

# SHIPPER SEASON EIGHT

## “Just Listen”

Production #XWP173/SS39  
Episode #8.15

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### Logline

After saving a little girl's cat from death, Xena is blessed with an unusual ability—a power that she'll ultimately need if she is to help stop an injustice that is threatening the animals of a very unique town.

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## TEASER

### *FADE IN*

A close-up of Gabrielle and Darion, obviously in the saddle of a horse, moving rapidly downward with the blue sky behind them. Darion looks incredibly excited.

### **DARION:**

Weeeeeee! A flying horse! This horse can really fly! It's amazing! (Gabrielle gives him a slightly concerned look; Darion looks down) Look at the ground below! It's really something!

### **GABRIELLE:**

Now, hold on and don't get too excited....

### **DARION** (waves to someone underneath):

Look at us! We're flying!

The camera pulls back to show that Gabrielle and Darion are riding Gabrielle's perfectly ordinary horse, riding fast down the slope of a hill. Xena and Eve are riding behind them. As the horse reaches the bottom of the hill, Gabrielle tugs at the reins to slow it down.

**GABRIELLE:**

I think we just landed.

**DARION:**

Wow, that was fun! Almost like riding that real flying horse you told me about... (scrunches up his face trying to remember the name) Peggy?

**GABRIELLE** (chuckles):

Pegasus.

**DARION:**

You think maybe you'll get to ride him again someday? And take me along?

**GABRIELLE** (gently):

I don't think so, honey. That was just a gift from Athena so that Xena and I could slay a monster.

**DARION** (wistfully):

I wish I could have been there. (perks up) You think there are any more flying horses out there?

**GABRIELLE** (teasingly):

I thought we were riding one just now.

**DARION** (impatiently):

Oh come on, Gabrielle...I mean for *real*.

**GABRIELLE** (a little sadly):

Well, some say that Pegasus was part of a flock of winged horses--but then an evil king decided to hunt them for sport, and now he's the last one left.

**DARION** (crestfallen):

Oh. That's really sad...

**CUT TO**

Xena and Eve riding behind them, too far for Gabrielle to hear what they're saying.

**EVE:**

They look like they're having fun. (The camera pans over to show Gabrielle and Darion from a distance; Gabrielle ruffles Darion's hair. Eve's voice drops) You think we'll ever find his sister?

**XENA** (her face hard and impassive):

I don't know, Eve.

**EVE:**

You want to find her, don't you?

**XENA** (brusquely):

Of course we want to find her--what do you think?

**EVE** (quietly):

So then, Darion would have a family of his own. How do you think Gabrielle would feel about losing him?

**XENA** (gives her an uncomfortable look):

We'll worry about that when we find his sister. (bitterly) Our record at finding people doesn't seem to be very good lately, does it.

**EVE** (looks away):

I'm sorry...

**XENA:**

What do you have to be sorry about?

**EVE:**

You know. It's my fault that Sabina escaped.

**XENA** (vehemently):

Nonsense. It was--

**EVE:**

--Livia? And where did Livia come from?

A brief pause.

**XENA** (heavily):

We'll find her.

**EVE:**

So far, all the trails have led to a dead end.

**XENA:**

Which is exactly how Sabina wanted it, I'm sure. (thoughtfully) I've been thinking, Eve--maybe we had the wrong idea all along. We thought Sabina was going someplace where she could gather an army.

**EVE:**

And--?

**XENA:**

I think she may have headed to Rome.

**EVE** (baffled):

*Rome?* But she's--

**XENA:**

Under a death sentence? I know Sabina. A little thing like that wouldn't stop her.

**EVE:**

So, after I return to Amazon lands, you and Gabrielle will go to Rome?

**XENA:**

We'll have to be careful about it. I don't think I'd be very welcome there right now.

**EVE** (tries to joke):

Well, at least I'm sure that feels familiar.

Xena chuckles bitterly. The camera pans ahead to Gabrielle, who has stopped.

**EVE:**

Now what?

Xena and Eve catch up with Gabrielle and Darion. Gabrielle's horse is neighing, grunting, tossing her head and rolling her eyes.

**XENA:**

What's wrong?

**GABRIELLE** (sighs):

I'm not sure. It's not like Klio can tell me. Hang on.

She dismounts. Klio neighs again, in obvious discomfort. Gabrielle starts to examine her and notices that she's jerking her front right hoof, gingerly lifting it off the ground. She bends down to examine the hoof.

**GABRIELLE:**

She's bleeding... She must have cut her leg on a sharp root or something like that. I'll get some bandages.

**CUT TO**

Gabrielle finishes up bandaging Klio's foot.

**GABRIELLE** (pats Klio on the neck):

There you go. Maybe now you'll feel better.

**DARION:**

Is she going to be all right?

**GABRIELLE:**

I think so, Darion. She's not hurt that badly. But I think she should take it easy for a while. (looks at Xena) Maybe we can stop in that town we saw from the top of the hill--on the other side of this grove.

**XENA:**

All right.

**CUT TO**

The entrance to the walled town. At the entranceway, there is a stone arch held up by two large polished marble statues of white horses, facing inward toward each other. They are rearing in the air, supporting the arch. On each one of the horses' reared hooves perches a white dove, its wings spread and sitting beside each horse is a white cat, with one of its paws in the air. An ornately carved wooden sign hangs from the archway that says (translation shown across the screen), "Welcome to Anderida".

Xena, Gabrielle, Eve, and Darion approach. They are all walking, with Xena, Gabrielle and Eve leading their horses; Gabrielle's horse is limping a little.

**DARION** (looks in awe at the size of the marble statues):

Look at these! They're huge!

He walks up to one of the cats; it's a little taller than he is. Xena, Gabrielle and Eve walk through the arch, leading their horses; Darion lingers for a moment looking at the statues before running up to catch up with the others.

### ***CUT TO***

Inside the town. It's twilight but the streets still seem busy with people going about their lives. As Xena, Gabrielle, Eve and Darion walk down the street, the camera pans over the sights they see, moving over the houses and up to the rooftops. On each side of the street, alongside the stone houses (many of them two- or three-story buildings), there are pens housing horses, goats, sheep, rabbits and other animals. Chickens, ducks and geese wander around. There are also cats sitting on some of the windowsills and walking along the rooftops. By almost every door, there is a tall wooden perch with a birdhouse or a bird-feeder as well as a stone birdbath. There are birds sitting on perches, pecking at birdfeed, or splashing around in the birdbaths. The noises made by various animals and birds fill the air.

**EVE:**

They're really into horses and cats and birds here.

**GABRIELLE:**

Not to mention ducks and goats and geese.

Two dogs come racing out of an alley and into the street right into Xena's path, making her stop abruptly. Barking playfully, the dogs race around, almost tripping up some of the people in the street, before disappearing into another alley.

**GABRIELLE** (points ahead):

There's the inn.

The camera pans over to the inn, which has animal figures carved into the wall. The stable next to it has two brass statues of horses at the entrance.

**XENA:**

Hmph. The stable looks nicer than the inn.

**EVE:**

I'll go get us a room, you take care of the horses.

## **CUT TO**

Inside the stable. Xena comes in, leading Argo and Eve's horse, while Gabrielle is leading Klio. They are greeted by a short, round, balding middle-aged man, the stableman.

### **STABLEMAN:**

Three horses?

### **GABRIELLE:**

Yes. This one has a cut on its leg and a little bit of a limp.

### **STABLEMAN** (unctuously):

Oh, not to worry, miss. We'll take good care of the poor thing. Change the bandages, put some healing ointment on it--the works. (to Xena, indicating Argo) And that must be your horse. What a very beautiful animal.

### **XENA:**

Thank you.

### **STABLEMAN:**

You know, with an animal like that, you should definitely stop by the tack shop while you're here. There is one just a block from here--one of the best anywhere.

### **XENA:**

Thanks, but I've already got all the equipment I need.

### **STABLEMAN:**

My dear lady, a beauty like this one deserves more than any ordinary bridle or saddle. You should check out some of the things they have. Saddles specially embroidered with gold thread. Jewel-studded bridles and such. It'll give your horse that extra... (pauses, looking for the right word) ...flair.

### **XENA** (coldly):

Argo has all the flair she needs.

### **STABLEMAN:**

Argo. What a *beautiful* name.

### **XENA:**

All right, mister, enough with the compliments. How much will it cost to stable the horses here?

### **STABLEMAN** (puts up hands):

Oh, no one has to pay to stable horses in Anderida. (Xena lifts an eyebrow) It's the law in this town. All animals get room and board free of charge.

### **GABRIELLE:**

Room and board... How--interesting.

### **STABLEMAN:**

Don't you worry, they'll be well-cared for.

He leads Gabrielle's horse into a stall. Xena gives him a rather hostile look.

