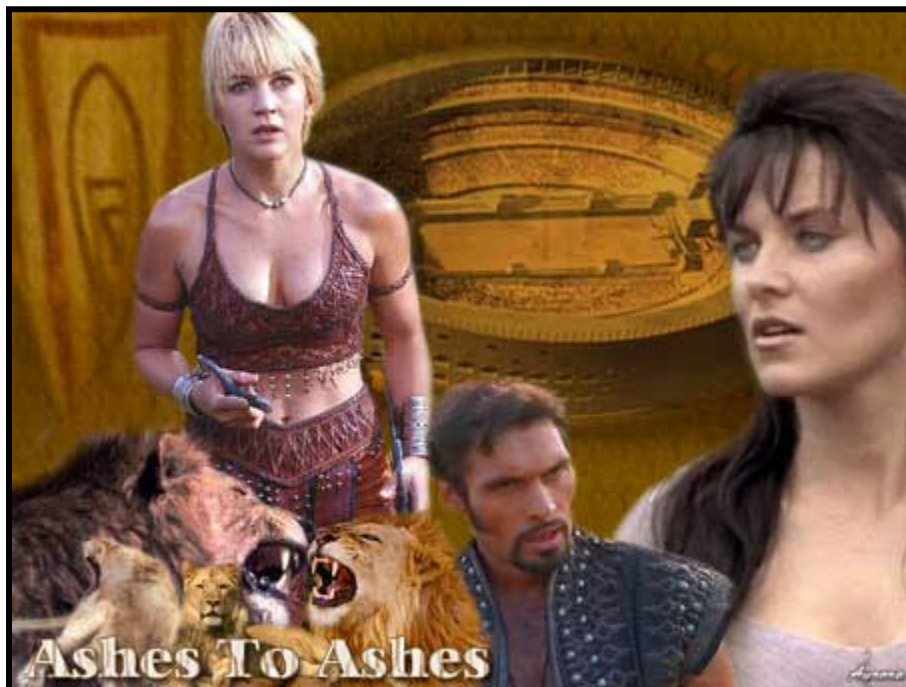


SHIPPER SEASON EIGHT



Production #XWP175/SS41
Episode #8.17

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Logline

Shattered by Agrippina's deathbed confession, Xena gives up the life of a warrior. Meanwhile, after the Great Fire of Rome, Nero steps up his persecution of the Elijans.

Airdate

September 21, 2003

TEASER

FADE IN

Fade up on a long shot of Rome. Large plumes of smoke can be seen rising from the city-whose skyline is now jagged, black and burnt.

CUT TO

Gabrielle picking her way through the smoldering remains of a building. Something catches her eye and she reaches down, moving aside a piece of furniture burnt beyond recognition. We do not see what she is looking at, but she swallows hard, as if trying to keep from being sick. She shakes her head sadly and straightens up. A blue light flashes behind her and she flinches.

GABRIELLE:

Ares...

ARES (looking around):

A waste, isn't it?

GABRIELLE:

What are you talking about?

ARES:

Rome. The greatest city the world has ever known--mankind's monument to power, wealth and might--gone. (Ares snaps his fingers.) Just like that. Kind of makes you look at things differently, doesn't it?



GABRIELLE:

That's all you *would* care about, isn't it? A bunch of buildings. What about the people in the city?

ARES:

People come and go, Gabrielle. Rome was supposed to last forever.

GABRIELLE (agitatedly):

You picked a bad time to get philosophical.

Gabrielle turns to walk away.

ARES:

You've heard the saying 'Rome wasn't built in a day,' right? Well, the saying is right--Rome *wasn't* built in a day. But some madman throwing a temper tantrum managed to tear it down in a few hours.

Gabrielle frowns and bows her head--Ares has confirmed her suspicions.

GABRIELLE:

Nero. (she turns to look at him) He did this?

ARES (shrugs):

Let's just say he's on the short list of suspects.

Gabrielle says nothing, staring up at Ares.

Ares shakes his head in an exaggeratedly rueful manner.

ARES:

I gotta be honest. I almost feel sorry for Nero right now. Once Xena gets wind of this his life won't be worth a plug dinar.

Gabrielle frowns and shakes her head.

GABRIELLE:

I wouldn't count on Xena if I were you, Ares.

