

SHIPPER SEASON EIGHT

“We Who Are About To Die”

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Logline

When Xena and Gabrielle visit Rome, the murder of a nobleman precipitates a political crisis—and forces Xena to come to the aid of an old enemy.

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TEASER

FADE IN

On a street in Rome. Xena and Gabrielle are walking down the street, facing the camera. The street is crowded, lively and colorful; everything seems to have an air of prosperity. As they walk, Gabrielle looks around, obviously very pleased by what she sees. Xena pauses as they pass a food stall and makes a quick purchase, then runs to catch up to Gabrielle.

XENA:

Wait up! Here--honey-covered figs.

She offers a fig to Gabrielle before popping one in her mouth and licking her sticky fingers clean.

GABRIELLE:

Thanks. (she nibbles on the fig diffidently) Since when do you have such a sweet tooth?

XENA:

Since Darion. That kid is a bad influence on me, you know. For the past three days all I've been able to think about is getting really good honey-covered figs once we got to Rome.

Gabrielle sees six acrobats beginning a performance in the middle of the street and stops to look. Xena stands behind her, stuffing figs into her mouth watching as one of the acrobats goes into a handstand and arches her back so that her body is in a backwards loop with her feet dangling in front of her face.

XENA (unimpressed):
I can do that.

GABRIELLE (rolls her eyes, with affectionate irony):
Oh yeah...maybe five years ago. (She chuckles as Xena glares at her in mock outrage. They resume walking; Gabrielle looks around, evidently more and more thrilled by what she sees) Who would have ever believed that a Roman emperor could do all this? Look around, Xena. I haven't seen a single beggar since we entered Rome. It's thriving under Nero.

XENA (inspecting a coin the fig merchant had given her as change):
Something tells me Agrippina has something to do with it too. Take a look.

She holds the coin up for Gabrielle's inspection. The camera zooms in as she flips it to show Nero's likeness on one side, Agrippina's on the other.

GABRIELLE (laughs in disbelief):
An emperor sharing power with his mother! I don't think Rome has ever seen anything like that before!

XENA:
Rome has never seen anyone like Agrippina before.

GABRIELLE:
Now that they've got an empire to run, I wonder if they'll even have time to see us.

CUT TO

Inside the imperial palace. Xena and Gabrielle wait in the atrium. Agrippina and Nero enter arm in arm. Agrippina breaks away from her son and strides over to Xena, grasping her by the arms.

AGRIPPINA:
Xena! I didn't know whether to believe it when I'd gotten word that you had entered the city. I hope this is a social call, not business.

XENA:
Gabrielle and I just thought we would see how you were getting along.

NERO:
Excellent! You'll stay here as our guests. Gabrielle, I hope you will honor us with one of your stories after dinner tonight.

AGRIPPINA (gently scolding):
Xena and Gabrielle are here as our guests, Domitius. They shouldn't have to work for their supper.

Nero glares at his mother. The air is thick with tension until Gabrielle clears her throat.

GABRIELLE:

Oh, I think I could be persuaded to tell one or two--

NERO (nods grudgingly):

No, no. My mother is quite right. You're here as our guests. (he forces a smile onto his face to alleviate the tension then reaches out to squeeze Gabrielle's elbow) We want you both to take advantage of our hospitality.

XENA:

We've already experienced it--out on the streets. You and Agrippina are to be commended. It looks like Rome is really flourishing under your rule.

NERO:

Thank you. It may not be terribly modest of me to say so myself--but I do believe that Rome has entered a new era of domestic tranquility.

CUT TO

A semi-dark room. A middle aged Roman man--obviously a nobleman by his dress--seizes an unseen assailant by the arms. There is a momentary struggle but he is clearly no match for this person. He stumbles backwards a step and is hit in the temple with an ornate brass candlestick. He sways, then crumples to the floor face first. A dark pool of blood spreads around his head on the marbled floor.

The shot of him laying there on the floor gradually becomes lighter and lighter until it is apparent that it is now morning.

Off-camera, the sound of the door opening is heard, followed by footsteps. A pair of feet in sandals and the hem of a white dress come into view. The person stops abruptly. A shrill, loud female scream pierces the silence.

CUT TO

The lavish atrium of the house, decorated in marble and gold, with rows of male and female busts on pedestals, and a square pool at the center. A crowd of slaves is milling about the atrium, the low, nervous buzz of their voices filling the air.

Several important-looking men, clad in white togas lined with purple or red, enter. They are led by a tall, broad-shouldered man in the uniform of a Praetorian guard. They stop.

PRAETORIAN:

Where is he?

Shaking in fear, a man of about forty in a brown tunic and pants, with blond hair and a curly blond beard, steps forward and points to a door. The Roman officials and the Praetorian walk silently toward the door and go inside.

The camera pans over several worried-looking slaves.

SLAVE #1 (a young man):

The master's been murdered--and they have no idea who did it.

SLAVE #2 (a middle-aged woman):

You know what that means for all of us.

The camera pans to a slender, slightly built dark-skinned young girl in a green dress, her curly brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She looks terrified. A woman's hand reassuringly squeezes her shoulder as we:

FADE OUT

ACT ONE

FADE IN

A small though lavish banquet in Nero's palace. About a dozen diners are reclining back on cushions and eating in the typical Roman fashion. The atmosphere is tranquil. Nero and Gabrielle are reclining next to one another, talking. Xena and Agrippina look on a moment. Xena's expression is unreadable; Agrippina smiles at her.

AGRIPPINA:

My son is very fond of your friend.

XENA:

I think Gabrielle is loving the idea of a Roman emperor being her biggest fan.

AGRIPPINA (musingly):

Maybe not just a fan. Domitius hasn't made an official announcement yet, but he's liberating Greece. Of course it's more a symbolic gesture than anything--but it would mean that Roman taxation of Greece would be a thing of the past.

Xena's mouth drops open in shock. Agrippina giggles almost girlishly and shrugs.

AGRIPPINA:

Ordinary men send flowers. This is courtship to a Roman emperor.

XENA:

You mean--

AGRIPPINA:

Empress Gabrielle has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

Xena stammers in effort to respond to this.

CUT TO

Nero and Gabrielle.

NERO:

I know it's bad manners for me to ask--especially since you're here as my guest--but I *would* love to hear you perform after dinner, Gabrielle.

Gabrielle is clearly flattered. Before she can answer, a Praetorian guard enters and glances at Nero, clearly needing to speak to him. Nero gains to his feet.

NERO (to Gabrielle):

Excuse me a moment.

He steps away to confer privately with the Praetorian for a moment. He returns to Gabrielle appearing very distressed.

GABRIELLE:

Are you all right?

NERO (numbly shaking his head):

Senator Gracchus has just been found dead.

GABRIELLE:

I'm sorry. Was Gracchus a very close friend of yours?

NERO:

No...as a matter of fact he was one of my most stubborn political opponents. Not only that--but personally, I always thought him to be a vicious, despicable man. May the gods forgive me for speaking ill of the dead, but I think the world will be a much better place without Gracchus in it.

GABRIELLE:

Then why are you--?

