's had this conversation before--with the same amount of success. She brings the reins down on Argo and takes off.

CUT TO

Sunset at a small camp. Xena is there talking with Eve and a golden-haired girl of about fourteen--it's Klymene, the orphaned Amazon girl Eve befriended in "Sisterhood." As Gabrielle approaches, Eve turns and we can see that she is wearing the Queen's necklace that was Gabrielle's.

EVE (waves enthusiastically):

Gabrielle!

CUT TO

A young man who seems to be in his early twenties, wearing a warrior's outfit of tan leather and a headband on his shoulder-length brown hair, is riding through another part of the Amazon forest. He stops, hearing a sound, and looks around. Everything is silent except for the rustle of trees and the chirping of birds. The young man nudges his horse in the sides and starts riding again when two dark shapes swoop down from the trees and fall upon him, taking him down to the ground.

The young man leaps to his feet and finds himself facing two tall Amazon scouts, one blonde, the other with light red hair. He draws his sword; the Amazons do likewise. He strikes and the two women parry his blows. After a few moments, he finds himself focused on sparring with the redhead while the blonde puts her sword to his neck.

AMAZON #1 (the blonde):
Give it up.

The young man glares at the women, then lowers his sword.

CUT TO

Night has fallen. Xena, Eve and Gabrielle sit at the campfire. In the background, Klymene and Darion are playing a game. A faint "Hey! No fair!" can be heard from Darion.

EVE:
Three days ago there was a raid on another village about half a day's ride from here.

XENA:
Then tomorrow that's where we're headed. They might be able to put us on the trail of the gang that's behind this.

The sound of rustling underbrush and footsteps rapidly approaching can be heard. Gabrielle leaps to her feet, drawing her sais. Xena takes a moment longer to react. She jumps up but her sword remains sheathed. Eve holds up a hand.

EVE:
It's all right! It's just Algiz and Urd, the scouts.

The two Amazons we saw before appear out of the underbrush; the young man walks before them at the points of their swords.

ALGIZ (the blonde Amazon):
Look what we caught.

XENA (looks him up and down):
What's this? A poacher?

URD (shakes her head):
I don't think so. From the footprints, we think he was tracking you.

Xena's eyes widen slightly at the knowledge that she was unaware of someone following her.

Algiz gives the man a shove and he falls to his knees with a grunt.

TAPHIUS:
A poacher? (he sniffs indignantly) I happen to be a warrior!

XENA:
A warrior? (she smirks) What kind of warrior allows himself to be taken without a scratch on him?

TAPHIUS:

The kind that doesn't waste his time fighting second-rate opponents.

GABRIELLE:

Who are you?

TAPHIUS:

I'm-- (he shifts in order to stand but Urd presses the point of her sword into his shoulder. He glances up at her and frowns.) Can someone call these two off?

EVE (to Algiz and Urd):

It's all right.

The two scouts step back--however, they keep their swords trained on him. Taphius stands and casually brushes himself off.

TAPHIUS:

The name is Taphius. I've been trailing you since Corinth.

XENA:

Why?

TAPHIUS:

Because there's no better way to prove myself than to fight and defeat a great warrior.

XENA (rolls her eyes):

So that's what this is all about--another warrior wannabe trying to build his reputation on my grave. (her lip curves scornfully) Trust me, Taphius, the only grave you'd be digging is yours. Forget it.

TAPHIUS (blinking in confusion):

You? I'm not here to challenge you, Xena. It's Gabrielle I want to fight.

Close-up of Gabrielle's stricken face as we:

FADE OUT

ACT ONE

FADE IN

Same scene as before. Gabrielle stares at Taphius in amazement. The camera pans over the shocked faces of Xena, Eve, and Klymene, and Darion's excited face, before panning back to Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE:

You want to fight *me*?

TAPHIUS:

Yeah. See, a fellow from my town was in Bellerophon's army. He came back with all sorts of stories about how you and your Amazons fought them. You made quite an impression. (Gabrielle stares at him with obviously mixed feelings, both pleased and distressed) And then I started hearing other stories about you. (awed) They say that in Jappa, you killed the warrior who defeated Xena herself!

XENA (through clenched teeth):

It was a little more complicated than that.

TAPHIUS:

Oh, I don't mean to question your greatness, Xena. But I'm a forward-looking kind of fellow. Gabrielle...you might say she's the Warrior Princess of the future--the heir to your mantle. She's the one I want to match swords with.

GABRIELLE (with a somewhat forced smile):

I'm flattered, Taphius. But I'm afraid I'll have to decline your offer.

TAPHIUS (piqued):

Why? I'm not good enough for you?

GABRIELLE:

I don't believe in fighting--without a reason. Proving something to yourself is not a good enough reason.

TAPHIUS:

Maybe you're just chicken. (mocking) I mean, if I beat you, that would be a pretty embarrassing one to put down in your scrolls, huh? (looks dreamily into the distance) Up-and-coming young warrior defeats famous Battling Bard...

GABRIELLE (sighs):

All right--you go on and believe that if it makes you feel better. Sorry, Taphius--I'm not going to play your game.

TAPHIUS (juts out his chin):

Maybe I'm not going to give you much of a choice!

Gabrielle rolls her eyes.

XENA (with amusement and a touch of pique):

We're wasting time here. We've got work to do before up-and-coming young warrior here packs me off into retirement.

EVE:

Right. We need to get some sleep. (to Algiz and Urd) Make sure to escort him off our lands.

ALGIZ:

Get moving, mighty warrior.

EVE:

Once he's off our lands, give him back his horse and his sword. And make sure he's not hurt.

TAPHIUS (turns his head as the Amazons lead him off):

Don't you worry, I'll be back! I'm not going away until I get what I want!

The Amazons lead Taphius away. Xena, Gabrielle and Eve stare after him.

DARION:

Gabrielle?

GABRIELLE (turns to him, concerned):

What is it, sweetheart? That man didn't scare you, did he?

DARION (looks worried):

What if he tells everyone you're chicken because you didn't wanna fight him?

GABRIELLE (comes up to Darion and sits down on her haunches in front of him, putting her hands on his shoulders):

Don't you worry about that, Darion. You should never do something just because you're afraid of what someone else might say about you.

DARION:

You mean even fighting?

GABRIELLE:

Especially fighting.

DARION (doesn't look too convinced):

But you fight, don't you?

GABRIELLE:

When I have to. A real warrior is someone who knows when to fight and when not to fight.

DARION (looks at her thoughtfully, then shrugs):

I guess it's okay. If he goes around telling people you're chicken, no one's gonna believe him anyway, right?

GABRIELLE (chuckles and pinches his cheek):

Right.

XENA (looks at them, smiling):

All right, that's enough philosophy for now. Time to call it a night.

CUT TO

Daytime. Xena, Gabrielle (with Darion in the saddle), Eve and Klymene are riding through a grassy field. A village is visible in the distance. As they pass by a grove, Gabrielle looks thoughtfully at Darion and then at Xena, and slows down her horse.

GABRIELLE:

Xena...

Xena looks at her and slows down as well; Eve and Klymene follow suit.

GABRIELLE:

I think maybe Darion and Klymene should wait for us here.

XENA:

Are you sure? Darion might be able to help us--

DARION (eagerly):

I want to help!

XENA (off Gabrielle's pleading look, sighs):

Okay. (to Klymene) I guess you two can stay behind and play here.

KLYMENE (indignant):

Play? I'm not a baby--I want to help you track down the gang! (Eve leans over and whispers something to her; her face changes, and she nods, giving Darion a sympathetic look) All right, I'll stay. Come on, Darion.

Darion looks at Gabrielle and seems about to protest; then he nods and dismounts, leaning on Klymene's hand.

GABRIELLE:

We won't be long.

Xena, Gabrielle and Eve ride away. Klymene and Darion look after them.

DARION (a sad, earnest look on his face):

I know why Gabrielle doesn't want me to go to that village. She thinks I'm gonna feel bad about it because it's gonna make me think about how those guys attacked my village...

KLYMENE (squeezes his shoulder):

Gabrielle cares about you a lot.

DARION (sighs):

I know. I still miss Mom and Dad...and Lykia.

KLYMENE (reluctantly):

My mother was killed too.

DARION (looks at her curiously and sympathetically):

You should try to think good thoughts about her. Gabrielle says people who are gone can hear our thoughts...

Klymene nods a little uncomfortably, then shakes her head, obviously wanting to change the subject.

KLYMENE:

Race you to those trees!

The children race toward the trees, Klymene obviously slowing down her pace to give Darion a chance.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle, and Eve ride through the main street of the village. A couple of houses have broken-down doors; a man and a woman are working on fixing up one of them. People come out into the street to watch the three women ride past. Some of them have blood-stained bandages on their heads, shoulders and arms.