**XENA** (rubbing Argo's nose):

I'll see you later, girl. (She pats Argo's neck, then chuckles) You don't need any jewel-studded bridles to look good, do you? (Argo whinnies, Xena smiles) No? Didn't think so.

**CUT TO**

Xena and Gabrielle coming out of the stable.

**GABRIELLE:**

That man really rubbed you the wrong way, didn't he? Come on, he was just being friendly. Besides, they obviously like animals a lot in this town.

**XENA** (shrugs):

Obviously.

**CUT TO**

Inside the inn, where a lot of people are sitting at the tables, talking, eating and laughing. Gabrielle, Eve, and Darion are sitting at a table, looking over some pieces of parchment with writing scribbled on them.

**GABRIELLE** (reading):

Baked eggplant, corn bread and walnut salad: two dinars. All veggie casserole: three dinars...

Xena comes up behind her as Gabrielle continues to speak.

**XENA:**

What's for dinner?

**GABRIELLE** (sets the menu down and looks at Xena):

No meat.

The camera pans to Xena's shocked face as we:

**FADE OUT**

## **ACT ONE**

**FADE IN**

On Xena, still looking shocked.

**XENA:**

An all-veggie menu? (her jaw set) All right, I love animals as much as the next person...

**EVE** (teasing):

But you prefer them broiled or grilled.

**XENA** (icy glare):

This isn't funny, Eve!

**GABRIELLE:**

Definitely not. You think you've seen her grumpy before? Wait till you see her on a vegetarian diet.

Xena sits down next to Gabrielle, looking very ticked off. A serving girl approaches them.

**SERVING GIRL:**

You ready to order?

**XENA:**

Yeah--how about a steak?

**SERVING GIRL** (smiles):

You're new in town, aren't you? Well, I'm afraid that if you're looking for meat, you won't find it in this inn--or in this town. You see, here in Anderida, we don't eat meat of any kind. We respect animals here, big or small--we treat them as our equals. We think it's wrong to kill them just to fill our stomachs.

**XENA** (icy):

Really. Are the cats and dogs around here vegetarians too?

**SERVING GIRL** (confused):

I'm not sure I get your point.

**XENA** (smirks):

Well, if you treat animals as your equals, then I would think you'd expect them to follow the same rules people do.

**EVE** (touches her arm):

Mother--

**XENA** (looks sarcastically at the waitress, who is obviously at a loss for words):

Well? Are you telling me that a cat is allowed to eat meat around here, but I'm not?

**SERVING GIRL** (nervous):

Look, I don't make the rules...I just serve the food.

**GABRIELLE:**

I'll have the baked eggplant and walnut salad.

**XENA** (spits out the words as if talking about something particularly disgusting):

The all-veggie casserole.

**CUT TO**

Xena, Gabrielle, Eve and Darion are finishing their meal.



**EVE:**

Come on, Mother, you have to admit it wasn't that bad.

Xena gives her a rather nasty look.

**GABRIELLE** (finishes her meal and moves the plate aside; to Xena):

We'd better get out of here fast before you kill a rabbit and they charge you with murder.

She looks around and her attention is captured by the murals on the walls of the inn. They all have animals depicted in them in some way. One is of a girl who is smiling with joy and feeding the pigeons that flock around her hand, landing on the ground, her shoulder and even her head. There is another one of a man standing beside a chestnut steed, holding up a blue ribbon, smiling happily. The large mural, taking up an entire wall across the room, depicts a splendid white horse walking through the city streets, with a white dove on its head and a white cat seated on its back. A crowd of people looks at them in amazement, some of them kneeling worshipfully. The figure of a beautiful golden-haired woman in a dress of rich purple fabric is floating in the sky.

**GABRIELLE:**

Look...beautiful, isn't it?

**XENA:**

Sorry, Gabrielle, I'm not in a mood to appreciate animal worship right now.

**DARION** (curious):

What do you think it means?

**EVE:**

It must be something important to this town.

They are approached by the innkeeper, an elderly woman.

**INNKEEPER:**

Pardon me, but I noticed that you were admiring our mural...

**XENA** (under her breath):

Not all of us...

**INNKEEPER:**

Excuse me?

**XENA:**

Never mind.

**INNKEEPER:**

You probably want to know its history.

**GABRIELLE:**

Can you tell us about it?

**INNKEEPER:**

Sure. You see, it tells the story of how Anderida became what it is today. Over a hundred years ago, this area was struck by a terrible famine and drought...

As she speaks we fade into a:

**[FLASHBACK]**

We see the streets of Anderida. They are not happy and full of life like they are now. The streets are bare and dusty; there are no animals in sight, and the flowers in the window boxes are wilted. The people look sickly and starving.

**INNKEEPER** (voice-over):

There was no more food coming in from the surrounding farms, no more water in our wells. Many left to look for a better life elsewhere. But there were many others who couldn't bear to leave the homes of their ancestors.

**[END OF FLASHBACK]**

**DARION** (anxious):

So what happened?

**INNKEEPER:**

The priests prayed to the gods, hoping that their prayers would be answered. (Xena rolls her eyes)

**[FLASHBACK]**

We see several priests bowed down before an altar on which a slaughtered goat lies.

**INNKEEPER** (voice-over):

Many weeks went by and it seemed that no one was listening to our pleas for help. It seemed that the only thing any of us could do if we wished to survive was to leave Anderida forever.

We see a line of people carrying baskets and bags on their backs, leaving the town gates (with no animal statues) and heading down the hilly mountainside. Some of them look back sadly before continuing out of town.

**INNKEEPER** (voice-over):

Then, a seer said he'd had a vision that things would soon turn around and that the goddess Epona would send a sign, though what that sign would be was unknown.

**GABRIELLE** (voice-over):

Epona? The goddess of animals, to whom horses, cats and doves are sacred?

**INNKEEPER** (voice-over):

She's the one. Several days after the seer's vision, a pure white mare came in

through the town gates, with a snow-white cat riding on her back and a dove sitting on her head.

We see the horse with the dove on her head and the cat on her back, walking gracefully into town, people standing about, looking on in awe.

**INNKEEPER** (voice-over):

What a sight that must have been, after no animal nor bird had been seen in Anderida for so long. Then we knew that it was Epona's sign--and we were right. Just two days later, the rains came, the drought was over, the land around the town grew rich with fruit and vegetables, and then animals and birds began to show up to offer us their milk and eggs.

We see a montage of people picking berries, apples and other fruit, harvesting vegetables, milking goats and cows; a young boy holds up a basketful of eggs, smiling. Some young children are seen dancing around the well, splashing up the water onto each other and drinking. People are laughing and shouting for joy.

**[END OF FLASHBACK]**

**INNKEEPER:**

Since that time, Anderida has worshipped Epona as our goddess. She was our savior. And in honor of her, we keep the animals in Anderida free and happy. We do not eat them, we only use what they can provide us for food--such as eggs and milk.

**EVE:**

That was a wonderful story.

**GABRIELLE:**

Thank you for telling it.

**INNKEEPER:**

Oh, you are most welcome. We are always happy to tell visitors about our town's history. We know that many think our customs are odd--but it's our way of life, and we wouldn't change it for anything. (smiles) I hope you enjoy your stay here.

She walks away.

**DARION** (excited):

Hey, wait! Those statues at the entrance to town--that's the horse, the dove and the cat, right?

**GABRIELLE:**

That's right, Darion. (Darion beams proudly while Gabrielle looks at Xena) Well, there you go. How often do you see gods actually *helping* people?

**EVE:**

Amazing what they can do when they put their minds to it.

Xena glances at them thoughtfully.

**GABRIELLE:**

Well, here we are--in animal heaven.

Xena chuckles.

**CUT TO**

Later that night. In the moonlight, we see a cat, with a collar and a small medal on it, leaping off the window ledge of a house. As it starts to walk away, a dark figure appears and snatches the cat. It shrieks in terror and tries to claw at the man but the man quickly shoves it inside a sack.

**MAN:**

You are going to make me rich.

He walks off, the sack wiggling in his hand, the cat's muffled cries coming from inside.

**DISSOLVE TO**

The next day. It's bright and sunny; Xena, Gabrielle, Eve and Darion are walking through the streets, looking around.

**EVE:**

This place is even more beautiful in daylight.

A little girl in a blue dress, eight or nine years old, comes out running from behind a corner.

**LITTLE GIRL:**

Help! Someone please help my cat!

She runs up to Xena and the others.

**XENA:**

What's wrong?

The little girl looks scared, tears streaming down her face.

**LITTLE GIRL:**

My cat, Stripes--some other cats are attacking her. They could kill her! Please help her out!

**XENA:**

Where is she?

**LITTLE GIRL:**

Over here--come quick!

The girl runs into a side alley. Xena follows her. The sounds of hissing and loud meowing are heard. The camera pans down to show four large cats attacking a small striped tabby who is trying valiantly to fight back.