ARES:

What? You actually believe she's laid down her sword for good? (he smirks mockingly.) Silly girl. I thought you knew Xena better than that.

GABRIELLE:

You didn't see her after Agrippina died. (she shakes her head sadly.) I've never seen Xena so...lost.

[FLASHBACK]

The cliff from "Judgment Calls." Xena throws down her sword, then after a moment kicks it off the cliff. She unhooks her chakram from her belt and throws it. The camera follows the chakram's flight and descent, until it sinks in the ocean. Cut back to a close-up of Xena's anguished face. Slowly the camera pulls back and Gabrielle can be seen over Xena's left shoulder. Sensing Gabrielle is there, Xena turns her head slightly to speak over her shoulder.

XENA:

I'm done.

GABRIELLE:

Xena...

Gabrielle steps forward and takes Xena in her arms, hugging her. Xena lays her head on Gabrielle's shoulder. She looks like a lost child.

XENA:

I can't do this anymore, Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE:

Xena, you made a mistake. We both did. Everyone makes mistakes.

Xena steps out of Gabrielle's embrace and shakes her head.



XENA:

Not like this. My mistakes get people killed.

GABRIELLE (gaping):

So you're just going to...walk away?

XENA:

It's for the best, Gabrielle.

Gabrielle frowns, almost in annoyance and points out towards the horizon.

GABRIELLE:

The best for who? Xena, there are people out there that need our help.

Xena gazes out in the direction that Gabrielle has indicated, but her expression is distant and frozen.

[END OF FLASHBACK]

Xena seated at a table in a tavern. She is dressed in a simple peasant's dress, her chin resting in her hand as she absently picks at the remains of her meal. The shadow of someone falls across her but she doesn't react.

PEST:

Xena!

She blinks as if coming out of a haze and looks up to be confronted by a leather clad thug with a crowd of his friends standing around him. The spark of Xena's former self can be seen flickering in her eye and heard in her tone.

XENA:

Yeah?

Pest laughs and turns his head slightly to address his friends.

PEST:

Ha! You see? I told you it was her. (he turns back to Xena) My friends didn't believe me when I told them it was you. Not that I can blame them. Who would expect Xena Warrior Princess to show up here looking like some peasant? (he smirks) Word on the street is that you've lost your nerve.

Xena glares and Pest's friends take a collective step backward in fear of Xena losing her temper. The tension is palpable as they all await her reaction. After a long moment, Xena's shoulders sag and she sighs tiredly, looking away.

XENA:

Leave me alone.

Pest senses Xena's unwillingness to fight and presses his advantage.

PEST:

I never thought I'd meet you face to face--and now that I do you're *such* a disappointment!

Xena leaps to her feet.

XENA:

Why you little--

Xena reaches behind her, out of habit reaching for her sword. She pauses, realizing it's not there. Her hand drops tiredly and she looks away.

PEST (laughs dryly):

How does it feel to be nothing but a has-been?

Xena stares at him, clearly wanting to fight. But after a moment she simply turns and walks out of the tavern.

CUT TO

The interior of a small, dark and dusty cabin. It is sparsely furnished--only a table with two chairs, a stove, and a narrow cot. The front door opens and Xena steps in. She turns and softly closes the door then rests her forehead against it, squeezing her eyes shut. In frustration, she strikes at the door with the heel of her hand.

Off camera a voice is heard.

VOICE:

My...how the mighty have fallen.



Xena turns to confront the voice. Seated on the edge of Xena's cot is Agrippina, shaking her head in disapproval as we:

FADE OUT

ACT ONE

FADE IN

On the same scene as the end of the teaser. Agrippina is seated on the edge of Xena's cot, frowning at Xena.

XENA:

What do you want?

AGRIPPINA:

Maybe to shake some sense into you.

XENA:

Forget it. I'm done talking to you.

Agrippina rolls her eyes and gets up.

AGRIPPINA (shrugs):

Talking to me, talking to yourself--what difference does it make? Be honest, Xena. Every fiber of your being wanted to pummel that fool back at the tavern--and he deserved it. What right did that insignificant little worm have to speak to the *Warrior Princess* that way?

XENA:

I don't care what he thinks about me.

AGRIPPINA (laughs):

Right. Keep telling yourself that, Xena. Someday you just might believe it.