NERO (shakes his head):

You don't understand, Gabrielle. Gracchus was found murdered inside his own home--with no signs of a break in. Which means it was most likely one of his slaves that did it. Unless the killer can be found, Roman law requires that every one of Gracchus' slaves pay for his murder with their own lives. (off Gabrielle's astounded look) Oh, I know it sounds cruel. But it's proven to be a rather...effective deterrent against anyone that has designs on killing their master--though, by the gods, I would sooner honor the murderer of Gracchus than execute him. (sighs) Well, I have sent Tigellinus, my head counselor, to investigate. I pray he finds the killer before I must order the deaths of those innocent slaves.

GABRIELLE:

How many slaves belong to Gracchus?

NERO (with a sickened expression):

Over two hundred.

Gabrielle stares at him, horrified.

CUT TO

The antechamber to Gracchus' bedroom. Tigellinus, a dignified middle-aged man in a dark blue cloak over a white toga and a large golden medallion with the imperial eagle of Rome on his chest, is conferring in hushed tones with one of the Roman officials. The Praetorian guard seen in the teaser enters and salutes.

TIGELLINUS (turns to him):

Well, Praetorian? Has your investigation of the crime scene turned anything up?

PRAETORIAN:

It has, Tigellinus. (he places an unseen piece of evidence into Tigellinus' hand) I found it lying under the bed. The chain is broken. Gracchus probably tore it off in the struggle with his assailant. It's not the kind of jewelry you'd find Roman gentry wearing.

TIGELLINUS (musingly, as he inspects the still-unseen object in his palm):

No...no it's not.

CUT TO

Nero's private chambers. Xena and Gabrielle slowly pace back and forth. Agrippina can be seen sitting in the background, embroidering. Nero stands by the window, plucking nervously at his lute. Tigellinus enters.

NERO (eagerly):

What news, Tigellinus? Tell me you've found the killer.

TIGELLINUS (bows):

I have, Caesar. (he pauses.)

NERO:

Well? Are you going to keep me in suspense? Out with it! Who *is* the devil?

TIGELLINUS:

Xena of Amphipolis, Destroyer of Nations.

GABRIELLE:

What?

XENA:

I didn't even know--

NERO:

Nonsense! Xena hasn't left the palace grounds since she arrived yesterday.

TIGELLINUS:

With all due respect, Caesar, Xena's stealth is legendary. I've no doubt she could come and go from these grounds with you none the wiser.

AGRIPPINA:

Oh, this is ridiculous! Tigellinus, I would suggest that you produce some particularly damning evidence before you go hurling insane accusations.

TIGELLINUS:

My Empress (bows slightly), I am about to do just that.

He holds up a medallion in his hand. Nero reaches out to take it but Agrippina steps forward, snatching it from Tigellinus.

AGRIPPINA:

Let me see that! (she studies it carefully, reading the inscription carved into it) Xena of Amphipolis, Destroyer of Nations...

She hands the medallion off to Xena.

TIGELLINUS:

We found it near the body. Given the broken chain, I'm assuming that Gracchus ripped it off the neck of his killer in a struggle. In the haste to get away the killer wasn't able to retrieve the medallion.

XENA (shrugs calmly):

It isn't mine.

TIGELLINUS (snorts):

I wouldn't expect you to claim ownership.

Gabrielle steps forward to get a look. Recognition flashes across her face.

GABRIELLE (blurts out):

But this is--

Xena gives her a sharp look.

GABRIELLE (lamely):

...not Xena's medallion.

AGRIPPINA:

Tigellinus, I hardly think that Xena would wear such a thing with her own name inscribed on it. (smiles) She doesn't strike me as quite so--narcissistic.

TIGELLINUS (rubs his chin reflectively):

Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it doesn't belong to Xena at all. Perhaps it's more likely that it belongs to one of her...loyal minions.

He glances meaningfully at Gabrielle. Nero steps in front of her, as if to shield her from Tigellinus.

NERO:

Have you gone mad, man? To even suggest that Gabrielle would-- (he shakes his head, almost speechless with anger. After a moment he regains control of himself.) Have you even tried to find out if the medallion belonged to one of Gracchus' slaves?

TIGELLINUS:

What would be the point? What would a slave be doing with such a thing?

NERO:

Tigellinus, I put you in charge of this investigation to find the truth. But you seem to be more interested in besmirching the name of two of our closest friends. Obviously I have to take matters into my own hands.

Nero storms out of the room, with Tigellinus and Agrippina are close behind. Gabrielle steps up close to Xena.

GABRIELLE (murmuring):

We have to tell them, Xena.

XENA:

I'm hoping we won't have to. (she shakes her head) I'm sorry. But the idea of being an informer for Rome is just so...

Gabrielle looks at her.

XENA:

Don't worry. I'm not about to let anything happen to those slaves either.

CUT TO

The atrium in Gracchus' house. A crowd of slaves has been gathered. Tigellinus stands before them, arms folded imposingly across his chest. Nero, Agrippina, Xena and Gabrielle look on.

NERO:

Which one of you is the house steward?

The blond-haired slave in the brown tunic who was seen in the teaser tentatively raises his hand and takes a nervous step forward.

HOUSE STEWARD:

I--I am.

NERO (snaps his fingers at Tigellinus):

Show him.

TIGELLINUS (holding out the medallion for the steward's inspection):

Have you ever seen this before?

HOUSE STEWARD:

I--I--I'm not sure. I might have but--

TIGELLINUS:

I have very little patience for slaves and even less for fools. Do I really need to remind you that your life hangs in the balance here--as well as the lives of two hundred of your fellow slaves? So I'll ask you again. Have you ever seen this medallion before?

HOUSE STEWARD (paling):

Yes...it looks like the one I've seen Leonia wear.

Xena and Gabrielle look at each other.

XENA:

Who's Leonia?

HOUSE STEWARD (pointing):

That's her. That's Leonia.

The camera pans over to the slave to whom the steward is pointing. It's Sabina. She steps forward with a cool, contemptuous smile on her face as we:

FADE OUT

ACT TWO

FADE IN

Gabrielle and Nero are alone in Nero's private quarters, luxuriously decorated with exotic plants, tapestries depicting scenes from Greek history and mythology, and statues. Nero is nibbling with relish on the drumstick of a roasted pheasant while Gabrielle circles the room restlessly.

NERO:

Gabrielle, please sit and eat. After the distasteful way in which our dinner was interrupted earlier, I would think you'd be starving.

GABRIELLE:

No thanks. I've lost my appetite.

NERO (licks his fingers and frowns):

I'm sorry, but I fail to see why you're so broken up about this slave. I would have thought you'd be pleased that we found the killer. Or would you rather see two hundred innocent slaves condemned to death?

GABRIELLE:

No. No of course not--but--

NERO:

Not to mention the fact that, as you yourself have told me, Sabina has been a thorn in your side for quite awhile now. Isn't that true? For you, Xena *and* your Amazons. Trust me, we'll all sleep better once Valeria Sabina is hanging from a cross.

Gabrielle flinches noticeably.

GABRIELLE:

Domitius...I know that Sabina has to pay for her crimes. But can't she be--can't it be some way other than... *that*? Something more--

NERO (sneering):
Humane?

Gabrielle looks at him.

NERO:
Why?

GABRIELLE:
Sabina was born a Roman citizen. Isn't there some other way?