**XENA:**

Can't you pick on someone your own size?

She rushes toward the cats and grabs two of them by the scruff of the neck. The cats growl and wiggle in her hands, trying to charge at the tabby. Xena knocks their heads into each other in a parody of her usual fighting moves. They are slightly stunned and she throws them away from the tabby. The two other cats turn and hiss at her. Xena hisses back and they shrink back, obviously intimidated.

**XENA:**

Don't make me angry or fur is going to fly.

One of the cats growls at her and lashes out with its paw trying to scratch her. Crouching down, with a feral grin on her face, Xena advances on the two cats, hissing. The cats flinch back, turn and run off whimpering.

**GABRIELLE** (comes up behind Xena, with Darion in tow):

Well, that was different.

**XENA** (picks up the tabby):

Let's take a look at you. Are you hurt?

The cat, whose fur is bloodied, meows piteously.

**XENA** (looks her over):

You'll be okay.

The little girl comes up, with Eve behind her.

**LITTLE GIRL:**

Stripes! You're all right! (takes the cat from Xena and hugs it) Oh, thank you--thank you so much!

**XENA:**

No problem. You'd better put something on those cuts so they don't get infected.

**LITTLE GIRL:**

I will, miss. Thanks again.

**XENA:**

The name's Xena.

**LITTLE GIRL:**

Thank you, Xena. I'm Clelia.

**DARION** (pushes forward):

Hey, I'm Darion. I hope your cat will be fine.

**CLELIA:**

I know she will be. (she hugs Stripes and strokes her head) Xena, can Stripes thank you?

**XENA** (hesitantly):

All right...

Clelia holds out her cat to Xena who, after a moment of hesitation, takes her from Clelia's arms.

The cat starts to purr and licks Xena's face, her nose, and then her ear. Xena glances at Gabrielle and Eve, who watch smiling.

**XENA** (pulls the cat away):

All right. I think that's enough thanks for one day.

She hands the cat back to Clelia.

**CLELIA:**

Good-bye, Xena. Thank you again.

**XENA:**

Good-bye, Clelia. Nice to meet you.

**DARION:**

Bye, Clelia!

**CLELIA:**

Bye, Darion!

She walks away with Stripes in her arms. Xena watches her go into a nearby house; then she turns and wipes her face with her hand.

**GABRIELLE** (smiles):

Not a fan of kitty-cat kisses?

Xena chuckles, along with Gabrielle, Eve and Darion. They come out of the side alley and start walking down the street again.

**GABRIELLE:**

Well, it's nice to see that you can care for animals as much as you do for people.

**XENA** (unruffled):

Who, me? I was only doing it for the kid.

**DARION** (sighs):

I wish I had a cat. Or a rabbit. (sighs, then suddenly becomes excited and points) Look! A pet shop!

The camera pans over to a large gray stone building; a large sign with Greek lettering and drawings of animals hangs over the entrance.

**DARION** (turns to Gabrielle):

Can we go in and look at the animals? Please?

**GABRIELLE** (smiles):

Sure, Darion--why not.

Darion smiles and takes Gabrielle's hand, pulling Gabrielle toward the building.

**XENA:**

I think I've had enough of animals for now. I'll head back to the inn and give Argo a good brush down.

**GABRIELLE** (teasing):

Enough of animals? And what's Argo?

**XENA** (in mock outrage):

Watch who you're calling an animal.

**CUT TO**

The stables. Xena enters and walks up to Argo.

**XENA:**

Hey, girl.

She opens the saddlebag that is slung over a post and takes out a brush, beginning to brush Argo slowly.

The stableman comes in and walks up to Xena, smiling his unctuous smile.

**STABLEMAN:**

Keeping her coat nice and clean, I see. Always good for such a beautiful animal.

Xena gives him a cold glance.

**XENA:**

Uh-huh.

**STABLEMAN:**

Say, how old is she?

**XENA** (gives him an impatient glance):

Do you like horses that much or do you just like to be nosy?

**STABLEMAN** (holds up his hands):

Sorry, my dear lady. Just being friendly. (off Xena's chilly stare) I'll leave you and this fine animal of yours alone.

He retreats. Xena snorts and shrugs, and starts brushing Argo again when there is a faint whooshing sound behind her back and then the sound of barking. Xena turns around and sees Horace, who runs up to her, wagging his tail.

**XENA** (steps toward him, surprised):

Horace!

She looks around, obviously sensing Ares' presence. Ares materializes lying in a haystack, in a casual pose with one leg slung over the other. Horace runs up to him and licks his face.

**XENA** (smiles):

This is bringing back memories of the farm.

Eve walks in and stops cold in her tracks as she sees Horace licking Ares' face.

**ARES** (in mock anger):

Enough of that, you miserable mutt--

He gets up, patting Horace on the head. Eve coughs; Ares looks up at her in alarm.

**EVE:**

This is *your* dog?

**ARES** (slightly embarrassed but trying to hide it and putting on his usual bravado):

Yeah. Haven't you ever heard of the Dogs of War?

**EVE:**

Right...those fluffy ears just scream ferocious war hound.

**ARES:**

You haven't seen him in action. (nods toward Xena) She has the bite mark to prove it.

**EVE** (glances questioningly at Xena):

Where?

**XENA** (haughtily):

I don't see any need to go into the details. (off Ares' smirk, turns to Eve) Ares got him as a pet when he was mortal. You should have seen him when he thought Horace had run off and left him all alone on the farm. (clicks her tongue and shakes her head in mock sympathy) He was almost--

**ARES** (gives her the evil eye):

You know, you're right--there's really no need to go into the details.

**XENA** (innocently):

Thought so. (smiles) So, what are you doing here with him anyway? Let me guess...poor Horace is getting pretty bored, cooped up on Olympus in some marble doghouse with his own golden doggie bowl and a satin pillow to sleep on--so you're taking him out for a walk?

**ARES** (shrugs):

Actually, I just figured that since you were visiting this little den of animal lovers, it was the perfect time for me to bring Horace along. Let him find out what it's like to have people worship the ground he walks on.

**EVE** (smirks):

Right. (looks at Xena and Ares) Well, I think I'll go and... (thinks a moment) ...be somewhere else.

She goes out.

**ARES** (to Xena):

So, here we are. You and me and--



**DARION** (off-camera):  
Hey, Xena!

Pan to Darion running into the stable, followed by Gabrielle.

**ARES** (rolls his eyes):  
--company.

Horace leaps up and barks.

**GABRIELLE** (brightly):  
Horace!

**DARION:**

Wow, a dog! (he runs up to Horace, who jumps up and down and licks Darion's hand) Whose dog is that?

Ares looks away, embarrassed.

**GABRIELLE** (looks mischievously at Ares):  
So--who's going to be the one to tell him?

**ARES** (clears his throat):  
All right--he's my dog.

**DARION** (sincerely surprised):

*Your* dog? I thought you would have a different kind of dog--you know, like a *huge* wolfhound or something-- (demonstrates the size of the dog with his hands)

**ARES** (with a grumpiness that's part fake):  
Yeah, yeah, yeah...

**DARION** (turns to Xena):

Hey, you'll never believe what I got to do at the pet shop! I got to touch a snake! It was so cool!

**ARES:**

A snake. Now there's my idea of a pet.

Gabrielle glares daggers at him.

**DARION** (eyes light up):  
Yeah!

He looks at Gabrielle but is immediately crestfallen when he sees the look on her face.

**GABRIELLE:**

Sorry, Darion. I'm afraid I'm going to have to say no to this one.

**DARION** (sighs, disappointed):

Oh well. That would have been such a cool pet.

**GABRIELLE** (pats him on the head):

Why don't you... (glances at Xena and Ares) ...why don't we go play with Horace for now.

**DARION** (with a renewed excitement):

Yeah! Come on, Horace!

Darion and Horace run outside; Gabrielle gives Xena a mischievous little smile and follows them.

Left alone, Xena and Ares look at each other.

**ARES:**

So. (after a pause) You haven't found Sabina. You know--I could help you. (off her uncertain look) And your next line is: "Sorry, Ares, I've got to do this my own way."

A close-up of Xena who smiles teasingly but obviously trying to conceal her discomfort; then the camera pulls back to show both Xena and Ares, who grins at Xena.

**ARES:**

Unless, of course, you weren't going to say "sorry." (Xena chuckles; Ares reaches out to caress her face, and after a moment's hesitation she takes his hand and presses it to her cheek) How long do you plan on staying in this town, anyway?

**XENA:**

We'll head out tomorrow morning if Gabrielle's horse is well enough to travel again.

**ARES** (smirks at her):

Stuck for a whole day in a town of vegetable-eating animal lovers... (off her glare) I bet I could offer you something to make the rest of today more interesting.

**XENA** (smirking back):

And what's that?

**ARES:**

Steak?