XENA (growls):

I don't care what you think either! Besides, who are *you* to judge me? You're not even here.

AGRIPPINA:

Ah! There's that fire and passion I always admired in you! (Agrippina circles casually around the room.) I know you don't care what I think. Maybe I'm just here to ask you the questions you're afraid to ask yourself.

XENA:

Oh really? Like what? What am I afraid to ask myself?

Agrippina stops and looks at Xena, her expression deadly serious.

AGRIPPINA:

Is this the kind of life you really want to live from now on, Xena? If you want to call this pathetic existence a life. Up at the crack of dawn to milk the goats and feed the chickens, doing the dishes, cleaning the laundry, weeding the garden and in bed before the sun has even gone down simply because there's nothing else to *do*? Do you really think you'll be happier this way?



XENA:

At least this way I won't hurt anyone else.

AGRIPPINA:

You won't be able to help anyone either. Is that what you really want? No warrior worth their salt would allow themselves to be reduced to this.

XENA:

I'm not a warrior anymore.

Agrippina studies her a moment.

AGRIPPINA:

What haunts you the most? That you were duped into trusting the wrong people? That you couldn't save someone you promised to protect? Or maybe you think that because of your meddling in Rome's affairs, Lykia has you to thank for turning her into a killer?

Xena flinches--Agrippina has struck a nerve.

XENA:

All of that.

AGRIPPINA:

That's a lot for you to carry on your shoulders. It's a wonder you can still stand up. But then again, you're really not, are you?

Xena thinks a moment then sighs tiredly.

XENA:

Leave me alone.

Agrippina laughs lightly.

AGRIPPINA:

Of course! The moment you want me to.

CUT TO

A lavishly decorated room in Nero's palace. Nero sits upon a velvet covered settee, fidgeting nervously. He bites his fingernails and bobs his knee compulsively. Tigellinus stands before him.

NERO:

So you say I've lost the hearts of my people?

Tigellinus says nothing.

NERO (agitatedly):

How is this possible, Tigellinus?

TIGELLINUS (shrugging):

The masses are fickle, Caesar.

Nero leaps to his feet and begins to pace frantically.

NERO:

Have I not done everything I could for them since the fire?

TIGELLINUS:

Your mercy is legendary, Caesar.

NERO:

My enemies have turned my people against me with vicious lies. I must win them back, Tigellinus-- no matter what the cost.

Nero begins to pace again. Lost in his own thoughts he doesn't notice the guard enter and go to Tigellinus, whispering in his ear. Tigellinus' eyes widen with curiosity and he nods.

TIGELLINUS:

I'll see to it.

With a wave of his hand, he dismisses the guard. Nero comes out of his haze to notice the guard leaving and yet continues to pace.

NERO:

What news, Tigellinus?

TIGELLINUS:

You have a visitor, my Emperor. Gabrielle of Potidaea.

Nero stops pacing and spins towards Tigellinus.

NERO:

Gabrielle is here?

TIGELLINUS:

She is. Shall I have her removed from the palace?

NERO (whispers to himself):

Gabrielle is here...

Nero launches himself back onto the settee, carefully arranging his robes. He adopts a nonchalant pose and takes a deep breath. With outward calm, he nods.

NERO:

Send her in and leave us alone, Tigellinus.

Tigellinus coughs uncomfortably.

TIGELLINUS:

If I may, Caesar. It might not be wise to leave you alone with this woman. I'm not altogether sure that she doesn't consider you an enemy.

NERO (glares):

Gabrielle an enemy? Bite your tongue, Tigellinus. Gabrielle is an artist. Artists create--they don't destroy. She would never harm me. (he makes a shooping gesture with his hands.) Now let's not keep Gabrielle waiting any longer!

TIGELLINUS:

As you wish, Caesar.

Tigellinus bows respectfully as he backs out of the room. Nero compulsively arranges and re-arranges his robes. Finally he looks up. Gabrielle stands resolutely before him, her clothes, hair and face are smudged heavily with soot from the fire.

NERO:

Gabrielle!

She says nothing, glaring daggers at him. It is obvious her temper is seething just beneath the surface. Nero fidgets uncomfortably and finally can't take her scrutiny anymore. He looks her up and down.

NERO:

What has happened to you?

GABRIELLE:

You should know.

Nero shakes his head innocently.