GABRIELLE (puzzled):

This place was raided by the same gang that attacked Darion's village?

EVE:

That's what my scouts said. A group of men wearing masks, just like the other time.

GABRIELLE (puzzled):

This is strange... They didn't do nearly as much damage here.

XENA (sarcastic):

Maybe they've mellowed out.

As they approach the village square, two elders, a middle-aged man and woman in peasant garb, come out to meet them.

FEMALE ELDER (respectfully):

Are you Amazons?

EVE (gives Xena and Gabrielle a slightly hesitant look, then turns to the woman):

Yes, we are. We're trying to track down the gang that raided your village.

The camera pulls back to see people coming out of their houses and streaming out onto the square. The women dismount as the villagers surround them, talking animatedly.

The camera pulls closer to catch their conversation.

YOUNG WOMAN:

They took my fattest geese!

MAN (in his thirties, with a bandaged head):

All the money the wife and I have been saving up to buy a cow--the sons of bitches took it! And look (points to his bandaged head) what they did to me when I tried to stop them!

YOUNG MAN:

Such a shame, too. We had such a good time just the day before, when those traveling actors came here and put on their show...

GABRIELLE (tries to shout over the din of voices):

So they didn't kill anyone.

MALE ELDER:

No, no... Elis got beat up pretty bad when he wouldn't give up his piglet, poor man, but that was about it...

XENA:

Did they abduct any women?

FEMALE ELDER (horrified):

Women? No, the gods help us. As if we didn't have enough trouble here already!

EVE:

And no houses were burned down?

MALE ELDER (hastily):

No, no! Is that what they did in other villages?

GABRIELLE (anguished):

Yes, they did.

The female elder shakes her head in dismay.

XENA:

Did you see which way they went when they left the village?

FEMALE ELDER:

Sure. Come on this way, I'll show you.

CUT TO

A wide shot of Xena, Gabrielle, and Eve at the edge of the village, accompanied by the two elders and a few other people, examining some tracks. The camera slowly zooms in.

GABRIELLE (looks at Xena and Eve, puzzled):

They were much more careful about covering their tracks when they raided Darion's village. Are you sure this is the same gang we're talking about?

EVE (a little doubtfully):

It could be a copycat attack...another gang that figured wearing masks was a good idea.

XENA:

Or maybe they've mellowed out *and* gotten sloppy. (shrugs) Look, whether it's the same gang or not, we've got to track them down. Just because they're kinder, gentler looters doesn't make them all right.

EVE:

Of course.

FEMALE ELDER (hopeful):

You'll track them down, then? Myconos and I went to see the magistrate, but he told us the only way he could help us is if we send him a dozen people to organize a search party.

MALE ELDER:

To tell you the truth, we haven't got twelve people to spare--it's harvest time.

FEMALE ELDER:

Besides, none of our people have experience in these matters. You ladies obviously do.

XENA (with grim determination):

We'll find them. Gabrielle, go get Darion and Klymene. We're going to follow these tracks.

CUT TO

Evening. The daylight isn't quite gone yet, but the moon is faintly visible in the darkening sky. Xena, Gabrielle, Eve, Klymene and Darion are making camp in a clearing in the woods.

GABRIELLE:

I'll go water the horses.

CUT TO

A riverbank nearby. Gabrielle is leading the horses up to the water's edge. As the horses start to drink, Gabrielle suddenly looks up, almost as if she senses something.

GABRIELLE (puzzled):

Xena?

There is a flash of blue light and Ares materializes standing next to her. The horses neigh in alarm.

GABRIELLE (gives him a surprised look):

What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be hanging around Xena?

ARES (smirks):

I'm glad you think so. (Gabrielle looks away, embarrassed) Actually, I wanted to talk to you.

GABRIELLE (suspiciously):

What about?

ARES (mocking):

The way you walked away from a perfectly good fight last night. You know, you're setting a bad example for the kid.

GABRIELLE (even more surprised):

Walked away from a fight? You don't mean that clown Taphius?

ARES:

He may be a clown, but he's pretty determined to fight you. When someone's that determined to pick a fight--

GABRIELLE:

Yes?

ARES:

They usually end up getting what they want.

GABRIELLE (warily narrows her eyes at him):

Wait a minute...is there some reason you're trying to get me into this? (in an accusing tone) Is this Taphius one of your men?

ARES (chuckles):

Please. I have my standards.

GABRIELLE (miffed):

Well, obviously, you don't expect *me* to have any.

ARES:

I can choose the people who work for me. I would have thought you'd have learned by now that you don't always get to choose who to fight. In fact--come to think of it--you almost never do.

He flashes a grin at her and vanishes before she can say another word.

GABRIELLE (stares after him and shakes her head in exasperation):

Gods and their riddles...

CUT TO

The campsite. Gabrielle is kneeling beside Darion, tucking him in while Eve looks on from where she sits cross legged--presumably in a meditative pose--across the campfire.

DARION:

Gabrielle, are you going to sing my song for me?

GABRIELLE (smiles and glances at Eve a bit uneasily):

Not tonight, sweetheart.

DARION:

But you know how I--

GABRIELLE:

I know we've all had a long day and need to get some rest.

Xena yawns and lies back in her bedroll, tucking her hands under her head.

XENA:

Right. I'm pretty worn out myself.

DARION:

I'm not! I could stay up all night and sing! "Oh, Jox--"

GABRIELLE:

Darion! (she pauses a moment, then pats his cheek) Just go to sleep, okay?

DARION (pouting):

Okay...

Darion shuts his eyes and Gabrielle strokes his cheek soothingly. Xena watches indulgently for a moment or two after Darion has obviously fallen asleep. Gabrielle remains kneeling beside him, watching Darion as if on guard. Xena cocks an eyebrow at her and sighs with a mix of amusement and annoyance.

XENA:

Gabrielle?

GABRIELLE (absently and still watching Darion):

Hmm?

XENA:

You could probably still see Darion from way over there on the other side of the fire.

GABRIELLE:

What? Oh, sorry... (she blushes) I was just...

XENA (chuckles):

Well, you can just do it from your bedroll.

Gabrielle sighs and gets up, stepping over a sleeping Klymene in order to lie down on her own bedroll.

EVE:

When Klymene first came to live with me, I would lay awake half the night just making sure she was still breathing.

XENA (yawning):

You're both like a couple of old mother hens.

Gabrielle grins and leans confidentially close to Eve.

GABRIELLE:

Don't listen to her. She was the same way when you were a baby.

Eve smiles at this and remains pensively silent. A few moments pass and finally Xena can be heard snoring softly.

EVE:

It's not easy for you to be back on Amazon land, is it?

GABRIELLE (shakes her head):

No, it's not--but not for the reasons you think. I'm not angry. Well...not much anyway. It's just... (she pauses and looks around, trying to find the words) I've gone through a lot changes over the years. Some good, some bad. But through all of the searching and trying to come to terms with who and what I was--the Amazon's were the one constant in my life, the one thing I never doubted. Now...now I have an idea of what Xena must have felt like every time she came to visit my tribe with me.

Xena snores.

EVE:

You're still an Amazon, Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE (laughs dryly):

To you maybe. But I can see the way Algiz and Urd act around me. They're different now. (her

look grows thoughtful) And maybe I'm different too. I feel like I've lost the only piece of myself that I've never questioned.

EVE:

Gabrielle, once we've--

GABRIELLE (her head snaps up, on alert):

Shh! (she pauses a moment then continues in a whisper.) Did you hear that?

EVE:

What? I don't--

Stealthily, Gabrielle springs to her feet. A shadowy figure can be seen approaching from the underbrush and she ducks behind a tree. Eve reaches out and pulls her staff close to her side. The stranger takes one step out into the clearing and Gabrielle bolts out from her cover, a sai raised high above her head, ready to strike.

GABRIELLE:

Hah!

His hands fly up instinctively in order to protect himself and Xena awakens, instantly jumping to her feet and trying to quickly take in the situation.

HAIMON:

I surrender! I surrender!

Gabrielle pauses and slowly anger gives way to bewilderment and finally recognition.

GABRIELLE:

Haimon?

HAIMON (nods, gasping for breath):

How come every time we run into one another I almost get cut to pieces?

XENA:

Just a strange coincidence--nothing personal.

GABRIELLE:

I'm sorry! I thought you were someone else-- (Gabrielle brushes the hair back from Haimon's forehead and strokes his cheek gently.) Are you okay?

He leans forward as if to give her a kiss.

HAIMON :

Well...I am *now*.

DARION (sleepily):

Gabrielle?

Gabrielle spins away from Haimon so abruptly that he loses his balance. Xena shoots her arm out to steady him. Gabrielle races over to Darion, crouching down beside him.