Xena stares at him in open-mouthed shock. Then, they both laugh.

**ARES** (suave and mischievous):

I can tell you what your next line is. (off Xena's questioning, amused look) "Gabrielle, I'll be back in the morning."

Xena chuckles, then leans forward and kisses him.

**CUT TO**

Late at night. A room in one of Ares' fortresses, dimly lit with a glowing fire in the fireplace. In the reddish reflections of the fire, we can see weapons displayed on the walls. The camera pans to a large bed, with an ornate headboard decorated with battle images, where Xena lies asleep by Ares' side.

She seems restless in her sleep. The camera zooms in closer and then we:

***DISSOLVE***

Into Xena's dream.

Xena is standing under the arch at the Anderida town entrance, holding Stripes the cat. Stripes meows and leans closer to Xena, licking her face. Then she meows again--and her meow suddenly becomes an articulate voice.

**STRIPES:**

Just listen, Xena. Just listen.

***DISSOLVE***

Back to a close-up of Xena's face. She frowns in her sleep, obviously startled.

***CUT TO***

Morning. The stable. A rather content-looking Xena opens the stable doors and walks in and up to Argo.

**XENA:**

Morning, Argo.

Argo neighs.

**ARGO:**

Morning, Xena. Sleep well?

Xena's mouth drops open; she stares at Argo with wide-eyed wonderment as we:

***FADE OUT***

**ACT TWO**

***FADE IN***

A close up of Xena's face, still staring in shock at Argo. She stands there, frozen for a moment.

**XENA** (chuckles nervously and rubs her head):

Okay...I'm still asleep.

**ARGO:**

You look pretty wide-awake to me.

The sound of Argo's voice makes Xena jump and she falls backwards in shock, landing in the hay. She stares at Argo. Argo grunts.

**ARGO:**

Hey. You're sitting in my breakfast.

**XENA:**

All right, either I'm still asleep or... (rubs her head again) ...I need to get more sleep.

**ARGO** (eyes the hickey on her neck):

I bet you do.

Xena gives her a startled look, then gets up, brushes herself off and heads toward the stable door.

**ARGO:**

Xena, are we going for a ride today? I'm getting bored standing around in this stall all day.

Xena turns slowly and looks with utter shock and bewilderment at Argo, who is bobbing her head up and down. Then she dashes toward the door, only to hear Argo's voice behind her again.

**ARGO:**

Guess that's a "no".

**CUT TO**

The dining room in the inn. Gabrielle, Eve, and Darion are having breakfast when they see Xena walk in, a disturbed look on her face.

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena. You're back.

Xena walks up to them and stops. She seems to be in a daze.

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena?

**XENA:**

Come with me to the stables. Right now.

**DARION:**

We're not even done with breakfast yet!

**GABRIELLE** (worried):

Is everything all right? Is it Klio?

**XENA** (shakes head):

No, it's--I don't know *what* it is. Just come with me.

**CUT TO**

Xena, Gabrielle, Eve and Darion walk into the stable and up to Argo's stall.

**GABRIELLE:**

All right--what's going on?

**ARGO** (whinnies):

Xena, you're back. It's about time. Are we leaving?

**KLIO** (from the next stall):

I hope not. My leg still hurts!

Xena whips around and stares in her direction.

**XENA** (to Gabrielle):

Did you hear that?

**GABRIELLE** (puzzled):

Hear what?

**XENA:**

Klio. She just spoke.

**GABRIELLE:**

Whaaaa--

**XENA:**

She said her leg still hurts.

**GABRIELLE** (irritated look):

Xena, is this another of your many skills that you (makes "air quotes") *forgot* to tell me about in the last eight years? Because if it is...

**XENA:**

No, it happened this morning. I came in here and suddenly I could understand Argo. And now Klio, too.

**EVE:**

What did Argo say?

**XENA:**

That she wants to ride.

**EVE:**

That's not very original.

**GABRIELLE:**

You expect a horse to say something original? (glances at Xena) Which is not to say that she said *anything*, of course.

**XENA:**

Wait, maybe we can test this.

**EVE:**

Test what? Whether you can hear the horses talk?

**XENA:**

Yeah. (to Argo) Hey, girl. You understand me, don't you?

**ARGO:**

Perfectly.

**XENA** (gets a sudden idea):

What about the others? Do you understand Gabrielle, or Eve?

**ARGO:**

No. But I'm sure I'm not missing a thing.

Xena shoots Gabrielle and Eve a somewhat uncomfortable look.

**GABRIELLE:**

What did she say?

**XENA:**

Uh... That she doesn't understand you two. (To Argo) Could you understand me before this morning?

**ARGO** (grunts):

Not the words. (off Xena's disappointed look) But we've always understood each other without words, right?

**XENA** (smiles):

All right. Now we've got to show them that you actually understand me. You ready to do something for me, girl?

**ARGO:**

Like what? A trick? I don't feel like doing any tricks.

**XENA:**

Oh, come on. This isn't the time to be stubborn.

**ARGO** (grunts):

Fine. What do you want me to do?

**XENA:**

Come out of the stall. (Argo trots out of the stall and stops in the middle of the stable) Now lift your right foot. (Argo obeys) Left foot. (Argo obeys) Walk backwards. (Argo obeys.) Bow down on one knee.

**ARGO** (grunts):

I think you're pushing it.

**XENA:**

Come on, girl. Just a couple more. Bow down on one knee. (Argo obeys) Now rear up on your back legs. (Argo gives her a nasty look) It's the last one, I swear. (Argo rears up, pawing the air with her front hooves and neighing.)

Gabrielle, Eve, and Darion watch in amazement, Xena smiles.

Quick pan to the stableman peeking in through the door of the stable, his eyes widening in amazement. Then he tiptoes away unseen.

Pan back to Argo, just as she comes down, planting all fours firmly on the ground. Xena walks up to her and rubs her nose.

**XENA:**

Good job.

**ARGO** (placated):

Thank you. Now can I get back to my breakfast?

**XENA:**

Sure.

**DARION:**

Wow, that was amazing! I want Argo to do more tricks!

**EVE:**

So, you really *can* speak to Argo. And she can speak to you. That's...amazing.

**XENA:**

I don't like this.

**ARGO:**

Hey!

**XENA** (looks back at Argo):

It's nothing against you, girl. It's just... (rubs her head) ...a little too weird.

**GABRIELLE:**

So...is it just horses who can understand you?

**XENA:**

Who knows. Let's go outside. (to Argo) Argo, back in the stall.

**ARGO** (grunts):

She's been talking for ten minutes and she's already bossing me around.

**XENA:**

I'll take you for a ride later--I promise.

**CUT TO**

Outside. Xena, Gabrielle, Eve and Darion walk out of the stable. Xena looks around.

**VOICE** (off-camera, coming from above):

Ow! Ow! This roof is hot!

Xena look up and sees a cat, which has just jumped from a tree branch onto the roof of the stable and is walking along the roof lifting its paws high in the air.

Xena and the others start walking down the street.

**THIN VOICE** (off-camera, from below):

Are we there yet?

Xena looks down to see a mother mouse scurrying along with several baby mice.

**MOTHER MOUSE:**

It's just around the corner. Hurry up, children. If we're the last to get to the garbage dump, the other mice will pick up all the good stuff.

**LITTLE MICE** (in unison with high pitched, squeaky voices):

Yes, mother.

Xena shakes her head.

**GABRIELLE:**

What?

**XENA:**

I can hear them.

**GABRIELLE:**

Who?

**XENA:**

The cat, the mice, the-- (looks up) Watch out!

**GABRIELLE:**

What?

Something falls from the tree over her head, barely missing Gabrielle's head. She looks at the ground and sees that it is a large walnut. She looks questioningly at Xena.

**XENA** (grins):

Told you.

**GABRIELLE:**

How'd you know?

**XENA** (shrugs):

The squirrel said so.

She points up and Gabrielle look up to a tree branch above their heads. Two squirrels are scurrying along the branch, one of them carrying several walnuts.

**SQUIRREL:**

I told you we were going to drop it!



The squirrels scurry off.

**GABRIELLE** (chuckles and shakes her head):  
So you can understand *all* animals now.

Xena and others continue to walk down the street as they talk.

**XENA:**  
Sounds like it.

**GABRIELLE:**  
That's...really weird.

**DARION** (excited):  
That's really neat.

**XENA** (slowly):  
Well, I'm not so sure about that.

**GABRIELLE:**  
What do you think is causing this?

**EVE:**  
Maybe it's something about this town. They love animals so much, maybe they *all* understand animals here. And it's rubbing off on you.

**XENA:**  
Then why isn't the same thing happening to you, or Gabrielle or Darion?

**DARION** (suddenly looks excited):  
Ooh--wait! I think it's happening to me, too!

**GABRIELLE** (whips around, worried):  
It *is*?

**DARION** (points to a big yellow dog warming himself in the sun):  
I just heard him say... (thinks for a moment) "Man, the weather is hot!"