NERO:

I'm afraid I don't. But allow me to find you some decent clothes--

GABRIELLE:

It was you that set the fire.

NERO:

I? Gabrielle, I'm very sorry but I'm afraid I have no idea--

GABRIELLE:

Spare me the innocent act, Caesar. You were never that good an actor to begin with.

Nero leaps to his feet.

NERO:

How dare you!

GABRIELLE:

No. How dare *you*? Xena and I trusted you, the people of Rome adored you.

Nero slits his eyes suspiciously.

NERO:

Who has been poisoning you against me? Seneca?

GABRIELLE:

Agrippina told us everything. The raids on the villages, how you plotted against Claudius and tricked Xena and me into helping you.

NERO (sneering):

So you believe Agrippina's lies about me?

GABRIELLE:

Agrippina confessed to everything just before she died by *your* hand. How she poisoned Claudius and forged the documents to make it look like he was invading Britannia. She implicated herself. Why would she make that up?

NERO:

That would be just like my wicked mother--to plot and scheme even on her deathbed to take down an innocent man. No doubt with her last dying breath she arranged everything to make it look as if I was responsible for her murder.



GABRIELLE:

It's not just Agrippina's word. I have proof that you were raiding villages in the Greek countryside. You never counted on us catching up to your cronies. It took me a while, but I finally was able to put all the pieces together. You were their leader. It was all your idea. (she sighs and shakes her head sadly) You could have done so much good for Rome and in the end you betrayed us all.

Nero leaps to his feet angrily.

NERO:

You dare speak to me about betrayal after your treacherous behavior in that affair involving the slaves of Gracchus? Against my better judgment I accepted your word when you told me you had nothing to do with Sabina's escape. And now you let the ravings of some twisted, fork-tongued woman turn you against me.

He stops and takes several deep breaths, calming himself. After a long pause he speaks.

NERO:

You mean a great deal to me, Gabrielle. And I'll do whatever I have to in order to gain your trust back. (he gains to his feet, a determined look on his face.) I'll find the culprits responsible for the fire. And then...you'll see...we can be friends again, can't we?

Gabrielle glares.

Nero smiles--it is a chilly smile devoid of any emotion.

CUT TO

Xena's cabin. A grim-faced Xena is wielding a broom, sweeping up some pieces of a broken clay jar lying on the floor.

AGRIPPINA'S VOICE (off-camera, mocking):

Cleaning up your mess?

Xena looks up to see Agrippina standing before her, hands folded on her chest, looking down sarcastically at the broken shards of the pot. Xena starts sweeping again, saying nothing.

AGRIPPINA:

That's right. You always clean up your messes. (pauses, then continues sarcastically) Don't you?

XENA (without looking up):
What's that supposed to mean?

AGRIPPINA (walks around her, looking her over mockingly, then stops):
I think you know.

XENA (curtly):
What?

AGRIPPINA:
That was quite a mess you left behind in Rome.

XENA (stops sweeping and whips around, furious):
A mess that I--

AGRIPPINA (coolly):
Sure, Xena. A crazed killer as Emperor of Rome.

XENA (sneers):
The Romans have done just fine in that department before--without my help.

AGRIPPINA:
Sure. But this time it happened *with* your help. You made him.

XENA (bitterly):
Not just me.

AGRIPPINA:
Doesn't matter. You're the one who has to stop him.

XENA:
Stop him? (chuckles bitterly) I couldn't even stop his assassins from killing his mother.

AGRIPPINA:
So you made some mistakes. Now you're going to spend the rest of your life sulking about it? (Xena resumes sweeping and says nothing) What will it take to get you to snap out of it? Warlords wiping out a village full of women and children? (Xena flinches) Roman armies overrunning Greece? Or Gabrielle getting hurt?

XENA:
Gabrielle isn't a little girl anymore. She can take care of herself. (lowers her voice) Maybe she can help people better than I can.

AGRIPPINA:
You keep telling yourself that and maybe some day you'll believe it. (mockingly) Gabrielle, Warrior Princess. Doesn't have quite the same ring to it, does it?

XENA (snarls and pushes the broomstick away so that it falls to the floor with a clatter):
Go away!

As she speaks those words, there is a flash of blue light behind her. Ares materializes.

ARES:

Thanks for the warm welcome. (Off Xena's startled look) Talking to imaginary friends?