GABRIELLE:

Everything's okay, sweetheart. You can go back to sleep.

DARION (looking over at Haimon):

Who is that man? Does he want to fight you too?

GABRIELLE:

No. He's a friend. Everything's fine. Lie down and let me tuck you in.

Haimon looks on, his mouth hanging open in shock and confusion. He glances at Xena out of the corner of his eye and she claps him on the shoulder jovially.

XENA:

Congratulations, Haimon. It's a boy.

FADE OUT

ACT TWO

FADE IN

Fade up on Gabrielle soothing Darion back to sleep while Haimon looks on in confusion.

GABRIELLE (turns to Haimon, smiling):

Are you hungry? You must have been riding a long time...

HAIMON (nods gratefully):

A hot supper sounds great right now.

GABRIELLE (chuckles affectionately):

I hope you don't mind if it's only warm.

She puts some stew in a bowl and hands it to Haimon with a piece of bread. Obviously famished, he starts eating while Xena eyes him with a mix of curiosity and anxiety.

XENA:

So, is there some news of Sabina? (off Haimon's surprised look) You usually turn up when there is.

HAIMON:

Well, you're right.

XENA:

Don't tell me she's up to her old tricks again.

HAIMON (shakes his head):

No--just the opposite.

XENA:

Meaning what?

HAIMON:

She's been captured by the Corinthians.

XENA (gives him a look that can't quite hide her disappointment):

Really. Well--less work for me, I suppose. (pauses) When did *that* happen?

HAIMON:

Some three months back. (off Xena's surprised look) I only just found out for sure. The rumor I heard was that after they got her, they sent you after her on a wild goose chase--because they didn't think you'd approve of what they had in mind.

Xena is silent for a moment. The look on her face turns angry, then grim.

XENA:

What did they do? Kill her?

HAIMON:

I finally got someone to tell me the whole story. They branded her and sold her into slavery.

Xena lets that sink in a moment.

XENA:

I can't blame the Corinthians for wanting payback. But this... (she shakes her head sadly) This isn't justice. No one deserves to be a slave. Not even Sabina.

HAIMON:

Well, I hate to admit it... (he looks down) I always thought I'd cheer when Sabina finally got what she had coming to her. I mean, after everything we've seen her do to innocent people... (he trails off) But now...I feel the way you do--something in my gut tells me this just isn't right. I've done some asking around, but no one seems to have any idea what happened to her after she was sold in Corinth.

XENA:

Well, finding out what became of Sabina will have to wait. We've got another problem to deal with first.

HAIMON (nods):

I heard about the raids in the last village I passed through. (having finished his meal, he puts the bowl aside) I thought maybe you and Gabrielle could use my help.

At the mention of her name, Gabrielle lifts her head and glances at Haimon. The look that is exchanged between the two of them does not go unnoticed by Xena. She clears her throat uncomfortably.

XENA:

Look--the two of you have a lot of catching up to do. Why don't you go and...take a walk or something? (to Gabrielle) I'll look after Darion.

GABRIELLE:

You're sure?

XENA (rolls her eyes):

I'm pretty sure I can handle this. Go on.

CUT TO

Deep in the forest. Haimon and Gabrielle sit beside one another under a large tree. There is an air of familiarity and ease in the way Haimon holds Gabrielle's hand.

HAIMON:

So you took Darion and left the Amazons for good.

GABRIELLE (frowns and nods):

I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I'd sent him away.

HAIMON:

Did you ever think that maybe this all happened for a reason, Gabrielle? You told me before that we couldn't be together because of your responsibility to the Amazons. This could be our second chance--ours *and* Darion's. We could settle down together and give him the home and family he needs.

GABRIELLE:

You mean the two of us--?

HAIMON:

I know it's sudden--and I know how hard it was for you to walk away from the Amazons. But maybe what Xena says is true. Everything happens precisely as it should. Maybe this is the Fates' way of trying to tell us something.

GABRIELLE:

Maybe...

She smiles and gives him a thoughtful look, saying nothing. Haimon pats her hand and gains to his feet.

HAIMON:

Just think about it, okay? Will you promise me that?

GABRIELLE (nods):

I'll think about it.

CUT TO

Night at the campsite. Everyone is asleep near the remnants of a campfire--a heap of glowing ambers. Darion starts tossing and turning in his sleep, muttering something. Gabrielle sits up with a worried look on her face and goes over to him. She strokes his hair and tucks in his blanket, and in a few moments he is quiet again. Gabrielle walks back to her bedroll and is about to get under the blanket when she hears a sound in the trees. The sound is repeated again. Very quietly, Gabrielle puts on her boots, slips the sais in them, and goes toward the trees to investigate.

CUT TO

Gabrielle walking stealthily through the trees. The branches rustle ahead of her and we see a shadow move behind a large tree. Gabrielle strides resolutely toward the shadow and finds herself face to face with Taphius, who steps out from behind a tree, his sword pointed at Gabrielle. With a deft move, Gabrielle kicks the sword out of his hand. He bends to pick it up.

GABRIELLE (irritated):

You again.

TAPHIUS (quickly regains his composure):

I've done a pretty good job tracking you, haven't I? I bet you never even knew I was there.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

All right, Taphius. I've got to hand it to you, you're pretty good at tracking.

TAPHIUS (proudly):

I'll have you know I'm the best hunter in my village... I mean, within five hundred *leagues* of my village.

GABRIELLE (tries hard to be conciliatory):

That's wonderful. You know, being a great hunter is a big accomplishment--you can be really proud of that...

TAPHIUS:

Oh no you don't. You're not going to get rid of me that easily. Being a hunter isn't enough for a man like me. I've been training for this past year, ever since my friend who served in Bellerophon's army got home. I'm good. Some day I'm gonna be the best. And you're going to help me prove it.

GABRIELLE (gently):

Taphius, I just disarmed you with one kick. I really don't think you're going to prove much by going up against me.

TAPHIUS (offended):

That's just--just because I wasn't ready to fight.

GABRIELLE:

Taphius, you've still got a lot to learn. A warrior has to be ready to fight anytime.

TAPHIUS (clearly stung):

Oh yeah? Then why aren't you ready to fight *me*?

GABRIELLE:

I already told you, I don't fight without a good reason. (exasperated) Look, I'm not going to stand here in the woods, in the middle of the night, chatting about it with you.

TAPHIUS (trying to be sarcastic):

And why not? You seem to be all talk and no action.

GABRIELLE:

You want to see me in action? Watch this.

She turns around and starts to walk away.

TAPHIUS:

Now wait a minute--

GABRIELLE:

And you'd better not follow me.

As she starts to walk away, the camera pans to Taphius.

TAPHIUS:

This isn't over!

Shaking her head, Gabrielle walks back to the campsite. After a few moments she hears a noise behind her. She stops, pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes, and whips around to see a dark figure behind her.

GABRIELLE:

All right--you're asking for it.

She charges, her fist shooting out at the man's face.

MAN:

Gab--

Her punch connects and he goes down on his back with a groan.

GABRIELLE:

I told you not to--

She stops short as the moonlight falls on the man's face--it's Haimon.

GABRIELLE (gasps):

Haimon? (She kneels next to him) Oh god--I'm so sorry--I thought you were Taphius--

HAIMON (props himself up on an elbow and rubs his jaw):

Who?

GABRIELLE (helps him to his feet):

Never mind... Are you okay?

HAIMON:

Well, you didn't break my jaw. Just a split lip.

GABRIELLE (stricken):

I'm so sorry...

HAIMON (smiles):

It's okay. It was bound to happen sooner or later.

GABRIELLE:

And that's supposed to make me feel better? (she touches his bleeding lip and he winces) Let's get back to camp--I'll put some healing ointment on it.

They start walking back.

HAIMON:

So who's--what was it, Taphius?

GABRIELLE (sighs):

Just a kid who's been following me around the past couple of days, trying to get me to fight him.

HAIMON:

Why?

GABRIELLE:

He wants to prove himself as a warrior. (she shakes her head and chuckles bitterly) Funny, there was a time when I used to watch Xena deal with that kind of thing, and I almost envied her...

HAIMON (gives her a strange look):

So how do you feel now that it's you?

GABRIELLE (thinks a moment):

Strange... You know, he was telling me how he heard about all those things I've done, and it was almost as if he was talking about someone else...some other person who looks like me and has the same name...

HAIMON:

Are you going to fight him?

GABRIELLE (a little too vehemently):

Of course not! Next thing I know, I'll have to fight every warrior wannabe who wants to try his luck. (looks at Haimon, slightly puzzled) What were you doing out in the woods, anyway?

HAIMON:

Some kind of noise woke me up and then I noticed that you and Xena were both gone from camp. After a while, I started getting worried and--

GABRIELLE (frowns):

Xena's gone from camp?