**XENA** (glares at him):  
He did not.

Darion gives her a mischievous, guilty grin.

**GABRIELLE** (upset):  
Darion, you made this up?

**DARION** (shrugs):  
I was just having a little fun.

**EVE:**  
You know, Mother--I think you must have received this gift for a purpose.

**XENA:**

What purpose? So I could say hello to Argo every morning?

**DARION** (excited):

Hey, what if there's something really wrong going on in town and only a person who can talk to the animals can stop it?

**GABRIELLE** (her face light up):

Maybe that's it.

**DARION** (amazed and proud):

Really?

**XENA** (sarcastic):

Oh, right. Like what? A gang of ruthless cats taking over a back alley?

They pass by a cat sitting on a short stone post, grooming itself. Darion reaches out and tries to pet it.

**CAT** (flinches and gives Darion a nasty look):

Do you mind? I just had that part cleaned. I don't want you messing it up with your dirty fingers.

Xena chuckles.

**VOICE** (off-camera):

Hey.

Xena looks up to see a dapple-gray horse with a rider going by at a slow trot.

**HORSE:**

Excuse me. You own that golden mare, don't you?

**XENA:**

Yeah.

**HORSE:**

I'm stabled at the same inn. Tell me, is she, uh--available? (dreamy) She's so gorgeous!

**XENA** (a little taken aback):

Well--

**HORSE** (already a few paces ahead of Xena, turns his head and neighs):

Put in a word for me, all right? (tosses his mane, showing off) They call me Falcon.

**XENA** (uncertainly):

Okay...I will.

**HORSE** (neighs again):

Great! Thank you!

Xena shakes her head.

**GABRIELLE** (gives Xena an amused and slightly worried look):

What was that all about?

**XENA:**

Let's see. So far, I've heard a cat tell Darion not to mess up her newly groomed fur and I've had a horse ask me for a date with Argo. (Gabrielle laughs) So much for my being given this gift for the Greater Good.

**WOMAN'S VOICE** (off-camera, screaming):

My baby! My baby!

Xena and the others look in her direction.

The woman, about thirty years old with light brown hair, wearing a long green dress, comes into view. She is running through the street, weeping.

**WOMAN:**

My Melissa! My baby is gone!

**XENA** (steps up toward the woman):

Maybe we can help you. What happened to your baby?

**WOMAN** (crying):

I walked into her room this morning and she was gone...no trace of her... (sobs) ...nothing but the mat on the floor and her toys and her doggie bowl...

**XENA** (taken aback):

Melissa is a *dog*?

**VOICE** (off-camera):

Hey! You say that like it was a *bad* thing.

Xena looks in the direction of the voice. The camera pans over to show the yellow dog lazing about in the sun.

**XENA:**

Sorry 'bout that.

**WOMAN** (angrily):

Well, you *should* be sorry! My poor Melissa... (sniffles) ...she couldn't mean any more to me if she were my own child! (defensive) And she's not just *any* dog, you know. She won a medal at the Anderida annual dog show last year. (starts wailing again) My *baby*!

A crowd starts to gather around them.

**WOMAN #1:**

Poor thing.

**MAN #1:**

You see? Another one!

**GABRIELLE** (looks at him curiously):  
Another what?

**MAN #1:**

Another animal theft. We've had more than two dozen in this town in the last two months. Horses, cats, dogs...the best animals in town. Usually ones that have won prizes, or are special in some way.

**WOMAN #2** (defensively):

All animals are special.

**XENA:**

And no one knows who's taking them?

**MAN #1:**

No. Whoever it is, is good. They never leave any tracks. Or witnesses.

**MAN #2:**

Except animals. And animals don't talk.

Xena, Gabrielle and Eve exchange curious looks as we:

***FADE OUT***

## **ACT THREE**

***FADE IN***

Xena, Gabrielle, Eve and Darion walk through a town square, past a beautiful marble fountain with statues of horses.

**XENA:**

Do you really think I got this power so I can solve some animal thefts?

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena, think about it. In a town like this where they love animals so much, for them to lose their pets and not know what happened to them--it's really horrible.

**XENA:**

So now I should play pet detective.

**DARION:**

Xena, Pet Detective. That sounds kinda cool. (grins)

**XENA** (gives him a mock glare):

I don't *think* so. (sighs) Well, I guess I've got to start *somewhere*...

***CUT TO***

Xena knocks on the door of a house. We see her talking to a woman, and then being escorted to a stable where she is left alone with a hazel-brown mare.

**XENA** (a little uncertainly):  
Hello.

**MARE** (whinnies):  
So you're the human who understands us. (off Xena's surprised look) Word travels fast around this town--we know all about you. (tosses her head) It's nice to have a human who actually talks back when you talk. I'm Amber, by the way.

**XENA:**  
Nice to meet you, Amber. So...they tell me that another one of your owner's horses--

**MARE** (tosses her head proudly):  
Not "owner." Human companion, please.

**XENA** (rolls her eyes, slightly exasperated):  
All right--they told me one of your human companion's other horses was stolen a week ago.

**MARE** (hangs her head sadly):  
Silver Blaze. He was my mate.

**XENA:**  
Sorry to hear that. (She reaches out to pat Amber's muzzle)

**MARE** (tosses up her head and whinnies):  
It's all right. I prefer to bear my grief with dignity.

**XENA:**  
Can you tell me what happened? What did you see?

**MARE:**  
It happened at night. I was awakened by a noise of some sort... It was dark--all I saw was a dark shape, leading Silver Blaze out of the stable... I never saw him again. (sniffs) Excuse me, I need a moment to compose myself. (she lowers her head as Xena looks on sympathetically)

**XENA** (after a pause):  
That dark shape, what did it look like?

**MARE** (lifts her head and sighs):  
I didn't see much...I think it was a man, a short man...

**XENA:**  
Do you remember anything else?

**MARE:**  
There was a noise outside...like that of a wagon. (thinks a moment) And there was a smell of apples in the stable.

**XENA** (frowns):

Apples, huh? (after a moment she smiles reassuringly at the mare) Thank you, Amber. I'll do my best to find your mate.

**MARE** (with dignity):

Thank you.

**CUT TO**

A montage of Xena knocking on other doors and talking to other animals--a dog, a cat, another horse.

**CUT TO**

Xena squats down before a porch on which a large silver-gray cat lies.

**XENA:**

Hello. Can I talk to you a minute?

The cat gives her a coldly dignified look and remains silent.

**XENA** (slightly puzzled look):

Can you hear me?

**CAT** (dignified):

Of course I can hear you. And of course you can talk to me. The proper question is, "*May* I talk to you."

**XENA** (amused but slightly miffed):

All right... *may* I talk to you, then? I'm Xena.

**CAT** (looks at her coolly):

*I'm* Xena.

**XENA** (taken aback):

Excuse me?

**CAT:**

My humans named me Xena--after the famous Warrior Princess. (looks at Xena) I take it that would be you?

**XENA:**

Yes. (doesn't quite know whether to be flattered or insulted) Listen, um--Xena, I'm trying to investigate the animal thefts that have been going on in this town. They told me your sister was kidnapped?

**CAT:**

Catnapped, if you please.

**XENA** (amused):

All right...catnapped. (gets a sudden idea) Don't tell me your sister's name is--

**CAT:**

Gabrielle.

Xena rolls her eyes.

**XENA:**

Can you tell me what happened?

**CAT** (a little more emotional):

It was terrible, just terrible. That man took us both...he ambushed us outside the window when we went out for a walk at night. It was just four nights ago.

**[FLASHBACK]**

"Xena" and another cat, "Gabrielle," jump down from the windowsill. Out of nowhere, a man's boots come into view. Two hands in leather gloves come down and snatch both cats, who shriek and try to scratch the man but to no avail.

**CAT** (voice-over):

We fought bravely--but he was able to capture us and carry us away in a sack. (We see the two cats being thrown in a sack; a short, dark figure carrying the sack starts to walk away.) Then he handed us over to another man who had a cage ready for us. Just as we were being released from the sack and put in a cage, I made a desperate effort and I managed to escape. (We see "Xena" the cat wriggling out of the hands of a man who is trying to push her inside a metal cage; she escapes and sprints away. The other cat, "Gabrielle," is stuffed inside the cage as she meows pitifully) I hid in the bushes and they couldn't find me. I watched as the cage with my sister was loaded into a wagon--I think there were other animals there too. (We see the cage being put in the wagon, where another cat and two dogs, looking scared and sad, sit in cages.) I tried to follow the wagon so I would know where these horrible people were taking them--but I couldn't keep up with it. (We see "Xena" the cat standing on a deserted road, looking after the wagon as it disappears into the distance, meowing sadly.)