NERO (sighs):
Gabrielle, don't think for a moment that I don't understand how hard this is for you. I'm sure seeing anyone--even Valeria Sabina--suffer this way must churn up all sorts of unpleasant memories for you. Believe me, if there were any other way, I would take it. But this is about more than justice. It's about preserving law and order in the Empire. Sabina is a slave--a slave that murdered her master. Besides, her father was stripped of his Roman citizenship by Julius Caesar. The law requires that Sabina be executed by crucifixion. It's my only option. I'm sorry.

Gabrielle studies him a moment, then nods sadly.

GABRIELLE:
I know. I know.

CUT TO

A half-dark prison cell. Sabina sits on a pile of straw in a corner. The door opens with a screech. Sabina lifts her head and sees Xena standing in the doorway, a lantern in her hand. Xena's face is impassive; Sabina stares at her for a moment and then gives her a cold, sarcastic smile.

SABINA:
Well, look who's here. Xena. Did you come to offer me moral support?

XENA (in a steely voice):
Maybe to see you get what you deserve.

SABINA (smiles):
Oh, really. Well, you'll enjoy this.

She stands up, turns her back to Xena and lifts her shirt. In the light of the lantern, we see that her back is criss-crossed with scars. A close-up on Xena's face as she flinches.

XENA:
Who did that to you?

SABINA (lowers her shirt and turns around):
What a funny question to ask of a slave. This is what happens to slaves, didn't you know? Especially slaves who don't know their place. (she leans against the wall, smiling again) Got to hand it to your Corinthian friends, Xena--they're smart.

XENA:

Or maybe you were stupid enough to get caught.

SABINA:

Now, now, Xena--you know better than that. *You* never did manage to catch me, did you? (cocks her head in mock sympathy) All they had to do was put a bounty on my head--big enough to give my former lieutenant an incentive to turn me in. Of course, they got their money back when they sold me to Roman slave traders. Now that was a masterstroke! They could have put me in prison, you know--or killed me. But putting me up on the slave market--now that was creative. You might say it was revenge for fun and profit.

XENA (her face is still rigidly impassive but the look in her eyes is one of growing unease):

You're breaking my heart.

SABINA (stares at her attentively):

You know, I think I am. It's tough, isn't it--having principles? Part of you thinks I'm getting what I deserve. Part of you thinks no one deserves to be a slave, not even Valeria Sabina. Quite a dilemma, isn't it?

XENA (abruptly):

Why did you kill Senator Gracchus?

SABINA (mockingly):

Changing the subject? (off Xena's expectant glare) Why did I kill Senator Gracchus... (pretends to think) Oh, I don't know. All work and no play makes for some very boring Saturday nights?

Xena's lips tighten; realizing the futility of asking any further questions, she turns around and starts to leave.

SABINA:

Oh, Xena?

Xena stops and half-turns toward her.

SABINA:

I guess I'm going to follow in your footsteps after all. Want to share some tips on getting crucified?

Xena flinches visibly and knocks on the door. The door is opened from the outside and Xena leaves, without looking at Sabina.

CUT TO

Outside the prison--a low building of gray stone, with steps leading down to the entrance. Xena walking briskly up the steps, her face set. The camera pulls back to show the Roman forum, where the prison is located. It's a bright, sunny afternoon and the forum is bustling with activity. As Xena walks away from the prison entrance, she is approached by a dark-skinned girl in a green dress--the one who was seen in Senator Gracchus' house at the end of the teaser.

GIRL (timidly):

Are you Xena? (lost in thought, Xena walks on, oblivious, and the girl speaks louder) Xena?

XENA (flinches and turns to her):
Who are you?

GIRL:
My name is Siran. I'm... (she hesitates) I'm one of Senator Gracchus' slaves.

Xena stops and looks at her curiously.

XENA:
What do you want?

SIRAN:
You saw her, didn't you? Leonia?

XENA (frowns, looking at Siran's stricken face):
Was she a friend of yours?

SIRAN (dismayed):
Was? Is she--

XENA (sharply):
Not yet. But she might as well be. There's nothing anyone can do to save her now.

SIRAN (her eyes filling with tears):
Can you get me in to see her?

XENA (warily):
I...I could try. (she puts a comforting hand on Siran's shoulder) Siran...how much do you really know about Leonia?

SIRAN (vehemently):
I don't care! She's--she's going to die for me!

XENA (shocked):
What?

Siran starts to cry. Some people give them curious looks, and Xena pulls her aside around the corner of the prison.

XENA:
Siran, tell me what happened. (pauses, then adds uncertainly) Maybe I can help her. (Siran continues to cry, saying nothing) Did--did Sabina kill Senator Gracchus?

SIRAN (sniffles):
Who?

XENA:
Sabina--that's her real name. (Grabs Siran's shoulders) Come on, Siran. Tell me!

SIRAN:
She did. But she was... (sniffles again) ...she was protecting me.

XENA:

Protecting from--?

SIRAN (burst into sobs):

--that horrible, horrible man!

XENA (her face darkens):

Your master?

SIRAN:

Yes! (she calms down a little and wipes away tears) He--he wanted me to-- (her voice falters)

XENA (grimly):

I understand. So--what happened?

SIRAN:

That day, he told me that from now on, I would be the one to bring him his bedtime goblet of wine. (she sniffles again) Leonia knew he was up to no good--so she followed me and stayed in the antechamber. Then... (her voice breaks off)

XENA:

He attacked you? (Siran nods wordlessly) And Sabina--

SIRAN (whispers):

She was only trying to defend me. I didn't see her kill him--as soon as I broke free she told me to run away, and then they continued to struggle--but... (she bursts into tears again)

Xena gives her a thoughtful, grim look, and then rather awkwardly pats her hair.

XENA (softly):

Thank you for telling me this, Siran. I'll-- (she sighs) I'll see what I can do.

She starts to walk away.

SIRAN:

Wait! (Xena turns) Can't you get me in to see her?

Xena pauses, obviously hesitant; then her face softens.

XENA (takes Siran's shoulder):

All right, come on.

CUT TO

The prison entrance. Xena and Siran start to walk down the steps.

CUT TO

A murky corridor inside the prison. Xena shows a parchment on which one can see the imperial Roman seal to the jailer.

JAILER (grumbles):

You again? But you just left!

XENA:

You're so observant.

JAILER (examines the parchment):

This doesn't say anything about letting in anyone else.

XENA:

It doesn't say anything about wasting my time, either. (scornfully) What are you afraid of? Think this girl (motions toward Siran) is going to break your prisoner out of jail?

JAILER (doubtfully):

Well, I guess there's no real harm in it... (he takes a bunch of keys off his belt and goes to open the door to Sabina's cell)

CUT TO

Inside the cell. As the door opens, Sabina looks up; for a moment she looks surprised before assuming her habitual mask of cool irony.

SABINA:

Forget something?

XENA:

Yeah. Her.

She steps aside to let in Siran. As Siran steps forward timidly, Sabina's emotional control slips for a moment and her face reveals a complex mix of joy, tenderness, and anguish.

SABINA (rises abruptly):

Siran!

Siran rushes toward Sabina and falls into her arms, hugging her tearfully.