HAIMON:

She is.

GABRIELLE:

I hope she hasn't found any trouble.

CUT TO

The campsite. The fire is burning again; Gabrielle is putting ointment on Haimon's lip. Xena's bedroll is empty.

GABRIELLE (smiles and speaks in a half-whisper):

There--all better now.

HAIMON (smiles back at her, a little mischievously):

You know, I can think of another way to make it better... (he reaches up to kiss her)

GABRIELLE (ducks out of the way):

Oh no. You should let it heal a little first. (kisses him tenderly on the cheek) Get some sleep, okay? I'll go look for Xena.

CUT TO

Gabrielle is walking through the woods, calling out, "Xena!"

CUT TO

Ares and Xena lying under a tree, covered with a fur bedspread. Xena is asleep, sprawled on Ares' chest, while he has an arm around her. He lifts his head, listening.

CUT TO

Gabrielle walking through the woods.

GABRIELLE (calls out):

Xena!

There is a flash of light and she finds herself facing Ares.

ARES:

You're going to wake her up.

GABRIELLE (looks embarrassed):

Oh--you mean she's--

ARES (smirks):

--just fine.

GABRIELLE (nods uncomfortably):

All right--I guess I'll just, uh, see her in the morning.

She turns around and starts to walk back toward camp--only to stop and flinch when she finds Ares standing in her path.

GABRIELLE:

I wish you wouldn't do that.

ARES:

Hey--godhood has its perks. So, Warrior Wannabe still won't leave you alone?

GABRIELLE (looks at him warily):

Were you watching me? (off his meaningful look) What do you care?

ARES (shrugs):

You're a warrior. Call it professional interest.

GABRIELLE (sharply):

I don't serve you, Ares.

ARES:

You don't work for me. There's a difference.

GABRIELLE:

Maybe it's time for me to hang up my sais.

ARES:

And then what? Settle down with that goody two shoes you left back at the camp? *Please* tell me you're kidding. Can you look me in the eye and honestly tell me that you wouldn't miss--

GABRIELLE:

Ares, I'm not going to stand here and play your little games.

ARES:

Riiight. And you think you're not going to play Taphius' little game, either.

GABRIELLE:

You're really eager to have me fight him, aren't you?

ARES (rolls his eyes):

Trust me, it's not a show I look forward to watching. I'm just telling you that you may not be able to walk away from this as easily as you think.

GABRIELLE:

Come on, he's just a hotheaded young fool...

ARES:

Here's a free tip for you. A fool can be the most dangerous enemy of all--if only because you're liable to underestimate him. Which is exactly what you're doing right now. And that means he can take you by surprise.

GABRIELLE (firmly):

Look, Ares--I'm not going to let some stupid kid draw me into a fight...

ARES:

You still don't get it, do you? You don't always have a choice about these things. That's how it is when you're a warrior. (looks at her probingly) Or do you still have trouble accepting what you are?

He is gone in a flash of light. Gabrielle stands still for a moment, looking thoughtfully at the spot where he vanished.

CUT TO

Gabrielle returns to the campsite and climbs into her bedroll beside Haimon.

HAIMON:

Did you find Xena?

GABRIELLE (curtly):

Yes. (her tone and expression soften a little as she rolls over to face him) How's your lip?

HAIMON (leans in to kiss her):

Much better.

GABRIELLE (pulls her head back):

Haimon, I don't know if this is such a good idea in front of--

HAIMON (whispers):

Relax. Darion is sound asleep.

GABRIELLE:

But sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the--

HAIMON (nods thoughtfully):

Okay. How about if we go--

GABRIELLE (frowns and shakes her head):

I can't leave him alone.

HAIMON (sits up in exasperation):

Eve and Klymene are sleeping five feet away in case anything happens.

GABRIELLE:

You don't understand at all, do you? He's just a little boy. He's lost both his parents--

HAIMON (flinches):

No. I wouldn't understand anything about that, would I?

Gabrielle pauses, letting that slowly sink in. She blushes and reaches out to touch his hand.

GABRIELLE:

I'm sorry.

HAIMON:

You're not doing Darion any favors by hanging over him all the time. You can't protect him forever.

Gabrielle sits up, drawing her knees to her chest.

GABRIELLE:

I can do everything I can to make sure he's safe and that no one ever--

HAIMON (points to Darion):

Take a good look at the kid, Gabrielle. He *is* safe. And he's happy. Darion adores you.

Haimon sits up and brushes his lips against hers.

HAIMON:

And he's not the only one.

He tightens his grip on Gabrielle's shoulders and she looks away, swallowing hard.

GABRIELLE:

Haimon--

HAIMON (kisses her throat):

If you want me to stop, I'll stop.

GABRIELLE:

I don't...

HAIMON (grinning as he massages her shoulders):

You don't...what? You don't want me to stop? Or you don't want this?

GABRIELLE (sighs heavily and meets his gaze):

I don't *know*.

Haimon smiles gently and pulls her into his arms. They kiss passionately and sink down onto the bedroll so that they're lying side by side. The kissing becomes more and more intense until Haimon pulls back slightly.

HAIMON:

Maybe we should go someplace a little more private.

Gabrielle opens her mouth to respond but Darion's voice calling out stops her.

DARION (sleepily):

Gabrielle?

Gabrielle quickly pulls away from Haimon.

GABRIELLE:

What is it, sweetheart?

DARION:

I'm thirsty.

Gabrielle casts a half-amused, apologetic look at Haimon and gets up. Haimon sighs and his head falls back in frustration as we:

FADE OUT

ACT THREE

FADE IN

Morning. Xena and Gabrielle are packing up the campsite. In the distance, the sound of splashing water and loud, boisterous laughter can be heard. They work in silence. Xena grins when she sees Gabrielle yawn.

GABRIELLE:

What?

XENA:

Late night, huh?

GABRIELLE:

It's not what you think.

XENA (smirking):

Sure it isn't.

GABRIELLE (sharply):

Sorry to disappoint you, Xena but after chasing off Taphius, almost breaking Haimon's jaw and taking care of Darion, I didn't have a lot of energy left for...anything else.

XENA:

No wonder you're so cranky. (she frowns) I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run off with Ares last night. You and Haimon obviously need to talk.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

I suppose we do.

Gabrielle glances over her shoulder towards the lake where Haimon is playing with Darion and Klymene. She smiles as she watches Haimon pick Darion up and throw the boy over his shoulder and into the water. Darion reappears on the surface, laughing hysterically.

KLYMENE:

My turn!

GABRIELLE (bows her head):

Haimon...he...he talked about the two of us settling down together.

Xena is clearly upset but hardly surprised by this.

XENA:

And what was your answer?

GABRIELLE:

I told him I'd think about it. Xena, you know I wouldn't make a decision like that without talking about it with you first. (she glances towards the lake again) But it *would* be good for Darion to have--

XENA:

You mean if we can't find his sister.

GABRIELLE (blinks):

Right. If we can't--

XENA:

Gabrielle, I've already told you that I'll support whatever you decide.

GABRIELLE:

But I don't want the two of us to--

XENA:

Be separated like before? (Gabrielle nods) That's not going to happen. Who knows? Maybe I should think about settling down too.

GABRIELLE (smiles teasingly):

You mean you and Ares? I think someone is going to have to get him pregnant before you get him to tie on the apron strings.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle, and the others riding along a wide road.

XENA (sighs in exasperation):

Well, we've lost them. Once they got out on the main road, it was hopeless--whatever tracks they've left have long been trampled by other riders.

EVE (points into the distance):

Look, there's a village. Maybe we can stop there and find out something useful.

HAIMON:

For the sake of that village, I hope not.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle, and the others ride into a village. They stop outside the tavern and start to dismount.

CUT TO

Inside the tavern. Xena and the others are eating.

DARION:

If I finish the lentil soup, can I have two desserts?

GABRIELLE (thinks a moment):

Well, I suppose you can.

XENA (rolls her eyes):

Watch out--pretty soon we'll be getting two desserts with every meal. (gets up) All right, you finish up here and I'll go take care of business.

She walks up to the tavern-keeper, a middle-aged woman with a kerchief tied carelessly around her graying hair.

XENA (leans on the bar):

Hey. Everything quiet here lately?

TAVERN-KEEPER (gives her a bored look):

As quiet as things can be in a tavern.

XENA:

Seen anyone strange or unusual hanging around? (skipping a beat) Other than me and my friends.

TAVERN-KEEPER (chuckles):

You don't know this village too well, do you? Traveling salesmen are about as unusual as it gets around here.

XENA:

Nothing like, say, about a dozen riders passing through?

The door of the tavern bursts open with a loud clatter. Xena turns around, alarmed. A teenage boy, obviously one of the villagers, bursts in.