**[END OF FLASHBACK]**

**XENA:**

Which way did the wagon go?

**CAT:**

It was the small dirt road that goes west from the walls of the town...past the abandoned windmill.

**XENA** (nods thoughtfully):

All right. Now, the man who snatched you--did you see what he looked like? You cats can see in the dark, right?

**CAT** (almost offended):

Of course. But I couldn't get too good a look at him. (pauses to think) He was rather short and a little plump. The top of his head was completely bald--I remember how it was shining in the moonlight. And he had these dark tufts of fur--I mean, hair--on each side of his head.

**XENA** (sighs):

That narrows it down for sure.

**CAT** (haughtily):

*Excuse* me. I thought you wanted my help.

**XENA** (apologetic):

I'm sorry, uh--Xena. I know you're trying to help. Anything else?

**CAT** (thinks):

He *reeked* of horses. (wrinkles her nose fastidiously) Nasty, smelly beasts. That's about it.

**XENA:**

Thank you. (She gets up) I'll find your sister, okay?

**CAT** (suddenly sits up):

I just remembered one more thing that could be helpful.

**XENA** (interested):

What?

**CAT:**

The coward was wearing leather gloves to protect himself from our claws and teeth. But I was able to strike out and scratch his left arm...just above the glove. He should still have the marks on him.

**XENA:**

That could be very helpful. Thank you.

She turns around and starts to walk away.

**CAT** (behind her):

Good luck, Xena. We're all counting on you.

**XENA** (mutters to herself):

Isn't that how it *always* is.

**CUT TO**

Sunset. Xena is walking briskly back to the inn.

**CUT TO**

The room at the inn, with the light of a couple of oil lamps adding to the fading daylight that comes in through the small window. Eve is sitting on the bed reading; Gabrielle and Darion are at the table. Darion has a quill in his hand and is writing on a parchment while Gabrielle watches, smiling, over his shoulder.

**GABRIELLE:**

Very good, Darion.

The door opens and Xena comes in. Everyone looks up.



**GABRIELLE:**

Hi, Xena! Any luck?

**XENA** (gives her a slightly alarmed look):

Huh?

Gabrielle looks at Xena, puzzled.

**GABRIELLE** (this time, we hear her speech as it is heard by Xena):

Iwadawuwuck?

Xena's eyes widen a little. She cocks her head, staring at Gabrielle.

**GABRIELLE** (speaks slowly and distinctly):

I said--any--luck?

**XENA** (nods):

Yeah. All I have to do is round up all the short, plump, bald men in this town and check their left arms for cat scratches.

This time, it's Gabrielle who looks at Xena uncomprehendingly--as do Eve and Darion.

**GABRIELLE** (speaks slowly):

What did you say?

**XENA** (stares at her in alarm; then we hear her speech as heard by Gabrielle):

I gat a deskipsho ovve fief. Shord, pump, ball, we cat scatcher onizahm.

Gabrielle and Eve exchange worried looks. Darion looks confused.

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena...oh, wait. (to Eve) I think she said she got a description of the thief--short, plump, bald with cat scratches on his arm.

Xena shakes her head in dismay.

**EVE:**

She doesn't understand us, either.

**GABRIELLE** (comprehension dawns on her):

So she's talking to animals--but she's losing her ability to communicate with humans. (looks at Xena, horrified)

**EVE** (bitterly):

Some gift.

**GABRIELLE** (comes up to Xena and takes her hands, speaks very loudly, almost shouting):

Look, Xena--maybe you should just rest, okay?

Xena looks at her uncomprehendingly; Eve winces and puts her hands over her ears.

**EVE:**

She's not deaf, Gabrielle. It's more like...she's listening to a language she doesn't know very well.

**GABRIELLE** (tries again, this time speaking loudly and distinctly):

This whole thing could go away in the morning. It started when you woke up, right? (Xena nods) Maybe it was just a one-day spell. (Xena nods again, gratefully.) I'll bring up some food from the tavern.

**XENA** (speaks with an effort):

I'll go to the stables.

**GABRIELLE** (nods, tearing up a little):

I understand.

Xena squeezes her hands, and then turns around and walks away rather stiffly.

**EVE:**

Poor Mother. Right now, Argo's the only one of us she *can* talk to.

Gabrielle and Eve exchange a pained look.

**CUT TO**

The stables. Dusk. Xena stands next to Argo, her cheek pressed to Argo's neck, stroking Argo's side.

**XENA** (sighs):

I guess it's really just you and me now, girl...

**ARGO** (neighs):

All the others ran off?

**XENA** (chuckles):

No...I'm just finding it hard to talk to them anymore. You know how hard it is when you're trying to tell people something and they don't hear a thing you're saying?

**ARGO** (grunts):

Welcome to the club.

Xena chuckles rather bitterly, patting Argo's side again.

Gabrielle comes in and stops for a moment. She looks sympathetic and sad. Then she comes over to Xena and puts a hand on her arm.

**GABRIELLE** (gently):

Xena... Come on. You need to eat something.

Xena strains to understand. Gabrielle takes her hand and pulls her gently toward the door; Xena nods and follows her.

**XENA** (turns):

'Night, Argo.

**ARGO:**

Sleep well.

**CUT TO**

Night, outside the stables. The moon is partly covered by clouds.

The stable door opens and a short shadowy figure emerges, holding out an apple. Argo comes out too. We see a close-up of Argo's muzzle as she reaches for the apple.

**MAN** (whispers, off-camera):

Good...good...come here. You are *such* a beautiful animal. Such a beautiful coat. Such strong, sturdy legs. I bet you can outrace the wind.

Argo takes the apple and munches on it. The man's hand extends toward her with another apple, luring Argo away from the stables.

**MAN:**

Oh, you are going to make your new owner *very* happy. And me, very rich.

Quick pan to a covered wagon waiting outside, barely visible in the shadows under a tree. A merchant in fine garments steps out from around the wagon.

**MERCHANT:**

This is the animal? Excellent, excellent. Let's get her inside the wagon.

**MAN** (off-camera):

First, my fee.

The merchant takes out a pouch of coins and hands it over to the thief, who extends his hand (the rest of him remaining unseen) to pick up the pouch.

Suddenly sensing trouble, Argo pricks up her ears and starts to neigh, but the man quickly throws a rope around her muzzle and tightens it. Argo tries to rear up in alarm, but a rope is thrown around her neck and she is pulled toward the wagon as we:

**FADE OUT**

## **ACT FOUR**

**FADE IN**

Early morning. The stables. Xena walks in, and stops in dismay when she sees Argo's stall empty. She looks at Klio.

**XENA:**

Where's Argo?

**KLIO:**

I don't know...she wasn't here when I woke up.

Xena looks horrified.

**HORSE** (off-camera):

That beautiful golden mare...she's gone. (Xena turns and sees Falcon, the horse who asked her for a date with Argo the day before.) I thought you had taken her away for an early-morning ride.

**XENA** (quietly furious):

The thief...that thief took her. Well, *now* he's gone too far.

The stableman shuffles into the stables. Seeing Xena, he stops. Xena whips around, glaring at him.

**XENA:**

What happened to my horse?

The stableman stares at her in bewilderment.

**XENA** (raises her voice; we now hear her as the stableman does):

Ahahawatamorf?

Impatient, she points indignantly toward the empty stall.

**STABLEMAN** (stammers, looking scared):

Uh...I don't know where she is... I swear, ma'am, this is the finest establishment in town! We've never had any problems like this! She must have run off during the night!

Xena tries to listen, cocking her head, but then obviously gives up on trying to understand him. She starts advancing on him threateningly while he backs off in fear.

Suddenly, Xena stops and looks over the stableman. He is short and plump, with tufts of hair on both sides of his balding head. There is a "gotcha" flash in her eyes. With a snarl, she leaps at the frightened stableman, pins him to the wall and grabs his left arm.

**STABLEMAN:**

Wh-what are you-- (yells) *Help!*

Xena rolls up the sleeve of his shirt. The camera zooms in to show nearly healed scratches on his arm just below the elbow.

**XENA:**

It was you, you bastard!

**STABLEMAN:**

Heeeeelp!

Gabrielle rushes into the stables and sees Xena.

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena, what is it? What did this man do?

**XENA** (turns her head, still pinning the stableman to the wall):

He's the one who's been stealing all those animals! And now he's taken Argo!

We hear a "rewind" sound; the camera pulls back to show the same scene again from Gabrielle's point of view.

**XENA:**

Ewowawobetelinovovamima--awoisapinao!

Close-up of Gabrielle's face; she is in dismay.

**GABRIELLE:**

Oh, Xena...it's getting worse. Now I don't understand you at all.

Another "rewind" sound while the camera pulls back to show Gabrielle from Xena's point of view.

**GABRIELLE:**

Owiwa...ibatawoh. Nahabokulaflam uhadaw.