SABINA (regains control):

Now, now...come on, Siran...don't be silly... (she pats the girl's hair and then glances at Xena, obviously embarrassed)

XENA:

Why didn't you tell me?

SABINA:

Tell you what?

XENA:

Why you killed Gracchus.

SABINA (smirks):

A girl's got to protect her reputation. Next thing I know, little Gabrielle would be writing about it in one of her scrolls, telling the whole world that I've become a do-gooder just like you.

XENA (exasperated):

Right. (to Siran) I'll wait for you outside.

CUT TO

Xena walking toward the imperial palace.

CUT TO

A room in the palace. Nero sits in a chair, absent-mindedly touching the strings of a lyre. Xena sits across from him, leaning forward, her posture tense.

XENA:

Nero, I'm not asking you to spare Sabina's life, merely to change the method of her execution...

NERO (impatiently):

Gabrielle and I have been over that already. I told her--nothing can be done. She's a slave who killed her master.

XENA:

But if you knew why--

NERO (puts the lyre aside, his face hardening suddenly):

The law doesn't care, Xena. There is no mitigation to such an act. Otherwise, none of us will be safe in our beds.

XENA (vehemently):

Maybe people who think they can own other human beings shouldn't expect to be safe in their beds.

NERO:

Our customs and institutions are what they are, Xena. Don't forget--

XENA (bitterly):

--that I'm speaking to the Emperor of Rome? How could I. Gabrielle and I helped put you on the throne.

NERO (his manner softening):

I'm not forgetting that, either. I would never begrudge you--or Gabrielle--any favor that's within my power. But Sabina's fate is decided. Even as Emperor, I can't change it.

On the words "Sabina's fate is decided," the camera pans to Xena, who stares at Nero, calm but obviously pondering something. While Nero is still speaking, we start a slow:

DISSOLVE TO

The Forum, just outside the prison.

Sabina is led out of the prison in a white linen cloth wrapped around her body, barefoot, hands tied behind her back.

A montage of images as Sabina is marched along a road toward a hill on the edge of Rome. She is led by two guards, with an escort of eight uniformed, helmeted Roman soldiers marching single file, four on each side. The procession is headed by Tigellinus riding a gray horse. Sabina looks calm, her hair blowing in the wind.

The procession approaches a hill and marches up the slope. At the top of the hill, a cross is lying flat, two soldiers with hammers and nails standing on both sides of it. Tigellinus stops, signaling to the procession behind him to stop as well, and dismounts. He turns to Sabina.

TIGELLINUS:

Leonia, slave of Senator Horatius Gracchus! You have been sentenced to die for the crime of taking the life of your master. Let the sentence be carried out.

He gestures to the guards who are holding Sabina. They lead Sabina toward the cross; one of them pulls out a dagger and cuts the rope binding Sabina's wrists.

One of the eight soldiers lined up behind her suddenly breaks rank and charges at the guards holding Sabina, downing one of them with a powerful punch to the face and kicking the other down.

Pan to Tigellinus' shocked face.

TIGELLINUS:

Mutiny!

The soldier and Sabina run toward Tigellinus' horse. Sabina turns abruptly toward the soldier to get a look at his face. The camera zooms in on the soldier's face: it's Xena, her hair tucked in under the Roman helmet. Her eyes meet Sabina's; the camera pans back to Sabina, who smiles a little.

Recovering from the surprise, the other seven soldiers charge at them. Xena draws a sword and holds them off; Sabina punches one of the soldiers in the throat and grabs his sword while he doubles over choking, then quickly runs him through with his own sword, spins around and cuts down another soldier who comes at her. Xena looks at her and her lips tighten; she is obviously disturbed by Sabina's readiness to kill. A soldier charges at Xena; she kicks the sword from his hand, making it fly up into the air, then catching it and using its flat side to knock out the soldier with a blow across his helmet. Another soldier swings his sword at Xena; she spars with him quickly and runs him through.

Just as some of the soldiers who are down are starting to get up, Xena leaps on Tigellinus' horse, then reaches out to Sabina but stops before Sabina can take her hand.

XENA:

Drop the sword. (Sabina hesitates) Drop it, or I leave without you!

Sabina turns around and throws the sword at one of the soldiers who is staggering to his feet; the sword goes through his chest and he falls down, dead. Xena looks very grim; still, she extends her arm to Sabina and helps her up in the saddle in front of her.

TIGELLINUS (yells furiously):

Stop them!

XENA (prods the horse with her boots):

Yah!

The horse takes off at a gallop--the camera zooms in on the cross as the horse leaps over it--and Xena and Sabina ride away, going over the top of the hill, in the direction leading away from Rome, as we:

FADE OUT

ACT THREE

FADE IN

The atrium of Nero's Palace. Gabrielle sits alone on a marble bench, bent over a scroll laying on her lap. Nero enters carrying a platter laden with fruits. He watches her a moment before clearing his throat to announce his presence. Gabrielle looks up and he steps forward, a nervous smile on his face.

NERO:

You weren't at dinner. I wondered if you were all right.

GABRIELLE:

I wasn't very hungry.

NERO:

I took the liberty of bringing dessert for the both of us. Fresh melon, apricots and pears in a fig syrup.

Despite herself, Gabrielle cannot hide her delight at the mention of food.

GABRIELLE:

My mother's fig syrup was the sweetest I've ever tasted.

NERO:

I'm sure this can't compare to your mother's but I did find this particular recipe in Macedonia. I had my cook prepare it in your honor. May I join you?

Gabrielle sighs and nods, sliding over to make room for him on the bench. Nero takes a seat beside her, resting the platter in his lap. He takes a pear slice, dips it into the fig syrup and offers it to Gabrielle who takes it from him and eats pensively. Nero watches her carefully.

Nero reaches up and wipes a drop of syrup from the corner of her mouth.

NERO:

Good?

GABRIELLE (nods with a sigh):

Sweet.

She reaches out and takes a slice of melon from the tray on Nero's lap. He is silent a moment, then frowns.

NERO:

Gabrielle, I want you to know that I would never deny you anything if it was in my power to give. But my hands were tied with Sabina. (he smiles sadly.) In some ways being Emperor makes me more a slave to Rome than anyone.

GABRIELLE:

Do you want me to feel sorry for you, Domitius? You know, a part of me thinks Sabina deserves everything she's got coming to her. (she pauses a moment, then shivers and shakes her head) But it's not about Sabina. It's no secret how I feel about slavery.

He nods gently and touches the back of her hand.

NERO:

I understand. Perhaps one day someone far smarter than I will come along who's figured out how to abolish slavery in the Empire. (he grins) I wouldn't be surprised if that someone was you and Xena. (he touches his temple as his memory is jarred) Oh! I almost forgot! After reading one of your scrolls last night, I was inspired to write a poem in tribute of the Warrior Princess. It can't compare to your writings, but may I have the honor of reciting it for you?

Gabrielle is a bit flustered at the sudden turn in the conversation but she nods.

GABRIELLE:

Of--of course.

Nero stands and very carefully arranges himself. He takes a deep breath, squeezes his eyes shut and raises his arms dramatically.

NERO:

The Warrior Princess rides alone
Her past drives her from shame.
Against the forces of a dark world
She fights for good, not for fame.