BOY (agitated, shouts at the top of his voice):

Hey, come in and look! Traveling actors have just arrived!

XENA (gives the tavern-keeper a wry look):

Well, at least it's not traveling salesmen.

An excited murmur swells up in the tavern and people start walking out to take a look at the new arrivals.

CUT TO

The square in front of the tavern. People from all over the village are coming up. A group of about a dozen people, mostly men, in brightly colored cloaks and robes are riding on horseback into the square. At the head of the procession is a man in a red-and-gold cloak with a turban of similar colors, with a curly, carefully styled dark beard. A group of children are running after the group, laughing and shouting.

Xena comes out of the tavern and stands by the door, arms folded on her chest, watching the scene before her. Gabrielle follows, holding Darion's hand, with Haimon close behind her, and then Eve and Klymene.

HEAD ACTOR (in the red and gold cloak):

Greetings, my good people! We are actors from Athens, traveling the countryside to bring the fine pleasures of the theater to villagers like yourselves. (Shouts and applause in the square) We will perform a play for you today. (More shouts and applause) Since we are doing this for the love of our art and not for profit, we ask each of you to donate only what you feel you can afford--so that we can continue performing in other villages. (pauses for effect) Give ten dinars or give nothing--you are still welcome to the show!

The applause grows even louder. The head actor looks down at the crowd with a satisfied smile. The camera pans to Xena and Gabrielle while the voices of the crowd and the actors are heard in the background.

GABRIELLE (to Xena, smiling):

Isn't it good to know that there are still people like this out there? You know, people who think about others and--

XENA:

Who are a little too good to be true?

GABRIELLE (wrinkles her nose):

You're such a cynic. I think Ares' company is having a bad--

DARION (tugs on her hand):

Hey, I remember these guys!

GABRIELLE (gives him a surprised look):

You do?

DARION:

Yeah--they did a show in my village-- (his face suddenly turns troubled and he turns away, looking almost as if he were about to cry)

GABRIELLE (sits down on her haunches in front of him and gently takes his face in her hands):

What is it, sweetheart?

DARION (sniffles a little):

Nothing...I just remembered they did a show in my village the day before-- (he stumbles and looks away again)

GABRIELLE (understanding):

The day before (her voice drops) the village was attacked?

Darion nods silently. The camera pans up to Xena, who has been listening to this conversation and has a very thoughtful look on her face. She turns from Darion to the actors. We see a wide shot of the square, some villagers coming up to the actors to give them money, others staying in the background. The camera pans closer and we see a young man with frizzy blond hair handing some coins to the head actor.

YOUNG MAN:

Five dinars is usually a lot of money for me, but I can afford it--sold a prize calf on the market yesterday!

The camera pans back to Xena.

XENA (turns to Gabrielle):

We're staying for the show.

GABRIELLE (stunned):

We *are*? (stares at Xena) Xena, what was in that wine you just had back there?

XENA (gives her an amused look):

Look who's a cynic now.

GABRIELLE:

I wouldn't call it a cynic. I'm just being-- (she pauses, looking for a word)

XENA:

--a realist? (smirks) That's what cynics always say.

EVE (looks curiously at Xena):

Come on, Mother. You're not going to convince us that you've developed a sudden taste for theater. What are you up to?

XENA (stares thoughtfully at the actors, who are still being mobbed by the villagers):

Just an idea I had. I need to think about it some more. Let's go back inside and finish dinner.

CUT TO

Evening in the village square. The villagers are seated around the actors, the wide circle they have formed makes up the performance area. There is a long shot of the performance over the shoulders of Xena and Gabrielle.

ACTRESS #1 (as Electra):

...Grab her! Get hold of her! Sword to her throat--keep her quiet...

Gabrielle turns to where Haimon is seated on the other side of her and her eyes widen in shock. Darion is asleep in his arms.

GABRIELLE:

He fell asleep during Euripides?

HAIMON (grinning):

Some people have no appreciation of culture.

XENA:

I know just how he feels. I'd probably be there right alongside Darion if I wasn't working right now.

EVE:

Mother, please! I'm trying to watch the play.

Xena holds up her hands disarmingly and they all fall silent. The performance goes on.

ACTORS (as Chorus):

...the music! Raise the roof!

Let them think "it's just the chorus"--

The victim's screams will not be heard.

Gabrielle ponders in silence a moment or two and finally:

GABRIELLE:

Xena, you know I usually trust your instincts, but this time I think you're way off.

XENA (shrugs):

We'll see.

GABRIELLE:

Artists create--they don't destroy!

XENA:

And there's never an exception to that rule?

Both Haimon and Eve cast a cautious, sidelong glance at Gabrielle. Eve leans over to whisper to Haimon.

EVE:

Haimon, why don't you take Darion back to the tavern and put him to bed?

Haimon nods a touch eagerly and carries Darion away.

GABRIELLE (laughs nervously):

Of course there are exceptions. There are always exceptions. What? Are you--?

XENA:

I'm just saying that an appreciation of fine poetry doesn't necessarily make someone a good person.

GABRIELLE (she looks away):

Let's just wait and see what happens.

ACTOR #2 (as The Phrygian):

...How shall I flee, stranger women? Shall I grow wings and soar through the sullen sky Or boat across the surging Ocean tides?

CUT TO

Gabrielle pushing her way through the crowd toward the actors after the performance. She comes up to the head actor.

GABRIELLE:

That was wonderful! You know, I've been to some of the finest theaters in Greece--Athens, Corinth, Thebes--and this was one of the best performances I ever recall seeing! I could see how much you love your material--you know, an actor, that's one of the most important things--

HEAD ACTOR (gives her a curious look):

So you're a well-traveled young woman. (looks at her outfit) Obviously a warrior, not a villager. (smiles at her) It's always a pleasant surprise to run into a warrior who appreciates our craft. Most of them seem to think it's nothing but a frivolous pastime.

GABRIELLE:

Some warriors feel that way. (smiles a little shyly) But I'm also a bard.

HEAD ACTOR (stares at her):

A warrior bard? Wait a minute...you're Gabrielle, the Bard of Potidaea, aren't you?

GABRIELLE (pleased):

Yes, I am. (smiles pensively) That's funny, people usually say "Battling Bard."

HEAD ACTOR:

Oh, my friends and I have heard stories of your battles, Gabrielle--but to us, you're always going to be a bard first and a warrior second. (pan to Gabrielle--close-up of the rather wistful smile on her face) It's a great honor to have you at our performance. (calls out to the other actors) Doron! Myrtila! Come here and meet Gabrielle of Potidaea!

ACTRESS #1 (a tall golden-haired woman):

Gabrielle, the Bard?

ACTOR #1:

You saw our performance?

GABRIELLE:

Yes, I-- (smiles and shakes her head, obviously a little overwhelmed by all this attention) I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

ACTOR #1:

I can't tell you what an honor this is. Tell me, have you written for the stage, too?

GABRIELLE:

I--I've tried my hand at it, yes--but you know, these days, I'm much too busy with other things to devote much time to writing...

ACTRESS #1:

That's a shame. (looks curiously at Gabrielle, as if she's just thought of something) Your friend the Warrior Princess--is she here too?

XENA (off-camera):

Yes, she is. (Xena comes into view, pushing her way toward Gabrielle. She gives the actors a nod and a rather cool smile.) Nice show. Come on, Gabrielle. You wanted to see the play, we've seen the play. Time to move on. We've got things to do, places to be...

GABRIELLE (gives her a slightly exasperated look):

Oh--all right.

HEAD ACTOR:

Are you sure we can't change your mind? The elders of this village are holding a special dinner for us. We would be delighted if you two could join us.

GABRIELLE (hesitant):

Well, I--

XENA (interrupts):

Very nice of you, but (tugging discreetly on Gabrielle's arm) we must get back on the road.

GABRIELLE (smiles at the actors):

It was wonderful meeting you. Thanks again and--good luck with your shows!

HEAD ACTOR:

A delight to meet you, Gabrielle of Potidaea!

CUT TO

Xena and Gabrielle making their way through the crowd of villagers.

GABRIELLE (shakes her head):

Xena...I don't know--I think you're wrong on this one. They're not--that kind of people.

XENA (looks around cautiously):

If I'm wrong, good for them. If I'm right and we don't check it out...it's going to be too bad for this village. Let's get out of here.

CUT TO

A quick montage of Xena, Gabrielle, Eve, and Haimon untying their horses outside the tavern and getting in the saddle, Gabrielle with Darion in front of her.

CUT TO

A long shot of Xena, Gabrielle, and the others riding out of the village.

CUT TO

A wide shot of the village at night in the moonlight. Everything is quiet. Suddenly, the rapid clatter of horses' hooves is heard, coming closer. A group of about a dozen riders is seen approaching the village, a few of them carrying torches. In the torchlight we see that the riders are all wearing masks.