Xena and Gabrielle stare at each other in horror. Xena loosens her grip on the stableman, who takes advantage of the moment to try to run; quickly remembering him, Xena leaps after him and drags him by the collar.

**STABLEMAN** (yells):

Get me away from this lunatic!

Pinning him to the wall with her left hand, Xena grabs a piece of coiled rope hanging on a post and starts tying the stableman to the post.

**STABLEMAN:**

Let go of me!

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena, what are you doing?

Xena points to Argo's empty stall.

**GABRIELLE** (gasps):

Argo's been stolen? (looks at the stableman) You think it was him?

Xena points to the scratches on his arm.

**GABRIELLE:**

Scratches on his arm...you think he's the thief the animals told you about? (sees the incomprehension in Xena's face) Oh, Xena...this is terrible. (gets an idea) Wait--maybe Ares can help you. After all, he *is* a god. (raises her voice) Ares!!! (there is no response) Oh, come on... *Ares!*

Xena looks at her, comprehension dawning on her face, and holds out her hand in a "keep still" gesture.

**XENA** (shouts):

Ares!

Another brief pause. Then there is a flash of blue light and Ares appears. The stableman's eyes bulge with fear.

**ARES** (surveys the scene, including the stableman tied to the post):

Whatever you're up to, I'm not joining in.

**GABRIELLE:**

Ares, dammit--this is serious! Argo's been stolen!

**ARES** (looks at Xena, incredulously):

And--you want me to help?

**GABRIELLE:**

Ares, it isn't just Argo. Xena-- (she doesn't quite know how to explain what happened)

**ARES** (slightly alarmed):

What?

He turns to Xena, who shakes her head and looks away.

**ARES:**

You can't talk?

**GABRIELLE:**

Xena, say something. Maybe he'll understand you. He's a god.

**ARES** (bewildered and alarmed):

All right, what's going on? (turns toward Xena) Xena? (looks to Gabrielle again) What--she's gone mute?

**GABRIELLE:**

Not quite. (takes a deep breath) Since yesterday morning, Xena's been able to talk to animals and to understand them. The downside is, she can't communicate with people anymore.

**ARES** (stunned):

Run that by me again?

**GABRIELLE:**

Don't tell me it's catching. (off Ares' glare) She can talk with animals. Anything she says comes out as gibberish to us--and vice versa, apparently.

**ARES:**

You're making this up.

**STABLEMAN:**

Hey, hey! I've had just about enough of this nonsense! I don't really care who she can talk to--just get me out of here!

**XENA** (glares at him, losing patience, and then steps toward him threateningly):

If you don't tell me what you did with my horse, you little tub of lard--

Ares looks at her in open-mouthed dismay.

**GABRIELLE** (gives up):

You don't understand her either.

**ARES:**

No.

**GABRIELLE:**

And there's nothing you can do?

**ARES:**

Hey, I don't even know what's causing this. (looks at Xena, who stands menacingly over the stableman) First things first. She thinks this guy stole her horse?

**GABRIELLE:**

Apparently so. See, there's been a rash of animal thefts in this town and--

Xena taps Gabrielle on the shoulder, interrupting her. Then, with a snarl, she jabs her fingers into the stableman's neck.

**ARES:**

Well, there's one form of communication he'll understand.

**XENA** (as heard by Ares and Gabrielle):

Awah--ulebeifirryshetah--

**GABRIELLE** (coughs):

I think I should translate. (to the stableman) Look--I hate to say this, but if you don't tell her everything you know--

**ARES:**

Hold on. You're not doing a very good job of this. (assumes a threatening look and leans toward the stableman) Listen, you little tub of lard. You'll be dead in thirty seconds if you don't spill the beans about the horse and anything else she wants to know.

**STABLEMAN** (coughing and wheezing):

All right, all right--I'll tell you! Yeah, it was me--I took the horse!

Ares taps Xena on the shoulder and nods, indicating that it's safe to take off the pinch. She jabs her fingers into the man's neck and he gasps for breath.

**ARES:**

Go on, we're listening.

**STABLEMAN** (still gasping):

I took the horse...I sold her to a merchant I know. Such a fine animal would make a lot of money on the market.

**GABRIELLE:**

And that wasn't the first time, was it? You're the one who's been stealing all these animals in this town...animals people loved with all their hearts...and you sold them all so you could put a little money in your pockets, didn't you? (The stableman says nothing, looking scared.) Well?

**STABLEMAN** (nods):

Yes. Yes, I did.

**GABRIELLE:**

And you never thought about what it would do to the people whose animals had been taken away from them? Aren't you ashamed?

**ARES** (rolls his eyes):

Look, why don't we save the noble sentiments for later. Where did your merchant friend take the horse?

**STABLEMAN:**

He...he's supposed to put her up for auction this afternoon in Photia...it's a few hours' ride west of Anderida.

**GABRIELLE:**

All right--then that's where we're going. (To Xena, beckoning her) Come on.

They head toward the door.

**STABLEMAN:**

Wait, wait--what about me?

**GABRIELLE:**

That's for the people of Anderida to decide.

**CUT TO**

A wide shot of Xena and Gabrielle riding down a hill toward a town seen in the distance.

**CUT TO**

A crowded square. The camera moves over the heads of the crowd as a loud voice is heard in the distance, getting closer. Finally the camera zooms in on a platform. There stands the merchant from the night before, next to a sad-looking Argo who is tied to a post.

**MERCHANT:**

And a magnificent animal it is, too! A golden coat--look at how smooth it is, so sleek she almost glows! (runs his hand over Argo's side; she whinnies) Look at that mane! Look at those legs! This is truly a dream horse for anyone who has ever been a horse lover. So, why don't we start the bidding at forty dinars?

**MAN #1** (in the crowd):

I bid forty.



**MAN #2:**

Forty-three.

**MERCHANT:**

Forty-three, we have forty-three. Forty-five, anyone?

Pan to Xena and Gabrielle pushing their way through the crowd.

**WOMAN #1:**

Forty-five!

**WOMAN #2:**

Fifty! I bid fifty!

Xena and Gabrielle come to the front of the crowd. Xena looks furious.

**MERCHANT:**

Fifty-five, anybody?

Argo looks up and sees Xena. She tosses her head up and lets out a loud neigh.

**ARGO:**

Xena!

**XENA:**

Hang tight, girl. I'm getting you out of here.

**MERCHANT** (puts out his hand to stop Xena who is heading toward the platform):

Excuse me, ma'am--you're not allowed to go near the merchandise. If you want to make a bid--

Xena growls at him and he shrinks back.

**GABRIELLE:**

That's *her* horse!

Ares steps out from behind a post at the corner of the platform and approaches Xena and Gabrielle, stepping between them, his hand on the hilt of his sword. The three of them stand together, reminiscent of the famous shot in OLD ARES HAD A FARM where they confront "Battling Siki."

**ARES** (aside to Gabrielle):

I think I can do a better job of delivering her lines. (to the merchant) What the lady wants to say is something like this (glares menacingly at the merchant) That's no merchandise, that's *my* horse!

A murmur goes through the crowd.

**MERCHANT** (trying to keep his cool as Xena, Ares and Gabrielle advance toward the platform):

The last bid was fifty dinars!

He puts his hand on Argo's bridle. Xena snarls.

**ARES:**

And that means: Take your hands off my horse, you pathetic excuse for a horse thief, or I'll rip off your head, suck out your brains and--

Xena stomps on his foot. Ares gives her a startled look.

**ARES** (to Gabrielle):

Hey--did she understand that?

**GABRIELLE** (shakes her head and smiles a little):

Nah--she just...knows you well enough.

Xena goes up the steps to the platform, glaring at the merchant. He backs off. The murmur in the crowd grows louder. Xena grabs Argo's bridle. Argo neighs loudly.

**GABRIELLE** (turns to the crowd):

Sorry, folks. This auction is closed.

The people begin to walk away, murmuring in disappointment.

The camera zooms in on Xena and Argo.

**XENA** (untying the rope):

I've got you, girl.

**ARGO** (whinnies):

What took you so long?

**XENA:**

Sorry. (pats Argo on the neck) Miss me?

**ARGO** (lowers hers head):

I was starting to think I'd never see you again.

**XENA** (smiles and strokes Argo's mane):

What, you think I'd ever give up on you? I would have looked for you to the end of the earth.

Argo nuzzles Xena.

The camera pulls back to show Ares and Gabrielle coming up the platform.

**MERCHANT** (angry):

I was sold this horse fair and square!

**GABRIELLE:**

Fair and square? Really? That's a stolen horse.

**MERCHANT:**

How was I supposed to know she was stolen? (Ares advances on him, hand on the hilt of his sword, and he backs up further. He raises his hands in a gesture of surrender) All right, all right--I knew. I confess.