Horns sound her coming, blare her name
"Make way the Warrior! Cheer!"
Drums beat a rhythm
Let villains beware
The Warrior Princess is here!

GABRIELLE (claps):

Domitius, I think Xena would be--

She is cut off by Tigellinus marching in.

TIGELLINUS:

Caesar, treason has been committed!

Nero leaps to his feet, slightly panicked.

NERO:

Treason? What? Where?

TIGELLINUS:

Sabina has escaped with the help of a Centurion--on my horse!

NERO:

How many men did you lose, Tigellinus?

TIGELLINUS:

How many? I don't know...perhaps three or four. No doubt Sabina used her feminine wiles to lure that Centurion into helping her. That horse was the pride of my stables--

NERO (reddening in rage):

Forget about your horse! Organize a search party. I don't care what it takes. I want Sabina and that Centurion found--and I want them both alive, Tigellinus. If anything happens to either one of them then you'll suffer in their place. Understood?

CUT TO

A field with a few sparse trees. Xena and Sabina come into view riding over a hilltop. Xena pulls on the bridle, slowing down the horse.

XENA:

You didn't have to kill that man.

SABINA (shrugs):

After all this time, I needed the target practice. Thought I might be getting rusty. (chuckles) So, what's your plan, Xena? Are you taking me in your personal custody?

XENA:

Don't worry, I'll find someone to watch over you.

SABINA:

Ooh--let me guess. You want to turn me over to that goody-two-shoes--what's his name?--the one who was chasing me all over Greece when you and I first met. (pauses) Unless, of course, you're talking about your boyfriend. I'm sure that would be a lot of fun for all involved. (chuckles) So...how *is* Ares these days?

Xena gives her a thoughtful look, then kicks the horse in the sides, making it go faster.

CUT TO

Xena and Sabina ride up to a gray granite building near a grove. The entrance is decorated with images of skulls and swords. Xena stops the horse.

SABINA (genuinely puzzled):

What's this?

XENA:

You ask too many questions. Get down.

She pushes Sabina off the horse, then dismounts, grabs Sabina's arm and heads inside the building.

CUT TO

Inside the building. It is a temple of Ares, decorated in the customary black, silver and red, with a massive throne with silver skulls for armrests and a tall statue of Ares carved from black stone. A priest, a middle-aged dark-haired, bearded man in a black robe with silver ornaments, is sorting through some of the sacrificial donations on the altar.

Xena comes in, pushing Sabina ahead of her.

XENA (businesslike):

Are you the priest of this temple?

PRIEST (turns around with a dignified air):

I am. Are you here to make a sacrifice to my lord Ares? (guardedly looks over Sabina) Uh--you do know that we don't do human sacrifices, right?

XENA (wryly):

Well, that's a relief. Nah, she's not a sacrifice--just someone I want to stash away here for the next three or four days.

PRIEST (indignant):

Excuse me, young woman. This is a temple of the God of War, not a babysitting service.

XENA (smirks):

And this is a warrior, not a baby. Look, all you have to do is make sure she doesn't escape. Oh, and feed her, I suppose. (gives Sabina a wry look) Nothing too fancy.

PRIEST (haughtily):

Absolutely not.

XENA (sighs):

I guess I'll just have to get your boss, then. (raises her voice) Ares!

Ares materializes in a flash of light; the priest drops to his knees, mouth agape.

PRIEST:

My lord--

ARES:

Get lost. (turns to Xena as the priest scrambles to his feet and hastily retreats to a back room) That's a rather different look for you... (as he notices Sabina, his eyes widen and his voice drops) ...isn't it. Well, *there's* a surprise.

SABINA (smiles brightly):

Ares. Last time we met, you were selling me out to your girlfriend after promising me your help.

ARES (points a finger at her):

I *never* promised you my help.

SABINA (cocks her head):

Hmm... "lead your armies to victory and make me proud" sounded pretty convincing to me.

Xena gives Ares a grim, suspicious look.

ARES (to Xena):

What are you doing with her?

XENA (reluctantly):

She was about to be crucified by the Romans.

SABINA (mocking):

And of course, our dear Xena *had* to save me--especially when she found out that I was sentenced to death for (makes a shocked face) doing a good deed. (turns to Xena, who is still holding her arm) So tell me, Xena--do you think I'm all ready to try and redeem my evil past? Think you can reform me?

XENA (gives her a narrow-eyed glare):

Sabina? Put a lid on it. (to Ares, coldly) All I need is a safe place to keep her before Gabrielle and I can take her back to Greece. Think you can arrange that?

ARES (thinks a moment, then raises his voice):

Massalus!

The frightened-looking priest comes out of the back room.

PRIEST:

My lord?

ARES:

Do what she (nods toward Xena) tells you.

PRIEST (bows):

I'm sorry, my lord--I didn't know she was acting on your--

ARES (impatiently):

Cut out the pleasantries. (gestures toward Sabina) Just make sure this one stays put.

PRIEST (nods nervously):

Yes, my lord. (to Sabina) Come along.

Sabina gives Ares a scornful look and follows the priest into the back of the temple. Just before disappearing from view, she stops and turns around.

SABINA (the sarcasm suddenly gone from her voice):

Xena?

XENA (harshly):

What?

Sabina's face reflects an emotional struggle.

SABINA (in a hushed voice):
Would you check up on Siran?

XENA (stares at her intently, then nods):
I will.

Sabina turns to go, then stops again and half-turns her head.

SABINA (in a tone that may or may not be sarcastic):
By the way, it was fun fighting by your side.

XENA (her eyes narrowing):
I wish I could say the pleasure was mutual.

Sabina shrugs and follows the priest, disappearing into an arched passageway. Ares stares after her, then turns to Xena.

ARES:
What was that all about?

XENA:
I'll tell you later. I have to get back to Rome. (she walks toward the door, then turns toward Ares, who is standing with his arms folded on his chest, scowling) Thanks.

ARES:
Thanks? I don't see you for a month and that's all you have to say to me?

XENA:
I've been busy.

ARES:
All right--what did I do now?

Xena's lips tighten; she is obviously struggling with something she wants to say but isn't sure she should. Then she whips around, a bitter look on her face.

XENA:
You used her, didn't you?

ARES (flabbergasted):
Who? Sabina? What did you want me to do, help her?

XENA:
No, stay away from her. (bitterly) It amused you, didn't it? Here was this girl who wanted to play Warrior Queen. And a pretty good fighter, too. Oh, you never actually *told* her she was your new favorite--you just let her believe she was. Don't forget, Ares--I know how you operate. (Ares scowls and says nothing) So she set her sights on Corinth, and ended up losing her army--and then her freedom.

ARES:
Give me a break. Sabina knew what she wanted long before she met me.

XENA:

Oh, I don't doubt it. You just made her think she could have it.

ARES (exasperated):

Look, what's with this sudden outbreak of fondness for Sabina? What is this, Love Your Enemy Week?

XENA (lowers her eyes):

She's done terrible things. But what happened to her wasn't right.

ARES:

And that was *my* fault? (Xena shrugs slightly and says nothing, still staring down. Ares approaches her and puts a hand on her arm) This isn't just about Sabina, is it?