Reaching the village, the riders scatter and use their swords to bang loudly on the doors. A couple of doors open and startled, sleepy-looking villagers look out.

Close-up on one of the riders, with the torch lighting his masked face. The mask, which has openings for the eyes and nostrils and only a small opening for the mouth, glitters surreally in the torchlight.

BANDIT #1 (his voice slightly muffled by the mask):

Give us all you've got and then we won't have to torch this miserable village!

An overhead shot of the village, with people running out of their houses in a panic as we:

FADE OUT

ACT FOUR

FADE IN

The same scene as before. The masked riders are looting the village. A few villagers who try to resist are beaten or trampled by the horses. The camera zooms in and pans over various scenes of violence and pillage; we see the bandits grabbing chicken and geese and stuffing them into bags, and carrying away other goods from houses.

The frizzy-haired blonde man we saw before, telling the actors that he had recently sold a prize calf, holds out a few coins to a bandit on horseback.

YOUNG MAN:

Take it! This is all we have in the house, just leave us in peace!

BANDIT #2:

Liar! (he hits the young man across the shoulders with the flat of his sword, making him cry out in pain) *Everything* you've got, or... (he lifts up a torch and makes as if to throw it at the thatched roof)

Terrified, the young man staggers back into the house.

Just then, off-camera, Xena's ululating battle cry, "A-la-la-la-la--shee-ya!" cuts through the night, rising above the sounds of the village under attack. In quick succession, we see close-up shots of several masked bandits turn their heads in alarm. The villagers look up too, their faces expressing a mix of fear and hope.

The camera pans quickly to Xena riding at a gallop, her mouth open in a dangerous, feral grin.

XENA:

Yah!

She charges one of the masked riders and, after some quick sparring, knocks him out with a blow to the head with the flat of her sword.

Haimon and Gabrielle gallop into view as well and engage the bandits. Eve follows close behind. The look on her face is one of uncertainty; she would clearly rather not participate in the fighting. Uneasily, she watches Haimon, Gabrielle and Xena fight the bandits.

Two bandits charge Xena; she lifts herself up in the saddle and leaps, flipping in the air and knocking one of her attackers off his horse by slamming her feet into his chest. Before her other attacker can recover from the shock, she flips her sword in her hand so that she is now holding it hilt forward, and hits him in his masked face with the hilt of the sword. He grabs his face with his hands, screaming. A jab in the chest with the hilt of the sword is enough to topple him from the saddle.

The camera pans to Gabrielle just as one of the bandits rides up behind her, aiming a sword at her back. Hearing him behind her, she manages to duck the blow, turn her horse around and use her sais to parry the bandit's sword. He is furious, his movements becoming less coordinated. At last Gabrielle slashes at his wrist with the sharp end of her sai and wounds him. Shocked, he momentarily lets go of his sword and she knocks it out of his hand so that it falls to the ground. The man lurches forward, taking Gabrielle by surprise, and knocks her out of the saddle, hurtling down with her. They both scramble to their feet and the bandit manages to pick up his sword. He and Gabrielle start fighting again.

Pan to Xena, now on foot, bringing down another attacker with a kick to the midriff that makes him stagger and fall back. When he gets up, she spins around and punches him in the face, knocking him out completely.

BANDIT #1 (off-camera; his voice sounds eerie, muffled by the mask):

Xena! Over here!

Xena whips around and the camera pans to the bandit. He is bending down from the saddle holding a terrified peasant woman by the hair, his sword at her throat.

BANDIT #1:

Put your sword down, or this worthless villager dies! (he sees Xena's hand reach for the chakram and jabs the tip of the sword slightly against the woman's neck; she whimpers with fear) Put that round thing down too. And no sudden moves.

Xena stares at him, obviously trying to decide what to do. Just then, something whizzes through the air and hits him in the head. He sways in the saddle and then falls down. Xena turns to see Eve, her hand at her belt. Xena's face reflects conflicting emotions, but finally she smiles proudly at Eve. After a moment Eve smiles back.

Emboldened, the villagers run toward the fallen bandits and start tying them up. A villager runs up to Bandit #1, who is still unconscious, and swings a foot to kick him.

XENA:

No! (the villager stops and looks at her, surprised) There's no need for that. We'll make sure justice is served. That should be enough.

CUT TO

The bandits are lined up in the village square, their hands tied behind their backs. The villagers stand around with torches.

Xena approaches Bandit #1 and rips the mask off his face. It's the head actor. Quick pan to Gabrielle, who lowers her eyes sadly. There are gasps and murmurs among the villagers.

VILLAGER (picks up a stick and steps toward the bandit/actor):

Why, you no-good son of a--

XENA (holds out a hand to stop him):

Hold it! I know you're angry. You have every reason to be. That still doesn't excuse beating a man who's tied up.

The villagers come up to rip the masks off the other actors. One of them, with a bloodied bandage tied around his head, spits in the face of one of the attackers.

XENA (to the head actor, bitterly):

So this is how your gang has been operating. Traveling the countryside, pretending to be actors--

HEAD ACTOR (insulted):

Pretending! Spoken like a true barbarian. We are actors. Top-level actors, I'll have you know. Just ask your friend over there-- (he nods toward Gabrielle, who is still looking away) --at least she's someone who understands art.

XENA (sneers):

Your late-night performance here was certainly a work of art.

HEAD ACTOR (juts out his chin arrogantly):

And why not? People appreciate fake violence on stage. We're giving them the real thing.

XENA (glares at him with a chilly smile):

You know, I'd love to stand here all night discussing the arts with you. But what I need right now is some information. (She comes closer to him, staring him right in the eyes) A few months ago, you and your thugs raided a village called Melia, not too far from here. (The actor nods a little nervously) A girl named Lykia was abducted from that village. You're going to tell me where she is.

HEAD ACTOR (swallows nervously):

I--I don't know.

XENA:

Wrong line. (she jabs her fingers into his neck) I've just cut off the flow of blood to your brain. If you don't tell me where Lykia is and what you did with her... (gasping for air, the actor crumples to his knees) your next role will be playing dead--in about thirty seconds. And trust me, you'll give a very convincing performance.

HEAD ACTOR (hoarsely):

Luci...Lucius took her!

Xena jabs him in the neck, taking off the pinch. He gulps for air.

XENA (grabs the head actor's hair, forcing him to look up at her):

Who in Tartarus is Lucius?

HEAD ACTOR:

He used to ride with us...in fact... (coughs) ...he was the one who gave us the idea. That was the last time he came with us--he had to go away. He took the girl with him... I swear! I've no ide-- (coughs again) --no idea where he is now, or who he was. None of us do.

XENA (skeptical):

So this fellow was the head of your gang and none of you know anything about him. Nice try. (looks menacingly at the other actors) Anyone else want to tell me anything?

ACTRESS #1:

He's telling you the truth. All we know is, he was the son of some high-ranking Roman official who dabbled in acting.

ACTOR #1:

Kind of a crazy fellow. Always wanted to burn the houses down when we raided those villages.

HEAD ACTOR (mockingly, having regained a bit of his cockiness):

You can be sure he didn't leave us a forwarding address when he split.

Xena stares at them, slowly taking in the fact that they're telling the truth. She looks over at Gabrielle, who stares back at her, a pained look on her face.

DISSOLVE TO

The same village square the next day. Even as the nighttime shot is dissolving into the daytime one, we hear sounds of music fading in. In the sunlit square, villagers are dancing to a fast, merry tune played by a small band seated just outside the tavern. It's obviously a celebration of the bandits' capture.

After panning over the festivities, the camera holds on Xena, Gabrielle (with Darion standing next to her), Haimon and Eve standing on the side of the square watching. Darion is eating a honey-dipped apple on a stick. Eve's eyes are following Klymene, who is dancing with a boy about her age. Eve smiles as the boy takes Klymene's hand and twirls her. Klymene has a big, excited grin on her face.

XENA:

Looks like Klymene's the only one of us who's having fun.

EVE:

She doesn't get a chance to mix with boys much.

Xena turns to Gabrielle and notices her looking wistfully off into the distance. She is obviously about to say something, then changes her mind and turns to Haimon.

XENA (teasingly):

Where are your manners, Haimon? You should be showing your girl a good time. I think she's getting bored out of her wits. (she gives Haimon a meaningful look)

HAIMON (touches Gabrielle's shoulder):

Gabrielle. Would you like to dance?

GABRIELLE (flinches, startled out of her reverie, and looks at him):

Uh, what?

HAIMON (smiles tenderly):

I said, would you like to dance.