**GABRIELLE:**

Well, your days of dealing in stolen animals are over. We're taking you back to Anderida to face justice.

**MERCHANT** (terrified):

No, please! Anywhere but Anderida! Those animal nuts will tear me to shreds!

**ARES** (with an evil grin):

I hope you mean that literally.

**GABRIELLE:**

Maybe you'll get a break if you help them track down the stolen animals you've sold.

**MERCHANT:**

There's no way I can do that!

**ARES:**

Too bad for you, then.

He continues to advance on the merchant, who continues to back off until he stumbles and falls from the edge of the platform, sprawling on his back with a groan. He jumps to his feet and tries to escape, but Xena leaps after him, knocking him down, and ties his hands with a rope.

***CUT TO***

Xena and Gabrielle are riding out of the town, Xena on Argo, the merchant slung over Eve's horse which Xena rode into Photia.

***CUT TO***

Xena, Gabrielle and the merchant ride through the Anderida city gates.

***CUT TO***

Xena, Gabrielle, and the merchant ride up to the inn, where a small crowd has gathered. The sun is starting to set.

**VOICES IN THE CROWD:**

- Xena!
- She's back!
- That must be one of the thieves!

Eve and Darion come out of the inn. Darion sees Argo and grins happily.

**DARION:**

Argo! You got her back!

Xena smiles at him and dismounts.

**GABRIELLE** (raises her voice):

There will be no more animals stolen from Anderida. Xena and I have caught the thieves.

The crowd erupts in cheers.

**WOMAN:**

What about the animals who were taken?

**GABRIELLE:**

They've already been sold. (scattered groans) But I'm sure that he (pointing to the merchant) will gladly tell you what he knows if you promise to go easy on him. You may be able to recover some of the animals.

Xena drags the merchant down from the horse and hauls him up on his feet.

A middle-aged man with a dignified appearance steps forward.

**MAN:**

I want to thank you, Xena, on behalf of the people of Anderida. I'm the chief magistrate of this town. I'll take it over from here.

He grabs the man by the collar, to cheers from the crowd. Xena nods distractedly and the cheers turn to puzzled murmurs.

**GABRIELLE** (awkwardly):

Look, she's...uh...not in a very talkative mood today.

**VOICE** (off-camera):

Thank you, Xena!

Xena looks over to see a cat sitting on a wall.

**CAT:**

You did a wonderful thing for the animals of Anderida.

**LOWER VOICE** (off-camera):

We'll be in your debt forever.

Xena looks over to see a dog lying by the porch of the inn, wagging his tail and looking at her.

**DOG:**

Thank you, Xena. All the animals thank you.

**XENA** (smiles):

You're welcome.

The crowd murmurs again; someone is heard saying, "What did she say?" Gabrielle gently puts her hand on Xena's shoulder and leads her toward the stable. They lead the horses with them.

**CUT TO**

Inside the half-dark stable. Argo is munching peacefully on some hay while Xena is eating a piece of bread.

**XENA:**

Well, here we are, girl. You think I'll be stuck this way forever, huh?

**ARGO** (whinnies):

I like you this way.

**XENA** (smiles):

I bet you do. Hey, I enjoy talking to you too. But not being able to talk to other people is pretty tough.

**ARGO:**

Really? It's not like you're a big talker.

**XENA** (chuckles):

You're right. But sometimes there are things you really need to say.

She hears a noise and lifts her head. Stripes, the cat she saved earlier, runs into the stables, comes close to Xena and stops.

**STRIPES:**

Xena. Thank you for saving the animals.

**XENA:**

You're welcome. (stares at Stripes) Wait a minute...

**[FLASHBACK]**

Xena's dream:

Xena is standing under the arch at the Anderida town entrance, holding Stripes the cat. Stripes meows and leans closer to Xena, licking her face. Then she meows again--and her meow suddenly becomes an articulate voice.

**STRIPES' VOICE:**

Just listen, Xena. Just listen.

**[END OF FLASHBACK]**

**XENA:**

It was you, wasn't it? You gave me the power to talk to animals after I saved you.

**STRIPES:**

I did. I was doing what my mistress told me to do.

**XENA** (puzzled):

Clelia?

Clelia enters the stables and approaches Xena, picking up the cat.

**CLELIA:**

Yes, Xena. It was me.

Xena looks stunned.

**XENA:**

Wait--I can understand you--

**CLELIA:**

That's because I speak the language of animals, too.

A bright burst of white light engulfs her and the cat. When it clears, a beautiful golden-haired woman in a magnificent purple gown stands in Clelia's place, holding a pure white cat. Xena looks at her in shock.

**XENA:**

You...you're the goddess Epona.

**EPONA:**

You catch on quickly. I'm the one who gave you this power so that you could put a stop to these animal thefts. Having you save my cat was just a test--I had to make sure you cared enough about animals to take on the job.

**XENA** (rises to her feet and stares angrily at Epona):

You're a goddess. Couldn't you have tracked down the thieves yourself without messing with my head?

**EPONA** (smiles):

Yes, I'm a goddess. That means I don't take matters into my own hands when a mortal can handle the task--I just need to find the right mortal for it. I found out you were coming to town and so I decided to give you the power. After all, you're a problem-solver and this town had a problem.

**XENA:**

Well, in case you haven't noticed, now *I* have a problem.

**EPONA:**

I know. (sighs) Unfortunately, no mortal mind can handle the ability to talk to animals for too long without losing the ability to talk to humans. (she smiles) But not to worry--I can take it away. I assume that's what you want? (off Xena's glare) Yes, obviously you do.

She comes close to Xena and holds the cat close to Xena's face.

**XENA:**

Oh--wait...I just want to say a few words to Argo...while I can.

**EPONA:**

The change will not happen right away. You'll still have time.

Xena nods. The cat licks her face. After a moment Epona steps back.

**EPONA:**

It's done. (pause) I bid you farewell, Xena. May you always continue to help those in need, whether they be people or simple creatures of the forest.

**XENA (coolly):**

I'm glad I was able to help.

Epona disappears. When she is gone, Xena goes up to Argo and pats her muzzle.

**XENA:**

Can you still understand me, girl?

**ARGO:**

Yes, I can. (whinnies) I'll miss talking to you.

**XENA (smiles tenderly, stroking Argo's neck):**

I'll still talk to you. And we'll always understand each other...just not the words. I always knew you had thoughts and feelings just like I did...but now I know for sure.

Argo nuzzles her.

**ARGO:**

Well, as long as you still understand the words--mind if I ask for something?

**XENA:**

Sure.

**ARGO:**

How about a bridle with a special design? (Dreamily) Something that would really say "Xena." Maybe one studded with a couple of little round things like this one. (nods toward the chakram)

**XENA (smiles):**

Sure.

She leans forward and kisses Argo on the muzzle. Then she sits down in the hay again, lost in thought.

There is a flash of blue light. Ares materializes.

**ARES:**

Thought I'd find you here. (He sits down next to her.) So...no change? (Xena stares at him uncomprehendingly. Ares gives her a suddenly wary look, as if trying to figure something out.) Say, I meant to tell you--I just got Gabrielle to agree to lead my army. (Xena strains to listen; her expression doesn't change. Ares shakes his head) You really don't understand a thing I'm saying, do you. (He sighs and draws an arm around her.) Don't worry, we'll get you fixed up. And if not...hey, talking isn't the most important thing in the world.

She rests her head on his shoulder as he continues to stroke her hair. Then he pulls back and gently takes her hands, looking straight into her eyes as he speaks softly and tenderly.

**ARES:**

You know, I've wanted to tell you this for while. Do you know that I've lived for thousands of years but I never really felt alive until I met you? I never thought I'd love anyone--never wanted to. And then you came along and opened my heart... (chuckles slightly) I never even knew I had one. It's a funny thing, being in love. You can make me happy in a way I could never even imagine...and you can hurt me worse than eternity in Tartarus. (He lifts her hands to his lips and kisses them) And now that you're with me--I'd rather spend eternity in Tartarus than lose you again--or hurt you again. (pauses) I love you, Xena.

He leans forward and gives her a long, tender, passionate kiss. Then they pull apart.

**XENA** (lifts a hand to touch his face):

I love you too.

**ARES** (stares at her in shock):

You can talk! (stammers) Wait--how much exactly did you, huh--

**XENA** (smiles a little mischievously):

Wouldn't you like to know?

**ARES** (deeply embarrassed):

Well then--we'll just, huh--forget all about this little incident, right?

**XENA:**

Not very likely. (teasing) Opened up your heart, did I?

She moves in for another kiss; as they kiss, Ares leans into her until they are both lying in the hay. After a moment Xena gently pushes him back and they both sit up.

**XENA** (motions toward Argo):

Not in front of Argo.

Argo tosses her head and whinnies as we:

**FADE OUT**

**THE END**

*[Gabrielle's horse got a name during the production of this motion picture.]*