Xena looks up at him, an anguished look on her face.

XENA:

At the Fates' temple--when we saw the lives we would have had if we'd made different choices--

ARES:

Great! Now it's something I *would* have done in a different future? You know--as I recall, your little sidekick *killed you* in one of those futures. Are you busting her chops about that?

XENA (vehemently):

I'm talking about what happened in this life. When Gabrielle and I fought the Horde--you were watching me the whole time. (Ares says nothing, watching her intently) You were waiting for things to get desperate enough that I'd have no choice but to accept your help.

ARES (reluctantly):

I was.

XENA:

And then Gabrielle gave water to a wounded enemy--and made a truce possible. (sarcastic) You must have been really pissed off. (she pauses, watching Ares as he scowls) There you were--just waiting for a chance to turn me.

ARES:

That's not exactly news to you, is it? (off her stricken look) Come on, Xena--I thought we'd agreed to put the past behind us.

XENA:

It's not just the past.

ARES:

What are you talking about?

XENA:

I saw your face when you were watching me--in that other future. Leading your army into battle--wading knee-deep in blood--running my sword through the gut of an enemy who had surrendered... (vehemently) Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it!

ARES (defiantly):

So I enjoyed watching you kick some ass. It was a good battle.

XENA:

You enjoyed watching me turn into a vicious killer.

ARES:

And you think I still want to turn you? (off her heavy silence, bitterly) I would have thought you'd know the answer to that by now.

XENA:

I don't have time for this.

She starts walking toward the door. Ares watches her, obviously struggling with himself; then his face softens.

ARES:

Xena!

Xena stops but doesn't turn.

ARES:

I saw what it did to you--watching that battle. This isn't what I want, okay?

Xena slowly turns to him and looks at him thoughtfully.

XENA (softly):

I believe you. (pauses) I'll see you when I'm back in Greece, okay?

ARES:

Yeah.

Xena hesitates for a moment, then comes up to Ares and takes his hand, lacing her fingers with his. He watches her guardedly; she leans forward to give him a short but tender kiss on the lips. When she pulls back, Ares looks at her with a faint smile, his face relaxing.

ARES:

See you back in Greece.

Xena nods, pulls her hand away and walks toward the door, then stops and turns.

XENA:

And Ares--thanks for letting Sabina stay here.

ARES:

You already thanked me.

XENA:

This time I mean it.

She walks out. Ares watches her thoughtfully, then vanishes.

CUT TO

A hallway in the imperial palace. Gabrielle approaches an ornate door guarded by a slave.

GABRIELLE:

Is the Emperor in?

SLAVE:

Yes--he just returned from a Senate session. (bows his head) He said you should be admitted to see him whenever you want.

Gabrielle looks slightly disconcerted. The slave opens the door and lets her in.

CUT TO

Inside Nero's office. He is sitting at a desk, a parchment in front of him. One of his advisors stands at his side.

As Gabrielle comes in, Nero lifts his head.

GABRIELLE:

Domitius. (she comes closer to the desk) I was just wondering if there was any news of Sabina.

NERO (shakes his head sadly):

No--none at all. She and that accursed centurion might as well have vanished into the ether. (off Gabrielle's startled look) What is it, Gabrielle?

GABRIELLE (to herself):

The ether...

NERO (jokingly):

What, do you think that Sabina may have been whisked away by a god? (Gabrielle looks away uncomfortably) Really, Gabrielle--all those adventures you have had with Xena have given you an overactive imagination. But I suppose that's a good thing in a bard. (he chuckles; then, suddenly, his expression turns sad) I would laugh about it--if you hadn't found me at such a dreadful moment.

GABRIELLE (looks up worriedly):

Dreadful? What happened?

NERO:

Because Sabina has escaped punishment for her master's murder, every slave in his house must be held responsible.

GABRIELLE (shocked):

What are you saying?

NERO (points to a parchment in front of him):

The Senate has just voted. Tomorrow, every one of Gracchus' slaves will be put to death.

GABRIELLE (gasps):

No!

NERO:

It's the law, Gabrielle. (he reaches for the quill in the inkstand)

GABRIELLE:

But you can't--you can't sign--*that!*

NERO:

Unfortunately, I can. (sighs dramatically) At moments like these, I do wish that I had never learned to write.

The camera zooms in on the parchment as he signs the decree with a flourish, then pans back to Gabrielle who looks on in dismay as we:

FADE OUT

ACT FOUR

FADE IN

Xena rides through the streets of Rome atop Argo. Looking around, she sees scattered groups of people, talking animatedly about something. While we can't hear their words, it is clear that unrest is in the air. One man standing in the center of a circle of people can be seen gesticulating wildly. Two Roman soldiers push their way through the crowd and a shoving match ensues between the man and one of the soldiers. Xena frowns.

CUT TO

Xena arrives in Nero's council room. She looks slightly haggard and breathless.

GABRIELLE (rushing to hug her):

Xena! Thank the heavens you're here!

XENA (returning Gabrielle's hug):

I almost wasn't. Riots are breaking out on the streets. What's going on?

Gabrielle steps back and glances at Nero.

NERO:

A decree that I've signed has met with some...opposition.

XENA (reluctantly):

What kind of decree?

NERO:

Valeria Sabina has escaped--with the help of one of my centurions, no less. Well, she may have been able to evade justice, but it won't stop the law from being carried out. If she won't pay for her crimes, every last one of her fellow slaves will pay for her.

XENA (aghast):

Nero, I'm...begging you to reconsider. (Gabrielle glances at Xena curiously) That's not justice, it's cold vengeance. You know that.

NERO:

It's the law, Xena. Like it or not, my allegiance to that comes before everything else: before what I myself believe is right, before compassion, before friendship... (glances at Gabrielle) ...or more. If Caesar--of all people--doesn't regard the law as sacred, how can we hope to maintain order?

XENA:

And you think you're maintaining order on the streets now?

Nero glares angrily at Xena.

Tigellinus enters.

TIGELLINUS:

A word, Caesar.

Nero continues to glare resentfully at Xena, then tears his gaze away.

NERO:

Speak.

TIGELLINUS (swallows nervously):

A crowd has gathered around the residence of Senator Gracchus.

NERO:

A crowd? Armed with what?

TIGELLINUS:

Unarmed, Caesar. They've formed a human chain to protect the slaves. It sounds like the kind of stunt the Elijans would pull.

NERO (curls his lip in disdain):

Elijans! Are they really stupid enough to think that they can keep justice from being done?

XENA:

You call this justice? Do you really want to go down in history as "Nero, Slaughterer of Innocents"?

Nero flinches at this, thinks a moment then sighs.

NERO (to Xena and Gabrielle):

Leave us. I need to confer with Tigellinus privately.

CUT TO

Outside Nero's office. Gabrielle stares expectantly at Xena who pivots away, pointedly not looking at Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE:

Xena, you have to tell me what's going on. Since when do you beg anyone--let alone a Roman emperor--for anything?

Xena fidgets uncomfortably under Gabrielle's scrutiny.

GABRIELLE:

Where were you the whole day? (off Xena's silence) It was you, wasn't it? You were the Roman centurion.

XENA (nods reluctantly):

Okay--it was me.

Gabrielle stares a moment, then finally shakes her head in disbelief.