GABRIELLE (looks uncertain):

Well, I... (she pauses, shakes her head, as if trying to get rid of all the sad thoughts, and then looks at Haimon, smiling) Sure. Eve, you'll keep an eye on Darion, right?

XENA (chuckles):

I think the only threat to Darion right now is getting a stomachache.

GABRIELLE (pats Darion's cheek):

And no more sweets, okay?

Darion nods, his mouth full. Gabrielle and Haimon go off to dance.

EVE (looks at Gabrielle and Haimon dancing):

You really think she's going to settle down with him?

XENA:

It could be the best thing for her. After everything she's been through... (she trails off)

The music stops, then the band starts a slow dance. Smiling, Gabrielle puts her hands on Haimon's shoulders and he puts his hands on her waist. They dance and Haimon notices Darion watching them and grinning as he eats his apple.

HAIMON:

So have you given any thought to what you're going to do with Darion now?

GABRIELLE (frowns):

No. There's always a chance that we could still find his sister.

HAIMON (quietly):

I think we both know that the chances of that aren't very good.

GABRIELLE (lowers her eyes):

I suppose not...

HAIMON:

He needs a home and a family. We could give that to him. (he pauses) Have you ever thought about us having a child of our own?

GABRIELLE (softly):

Sometimes...but...

HAIMON:

You know, you might even find some peace yourself.

GABRIELLE (laughs wryly):

I wouldn't be too sure about that. Somehow trouble always seems to find *me*.

HAIMON:

I think peace is something that comes from within.

Gabrielle smiles teasingly in order to mask her annoyance.

GABRIELLE:

Since when are you a philosopher?

He smiles though he is clearly wounded.

HAIMON:

I just want what's best for you.

GABRIELLE:

I know...I'm sorry. (she sighs and reaches up to kiss his cheek) Let's finish the dance and then we can talk. Okay?

HAIMON (smiles and gives her a small twirl):

Okay.

CUT TO

Xena senses a hand on her shoulder and turns around. Her eyes widen as she sees Ares standing behind her.

XENA:

What are you doing here?

ARES:

You think mere gods are allowed to join in the revelry?

DARION (claps his hands):

Hey! Ares! Are you going to show us any tricks?

ARES (pretends to fume):

Tricks. The kid has no respect for godly powers.

XENA:

Considering that you and Aphrodite are the only gods he knows, what do you expect? (she chuckles and puts her hand on his arm)

Eve looks thoughtfully at Xena and Ares, then squeezes Darion's shoulder.

EVE (to Darion):

Let's go get some lemonade--what do you say?

DARION:

Is Ares going to play with me later?

XENA (chuckles):

It looks like you're not going to get out of this one.

ARES (looks from Xena to Darion and back, slightly alarmed):

Uhh--sure.

DARION:

Okay--if you promise.

Eve leads Darion away. Xena and Ares stare intently at one another for a few moments.

ARES:

Care to dance?

XENA (lifts an eyebrow):

You dance?

ARES:

Hey, I'm a god, remember? In theory, I should be able to do anything.

XENA (teasing):

What theory is that?

ARES:

One we're about to test.

He takes Xena's hand and leads her out into the dancing ground. She looks at him with mixed feelings, obviously both uncomfortable and pleased.

A murmur ripples through the crowd as people stare at Ares.

XENA (concerned):

They don't know who you are, do they?

ARES (grins):

I don't think so. But they obviously have good taste.

He lifts Xena's hands, drawing her arms around his neck, and puts his hands on her waist. They dance for a while, completely absorbed in each other. The camera pans to Gabrielle and Haimon. Haimon follows Gabrielle's stare; she is gazing at Xena and Ares. Haimon shakes his head.

HAIMON:

Amazing. Looking at them, you'd never tell he wasn't-- (he trails off)

GABRIELLE (smiles wistfully):

Human?

HAIMON (chuckles):

Right now, I could almost see the two of them settling down next door to us.

GABRIELLE (gives him a look that's both dreamy and a little apprehensive):

I think that's pushing it a bit far...

Pan back to Xena and Ares. Ares tries to twirl Xena and she bumps into his sword. They exchange an amused glance. Then, Ares pulls Xena close to him and they slowly spin around a few times, lost in each other. After a moment Ares takes Xena's hand and tries to step back, only to find that they're stuck together--her chakram is caught on his sword belt.

XENA (chuckles as she detaches the chakram from his belt):

So much for gods being able to do anything.

ARES (in pretend outrage):

Me? Dancing obviously isn't one of your many skills.

They stand in the middle of the dancing ground, smiling at each other.

CUT TO

Haimon and Gabrielle. The music stops and they take a step back. They smile tenderly at each other and Haimon reaches out and takes her hand, leading her through the crowd back to where Darion is seated.

DARION:

Klymene looked the same way you two just did right before she kissed that boy she was dancing with.

Eve picks her head up.

EVE:

Excuse me? Klymene is kissing the boy she's dancing with?

DARION:

Well, she's not dancing with him anymore. She just left with him.

EVE:

For the love of Eli!

GABRIELLE (grins at Eve):

You can't take your eyes off of them for a minute, can you?

Eve frowns and races off in search of Klymene. Gabrielle shakes her head in amusement at Darion.

GABRIELLE:

Someday you'll understand what you just did, young man. Then you'll be sorry.

DARION:

Can I have another apple?

HAIMON (grins at Darion):

Looks like you're wearing half of the one we already bought you, little buddy.

GABRIELLE:

I should have known it spelled trouble when I found out it came dipped in honey. (she frowns) Look at you, Darion. You've got honey all over your face, on your shirt...how you managed to get it in your hair I'll never know.

HAIMON (winks at Darion):

It's a guy thing. Right, little buddy?

DARION:

Right! You wouldn't get it, Gabrielle. I mean, being just a girl and all...

GABRIELLE (tousles Darion's hair and pulls her hand back when her fingers come in contact with something sticky):

Well then Haimon can take you and get you washed up. And when you get back, Ares and Xena are going to play with you so that Haimon and I can talk. (she turns and stands on tiptoe, giving Haimon a light kiss. She whispers so that only he can hear) Among other things.

Haimon squats down on his haunches and pats his shoulder.

HAIMON:

Climb on, Darion. I'll give you a horsey ride over to the well.

DARION (climbs onto Haimon's shoulders):

Ares could just pop me over there by doing his blue light trick.

HAIMON:

Ares can do that for you later. But right now--

Haimon neighs and stomps his foot like a horse then gallops off.

Gabrielle watches them gallop off through the crowd. She laughs and shakes her head. Xena returns, leading Ares by the hand.

XENA:

Hey, where's Haimon running off to with Darion?

GABRIELLE:

He had a bit of a run-in with a honey covered apple and Haimon is getting him cleaned up. Xena, do you think you could keep an eye on Darion tonight? Haimon and I need to talk.

ARES:

"Talk"? (he turns to Xena) You know, Xena, after all these years I think it's time you told your goody-goody little friend here all about the birds and the bees.

Xena gives Ares a quick elbow to his side and he recoils.

ARES:

Ow! You know if I was still mortal that could leave a mark--

XENA (smiling at Gabrielle):

We'll be glad to watch Darion for you.

A middle aged villager comes up, tapping Gabrielle on the shoulder.

VILLAGER:

Say, you're Gabrielle, aren't you? The uhhh...oh, what in Ares' name did he call you? The Battling Bard of Potidaea.

GABRIELLE (nods carefully):

I'm Gabrielle.

VILLAGER:

There's some young hothead over in the tavern bragging about how he's going to fight you.

GABRIELLE (shaking her head in exasperation):

Taphius...

XENA (smirking):

Persistent little bugger, isn't he?

GABRIELLE:

I think it's time to put an end to this once and for all.

Xena gestures towards the tavern with her arm.

XENA:

Lead the way.

ARES:

Be careful, Gabrielle. You should never underestimate an opponent.

Gabrielle rolls her eyes at Xena.

GABRIELLE:

Come on.

Ares sighs and shakes his head as they walk off.

ARES:

Don't say I didn't warn you.

CUT TO

The tavern. Taphius leans his elbows against the bar and points at the barkeep.

TAPHIUS:

Someday you'll be able to say that you served the man that defeated the Battling Bard of Potidaea.

BARKEEP:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. She'll anoint your blade with her blood so that your name will be forever celebrated as the greatest of all warriors and so on and so forth. Are you actually going to order a drink or do you plan on standing here all night boring me to death?

TAPHIUS:

You would dare to insult Taphius the Strong?

Gabrielle comes up behind him.

GABRIELLE:

More like Taphius the Wrong.

A smile slowly spreads across Taphius' face as he turns to face her. Xena stands behind Gabrielle.

TAPHIUS:

Are you here to finally give me my satisfaction, Gabrielle? Perhaps now you're ready to accept your destiny--and mine.