GABRIELLE:

Why?

XENA:

I didn't think what was happening to Sabina was right.

GABRIELLE:

So explain to me how the execution of two hundred innocent people while the murderer goes free is right.

XENA:

Believe me, I'm not going to let that happen.

GABRIELLE:

I'm not sure what to believe anymore, Xena. I never would have thought you would risk the lives of all those innocent people just to help someone like Sabina. (stares intently at Xena) Or maybe that's the point. Maybe Sabina reminds you so much of what you used to be that you had to save her--whether she deserves it or not.

Xena rounds on Gabrielle angrily.

XENA:

Maybe she reminded me of what it was like to be crucified.

GABRIELLE (looks away):

I've...I asked Domitius if he could find some other way to-- (trails off)

XENA:

Well, it just so happens that Sabina doesn't deserve to die at all. She killed Gracchus while trying to keep a young slave girl from being raped.

GABRIELLE (looks up skeptically):

Sabina told you this?

XENA:

No. The girl did.

GABRIELLE:

How can you be so sure she was telling the truth?

XENA:

Because I saw Sabina with this girl. She can try to hide it all she wants, but Sabina really cares about her. And if she's capable of that--she has to have some goodness inside her. Gabrielle--I've always believed that one good deed is enough to start someone on the path to redemption. Maybe I was wrong--or even stupid--to believe that Sabina could change--but...

GABRIELLE (gently):

She deserved a chance--just like you.

Xena nods and Gabrielle reaches out to stroke her arm.

GABRIELLE:

You're right, Xena. You were right to save her.

Agrippina enters, obviously flustered.

AGRIPPINA:

Xena! Three of my slaves were set upon by a mob outside the palace gates. What's happening?

XENA (grimaces):

Justice.

Agrippina shakes her head in bewilderment and murmurs softly to herself.

AGRIPPINA:

All this over a few slaves...

The doors to Nero's office swing open and Nero comes out. Tigellinus is trailing on his heels.

NERO:

I want the Praetorian guard called out. I want that chain broken around Gracchus' house.

Agrippina rushes to her son.

AGRIPPINA:

Domitius! Please reconsider!

NERO (glares at Xena):

This your new ploy? You couldn't get me to change my mind so you pit my own mother against me?

In the hopes of avoiding a confrontation, Gabrielle steps in front of Xena.

GABRIELLE:

Xena hasn't done any such thing, Domitius.

AGRIPPINA:

Have you seen that mob out there, son? They could turn violent at any moment.

NERO:

All the more reason for me to send out the Praetorian guard.

AGRIPPINA:

You won't win their hearts and minds by force, Domitius! The people are against you. You alone have the power to stop this before it gets out of control.

Nero pauses and seems to consider his mother's advice. Sensing that he is beginning to waver, Gabrielle steps forward and reaches out to touch him.

GABRIELLE:

You don't want to do this.

Nero flinches and steps back out of her reach.

NERO:

You're right, Gabrielle--I don't want to do this. But the law is the law. And it's my duty as emperor to uphold it. I can't allow anyone--not the public, not Xena, not you or even my mother--dictate to me. (he turns to Tigellinus and snaps angrily) What are you waiting for? I've given you your orders. Go!

TIGELLINUS (nodding breathlessly):

I'll see it done, Caesar!

He scurries off. Without a glance at the three women, Nero storms off after Tigellinus.

AGRIPPINA (staring after Nero):

I was sure Gabrielle was about to convince him to change his mind.

GABRIELLE:

He's not listening to reason--or even his own conscience anymore. This is more about his stubborn pride than anything else at this point.

AGRIPPINA (frowns):

Yes. I know my son can be rather...obstinate when he has his mind set on something.

XENA:

Well, he doesn't know who he's messing with.

CUT TO

The street outside Senator Gracchus' house. A line of men and women dressed in white surrounds the house. They are holding hands and singing a hymn. A group of Praetorian guards stands at some distance from them, looking on glumly. A large crowd of onlookers has gathered, watching tensely and curiously to see what happens next.

A murmur runs through the crowd, and its ranks part to let through Xena and Gabrielle. Their appearance causes a stir among the Praetorians and the Elijans alike. Their chanting stops. A buzz of "Xena, Xena" can be heard.

Xena and Gabrielle approach the Elijans.

XENA:

We're here to stand with you.

ELIJAN MAN #1 (a little dubiously):

It's an honor to have you with us.

ELIJAN WOMAN #1:

Xena, we know you've always been a friend to the followers of Eli. But please remember--we are not here to fight. Our only weapon is love.

XENA (rolls her eyes slightly):

I've heard that before. Love is fine, but if you want to save those people, you may need something else to back it up.

The gallop of a horse is heard. The Elijans turn, alarmed. The camera pans to Tigellinus, who rides up to the front of the house, slowing down and then stopping.

TIGELLINUS:

By the Emperor's orders, step aside!

The Elijans link hands again; a few of them resume their chanting, and then all the others join in. Gabrielle, too, links hands with two of the Elijans and joins in the chanting; Xena stands fully alert, obviously ready to fight.

TIGELLINUS:

For the last time, you have been ordered to disperse.

The chanting grows louder.

TIGELLINUS (turns to the Praetorians):

Clear the way!

The Praetorians charge the crowd, grabbing the Elijans to drag them aside. Xena and Gabrielle meet the attack, without using their weapons yet; they spin, kick and punch, taking down several of the Praetorians. Xena lets out her battle cry, which stuns the Praetorians, momentarily stopping them in their track; the Elijans, taken aback, momentarily stop chanting. Xena leaps into the air, flips, and slams her boots into the chests of two Praetorians who go down crashing. Several more Praetorians draw their swords and charge at the women; Xena throws her chakram, knocking the swords out of four Praetorians' hands. They stop, stunned. Quick pan to Xena as she catches the chakram, smirking.

Pan to Gabrielle, who is using her sais to repel a Praetorian who attacks her with a sword. A second Praetorian attacks, slashing at her left shoulder and opening up a jagged gash in her arm. Gabrielle staggers and drops her sais, then rallies momentarily to kick the sword out of the first Praetorian's hand, and collapses to her knees in pain, clutching at her arm. The second Praetorian sheathes his sword and is about to drag her aside when Xena crashes into him from behind. He falls but tries to get up; she knocks him down with a punch.

XENA:

Gabrielle! (rushes toward Gabrielle, then turns abruptly to look back at the Praetorians who are charging again)

ELIJAN MAN #2 (steps forward):

I'll take care of her.

He helps Gabrielle to her feet and leads her aside. Xena hesitates, then turns and hurtles toward the Praetorians with a furious yell. Her sword clashes with those of two Praetorians even as she downs a third with a kick to the knee.

A few more Praetorians attack while she is still battling her two opponents. Several young Elijans, men and women, rush to repel their attack, fighting back without weapons but using kicks and punches.

ELIJAN WOMAN #1 (dismayed):

What are you doing? We've agreed that we're not going to use violence!

WOMAN #2 (one of the women who are fighting):

We can't let these two women risk their lives to protect us as well as the slaves! Would that really be the Way of Love?

Quick pan to Tigellinus, who watches this scene, pursing his lips in displeasure.

TIGELLINUS (raises his hand):

Stop! (the Praetorians who are still fighting stop and turn) We'll have to bring in more troops. (to Xena) When we get back, you'll be sorry you ever came to Rome.

XENA (grimly):

I'm already sorry.

Tigellinus turns and rides away. The Praetorians help their stunned or wounded comrades to their feet and leave.

Breathing hard, Xena sheathes her sword as she looks after them, then turns and rushes toward Gabrielle. The Elijan man who offered to help her has wrapped a piece of cloth around her arm to stanch the bleeding.

XENA:

Are you all right?

GABRIELLE (winces):

It's just a flesh wound.

XENA:

Let's get you inside and take a look at that.

CUT TO

Inside the house. Xena is almost done bandaging Gabrielle's arm. The slaves mill about, watching them uneasily. The house steward approaches, carrying two goblets.

STEWARD (stammering a little):

We--we wanted to offer you some wine.

XENA (looks up at him):

Thanks, but I don't think we should be drinking on the job. This isn't over. Just get us some water.

The steward nods and goes off. Xena finishes putting on the bandage.

XENA:

There--that should be all right.

Siran emerges from the crowd of slaves and approaches Xena timidly.

SIRAN:

Xena...

Xena looks up at Siran, her face unreadable.

XENA (quietly):

She's all right.

Gabrielle glances at Xena and then at Siran, then nods slightly.

SIRAN (whispers):

Thank you.

There is a commotion as Elijan Woman #1 runs in.

ELIJAN WOMAN #1:

The Emperor!

XENA (turns to her warily):

What about him!

ELIJAN WOMAN #1 (nervously):

He's here!

The camera zooms in on Xena, then Gabrielle as they exchange a startled look.

CUT TO

The street outside the house. Nero reclines on a litter carried by several slaves. A group of Praetorians stands behind them, with Tigellinus on horseback at their side, and the crowd of onlookers behind them. The slaves put down the litter and Nero stands up.

ELIJAN MAN #1 (awed):

Emperor!

The Elijans bow their heads respectfully.

NERO:

Followers of Eli! I respect your beliefs. I respect your compassion for these slaves. But you must recognize the authority of the law.

ELIJAN WOMAN #2 (raises her head defiantly):

What good is the law if it does not recognize humanity?

NERO (turns red):

I am not here to argue. I am here to tell you, as your Emperor, to stand aside and let the law be carried out.

ELIJAN WOMAN #1 (comes out of the house):

Never! You'll have to kill us first.

The chanting starts again. Nero opens his mouth, about to say something, when Xena and Gabrielle come out of the house. He stops in his tracks.

XENA (calmly):

These people have right on their side, Domitius. I have no choice.

NERO (bitterly):

I know what you're trying to do, Xena. You're counting on me to call off the attack in deference to our friendship. (pauses, scowling) And to think that you were the two people I least expected to try to take advantage of me. (Nero looks toward Gabrielle and notices the bandage on her arm, stained with blood that has leaked through the cloth; he frowns) What's that? Gabrielle is hurt?

GABRIELLE (looks down):

It's nothing--just a cut...

NERO (anxiously):

Has anyone tended to your wound?

Xena is about to answer; then she pauses and gives Nero a thoughtful look.

XENA:

I'm sure Gabrielle could use the help of a good physician. Of course, that's going to be a long time coming if she and I have a battle to fight against your Praetorians.

NERO:

She and you--? (looks to Gabrielle in dismay) But you're hurt--surely you're not going to--

GABRIELLE (looks up at him):

Nero, if the Praetorians attack, I will be right here, fighting at Xena's side--at these people's side-- (she makes a sweeping motion indicating the Elijans) as best I can.

The Elijans start chanting again. Nero purses his lips, angry and conflicted. Then, obviously having made a decision, he takes a step forward and raises his arm.

NERO:

People of Rome! The Emperor has heard your plea for mercy.

The chanting stops and the Elijans collectively gasp in astonishment. As a murmur rises from the crowd, the camera pans to Tigellinus, who looks shocked and displeased, and then to Xena and Gabrielle. Xena's mouth curves in a tiny smile of triumph, while Gabrielle looks both relieved and troubled.

NERO:

The slaves of Senator Gracchus are hereby pardoned.

The Elijans erupt in cheers and cries of "Hail, Emperor!" The camera pans to the crowd of onlookers, who start cheering as well, and then to the Praetorians, who join in the cry of "Hail, Emperor!"

TIGELLINUS (dourly):

Hail, Emperor!

The camera zooms in on Nero, showing his face in close-up. The look on his face is upset and peevish; for a moment he almost looks like he's about to cry. Then he forces a cold smile, turns and waves to the crowd.

CUT TO

Nero's office. Nero is seated at his desk reading a scroll. The door opens and Gabrielle, with a clean bandage on her arm, comes in. As he looks up, she stops and smiles uncertainly; Nero does not return her smile.

GABRIELLE (softly):

Xena and I are leaving... I wanted to say good-bye. (she pauses as Nero turns away) Your physician has done a wonderful job. Thank you. (Nero nods, not looking at her) And thank you for pardoning the slaves, too.

NERO (stares into the scroll):

You didn't leave me much of a choice.

GABRIELLE (comes closer):

Domitius...why are you so upset? You didn't want those slaves killed. Didn't you tell me, when you had to sign the order to execute them, that you wished you had never learned to write?

NERO (turns to her abruptly and speaks vehemently):

Why can't you understand this, Gabrielle? This has nothing to do with my personal wishes. It has to do with the law--with my authority as Emperor. (bitterly) As I recall, you were very impressed by the peace and prosperity you have found in Rome. Well, this peace and prosperity rests on the foundation of the law and imperial authority. What do you think will happen once those foundations have been undermined?

Gabrielle reaches out and tries to touch his arm but he flinches away.

GABRIELLE (softly):

You showed mercy. How can that undermine your authority?

NERO:

I bent to the demands of a mob. (bitterly) And you and Xena--my friends--joined that mob to thwart my will.

GABRIELLE (sighs and speaks almost as if to herself):

It was the least we could do for those people.

Nero turns and looks at her intently, his eyes suddenly flickering in understanding.

NERO:

Wait a minute...it was you two who helped Sabina escape--wasn't it?

GABRIELLE (reddening):

No! That isn't true.

NERO:

Then look at me and tell me that you have no idea who that centurion was.

GABRIELLE (flustered):

I--I-- (her voice falters and she forces herself to look at Nero) I swear I have no idea where Sabina is right now.

Nero looks at her suspiciously and shakes his head. Gabrielle looks away.

CUT TO

Xena and Gabrielle riding silently along a road. It's dusk; the walls and buildings of Rome are barely visible far behind them.

GABRIELLE:

Aren't we going to get Sabina?

XENA (shakes her head):

Not now. Nero probably has spies watching us.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

So much for being friends with a Roman emperor.

XENA (pensive):

Yeah. So much for that.

GABRIELLE:

You think we'll ever be back in Rome?

XENA (her voice harsh):

I know we will.

Gabrielle gives her a worried glance while Xena looks grim as we:

FADE OUT

THE END

[Domestic tranquility in Rome was harmed during the production of this motion picture.]