GABRIELLE (patiently):

Taphius, I'm warning you for the last time. Walk away now before anyone gets hurt.

TAPHIUS:

As a warrior, I'm prepared to accept the consequences of my choices. Are *you*?

Gabrielle glances at Xena and sighs tiredly.

GABRIELLE:

Yeah--as a matter of fact I am.

Gabrielle draws her sais and turns, holding them out to Xena, who stares at them in confusion.

XENA:

Gabrielle, what are you--?

GABRIELLE:

Take them, Xena. (Xena is momentarily too shocked to move) Take them!

Xena takes Gabrielle's sais and eyes her curiously. Gabrielle turns back to Taphius.

GABRIELLE:

Congratulations, Taphius. You've just destroyed the Battling Bard of Potidaea. (she holds out her arms) I'm totally unarmed. What kind of a name would you be making for yourself now by taking on the plain, old Bard of Potidaea?

TAPHIUS:

Now hold on a minute!

GABRIELLE:

And just to show there are no hard feelings, I'll even buy you a drink to commemorate your victory. (with her thumb, she flips a coin onto the bar and glances at the barkeep) Make sure Taphius the Strong here is taken care of--and don't give him any of that cheap swill from under the bar. A warrior like him deserves only the best.

TAPHIUS (reddening):

I'm not going to let you get away with this. Sooner or later you're going to fight me.

GABRIELLE:

You're wasting your time, Taphius--there's no way I'm ever going to fight you.

TAPHIUS (smirking):

Never say never, Gabrielle. Maybe all I need is to find the right incentive.

BARKEEP:

Then you'd best look elsewhere. I don't want no trouble in here so why don't you move along?

TAPHIUS (glares at Gabrielle):

This isn't over.

GABRIELLE (nods):

We'll see about that.

Obviously embarrassed, Taphius lowers his eyes, unable to meet the gaze of any of the other patrons. He makes his way to the door. Haimon has just come in, glares at Taphius and steps aside in order to let him pass. Taphius walks out and Xena smirks and throws her hands up in triumph.

XENA:

The air smells better in here already. (she holds out the sais to Gabrielle) I guess you can take these back now.

Gabrielle looks down at her sais, as if unsure whether to take them or not. Finally, she shakes her head.

GABRIELLE:

It might be better if you hold onto them for a little while. I mean--he could come back.

Haimon comes up to her.

HAIMON:

Let me guess. That was Taphius?

XENA and GABRIELLE (nodding tiredly):

Taphius.

XENA (looks around):

Where's Darion?

HAIMON:

I left him outside to play.

GABRIELLE:

I'm not surprised Ares isn't here. He'd have to eat his own words and admit to me that he was wrong.

XENA (grins):

Oh, I could get him to show. I'd just have to give him the right incentive.

Gabrielle's head snaps up at this and her eyes go wide as something occurs to her.

GABRIELLE (whispering to herself):

Incentive...

Gabrielle strides quickly towards the door, shoving a burly drunk out of her way.

DRUNK:

Hey!

Xena and Haimon glance at one another in confusion then follow after Gabrielle. They catch up to her just outside the doorway. Gabrielle stands frozen, her shoulders hunched up tensely and her fists clenched tightly.

XENA:

Gabrielle, what's the--?

Xena looks off in the direction that Gabrielle is staring. Across the street, Taphius can be seen talking to Darion. He kneels down and pats the boy on the shoulder.

XENA (cautiously reaching out to her):

Gabrielle--

Not hearing her, Gabrielle bolts across the street. Taphius looks up and doesn't have time to react before she flies at him with a shrill cry. She kicks him across the face and he lands hard on his back. Taphius rolls away as Gabrielle lifts her boot to bring it down on his face. She shifts her balance and kicks him twice in the lower back.

GABRIELLE:

You dirty son of a--if you ever touch him again I'm going to--

By now the villagers on the street have formed a circle around Gabrielle and Taphius. The tavern dwellers have also spilled outside, further cluttering the street. Xena and Haimon can be seen trying to fight their way through the crowd.

HAIMON:

Out of the way!

XENA:

Move!

Haimon is able to break through the crowd first. Gabrielle is now sitting on Taphius' chest, striking him repeatedly across the face with her fist. Darion looks on. His face is drained of all color and his expression is disturbingly remote.

XENA:

Haimon, get Darion out of there!

Haimon grabs Darion and throws him over his shoulder.

HAIMON (strikes out at the gawking crowd with his open hand):

Get the *hell* out of my way!

Xena forces her way through the crowd. Despite herself, she can't help pausing a second, staring at the scene before her in both horror, shock and morbid fascination. In a blind rage, Gabrielle continues to strike Taphius in the face, but he is no longer offering any resistance. There is a flash of blue light and Ares appears beside Xena, watching with a grim expression on his face.

Eve breaks through the crowd.

EVE:

For Eli's sake! Gabrielle--please! You're--!

Gabrielle gives no indication that she has even heard Eve.

Two arms wrap themselves around Gabrielle's waist. Xena drags her off of Taphius.

GABRIELLE (still kicking and swinging her fists):

Let me *go!* I'm going to--! (she struggles but cannot break Xena's hold on her) Get *off!*

XENA:

Gabrielle! (she jerks Gabrielle as if to shake her out of her haze) That's *enough!*

Finally coming back to her senses, Gabrielle realizes that it is Xena restraining her. She stops struggling and her body perceptibly sags.

GABRIELLE:

Xena...

She notices Ares watching her. He sighs and shakes his head. Almost as if noticing him for the first time, Gabrielle looks down at Taphius, who is lying motionless on the ground. His face is covered in blood. Eve is kneeling beside him, her fingers pressed against his neck, feeling for a pulse. Finally, she pulls her hand back and looks up, her expression grave.

EVE:

He's dead.

GABRIELLE (her eyes widening in horror):

No...no, that's not possible.

XENA (gently):

Gabrielle--

Gabrielle breaks Xena's hold on her and stumbles away, the crowd parting before her.

CUT TO

Gabrielle stands behind a house, breathing hard, staring at the blood on her hands.

She looks up, her lips pressed together, her eyes narrowing.

GABRIELLE (forcefully):

Ares!

A silver-blue light flares, and then Ares is standing near her, arms folded on his chest. His face is cold and hard, and now he looks very much like the God of War.

ARES (gives Gabrielle a curious, slightly worried look):

Don't tell me you could feel that I was there.

GABRIELLE (wearily):

I don't know...maybe I just knew you would be. (she looks at him and flinches slightly under his heavy stare) Are you happy now?

ARES:

Me? You think I wanted *this*?

GABRIELLE (bitterly):

So why are you here, Ares? What's your problem?

ARES:

I'll tell you what *your* problem is. Like it or not, you're a warrior with a warrior's reputation. But you refuse to accept the responsibility that goes along with it. That makes you dangerous.

GABRIELLE:

What's *that* supposed to mean?

ARES:

You could have avoided this if you had accepted his challenge in the first place. You would have

stayed in charge the whole time and he would have gone home with a few cuts and bruises. (close-up on Gabrielle as she lowers her eyes) Instead, you let things get out of control.

GABRIELLE (whispers):
Out of control...

Xena comes running around the corner.

XENA:
Gabrielle! (she stops and looks suspiciously at Ares) What are you doing here?

ARES (stung by the hostile edge in her voice, assumes a sarcastic tone):
Just discussing someone's problem with anger management.

XENA (brusquely):
Leave her alone.

Ares stares at her heavily, biting his lip, and vanishes in a flash.

XENA (hugs Gabrielle and rests her head on Gabrielle's shoulder, blinking back tears):
Oh, Gabrielle...

Gabrielle stands there stiffly, allowing Xena to hold her but not responding. After a moment she blinks hard and shakes her head.

GABRIELLE:
Darion...is he--?

XENA (gently):
He's okay...he's okay. He's with Haimon.

GABRIELLE:
I need to find him. I need to try to explain.

Gabrielle turns and walks off. Xena is right behind her. Haimon and Darion are around the corner of the house. Haimon is rubbing the boy's shoulder soothingly. Gabrielle stops and watches them a second, biting her lip. Haimon looks up at her sadly and Darion turns around, seeing her. Gabrielle forces a tiny smile onto her face and takes a step forward.

GABRIELLE:
Darion--

With a terrified expression, Darion shrinks back and throws himself against Haimon who immediately picks the boy up in his arms. Gabrielle stops walking towards them and watches in agonized guilt as Darion buries his face against Haimon's shoulder. Haimon hugs the boy tightly against him and gazes wistfully at Gabrielle a moment. He turns and the camera stays on him as he slowly carries Darion away:

FADE OUT

THE END

[Gabrielle's warrior angst reared its ugly head again during the production of this motion picture.]