XENA (doesn't turn around, but her face and voice soften):

What do you want?

Ares comes up to her and puts his hands on her shoulders. A sensuous look momentarily crosses her face but she doesn't visibly react, one way or the other.

ARES:

A better question is, what do you want? To spend the rest of your life moping...doing chores in a run-down shack...digging around in a vegetable patch...not what one would expect of a Warrior Princess.

XENA (brusquely):

Ex-Warrior Princess. I'm retired.

The camera pulls back to show Agrippina still standing by the wall, smiling sarcastically.

AGRIPPINA:

Xena: The Golden Years. What a concept.



ARES:

So this is the way the story ends? Not with a bang, but with a whimper?

AGRIPPINA:

He's right, you know. It's pathetic.

Xena jerks her shoulders slightly, freeing herself from Ares' hold, and walks over to the table.

XENA:

I don't care what you think.

Ares glowers at her, exasperated.

AGRIPPINA (standing next to Xena now):

You know, if you had listened to him before, maybe none of this would have happened. Just like

when he told you to destroy that temple in Britannia. You're sleeping with him and you still don't trust him.

ARES:

Come on, Xena. You ran into a couple of very good liars. That's no reason to throw away perfectly good weapons.

He flicks his hand; a glowing golden circle, spinning rapidly, appears in a corner of the cabin under the ceiling. It stops for a moment and we see that it's Xena's chakram. The chakram spins again and then hurtles toward Xena with a whooshing sound. She turns around abruptly and her hand shoots up in the air. A close-up on her hand snatching the chakram out of the air, then a close-up of her face as she grins a little, some of the old fire back.

ARES (grins):

Knew you still had it.

XENA (the grin fades from her face; she looks at the chakram and then gives Ares a grim look):

You got it back.

ARES (shrugs):

Did you think I was going to leave it to rust at the bottom of the sea?

XENA (through clenched teeth):

Fine. Maybe I'll use it to slice vegetables.

She puts the chakram down on the table.

ARES (stares at her grimly):

Catch!

Xena's sword materializes in his hand. He throws it to Xena; she catches it. Drawing his own sword, Ares charges at her and they start to spar in the confined space of the cabin. Xena jumps up on the table, parrying Ares' blows. A jar on the table is knocked over and shatters on the floor; Xena doesn't notice, absorbed in the sparring. After a few moments she leaps down and they continue to spar. Ares seems to have the edge; he advances on Xena, finally backing her up against the wall. Xena focuses and deflects his blow hard enough to make him stagger; then she flips over her head, kicks a chair out of the way and stands up on the other side of the cabin.

Ares charges again but this time Xena is much more confident. She quickly gains the upper hand and starts to advance on Ares; after a few moments she manages to get past his defenses and put the tip of her sword to his chest. The grin on her face is back and Ares grins back at her.

In the next moment Xena's face turns grim and she steps back.

XENA:

What did you want to prove? That I still love fighting? (bitterly) Give it up, Ares. I'm not coming back.

They stand facing off, with their swords pointed at each other. The tension is broken by a knock on the door. Xena and Ares both turn.

GABRIELLE (off-camera):

Xena? Are you there?

XENA:

Gabrielle!

There is a flash of joy on her face but it quickly fades. The door opens and Gabrielle comes in.

GABRIELLE:

Xena-- (Seeing Xena and Ares with their swords pointed at each other, she stops in her tracks) I guess I should have known it would come to this sooner or later.

Xena and Ares lower their swords.

ARES:

I bet you never would have thought I'd actually be glad to see you.

GABRIELLE:

You're right. I wouldn't.

ARES (nods towards Xena):

Maybe you can talk some sense into her.

Xena looks up. She and Gabrielle look at one another.

GABRIELLE (nods but never takes her eyes from Xena):

I'll see what I can do.

ARES:

Good luck. (he gives Xena a quick glance then shakes his head in frustration) You're gonna need it.

Ares disappears in a flash of blue light. Xena and Gabrielle gaze at one another a moment longer until Xena smiles.

XENA:

So...how's Darion?

GABRIELLE (nods):

Good. I sent him and Lykia to stay with Eve for a few weeks.

XENA:

Lykia? Okay. Just as long as Eve makes sure Darion isn't... (she trails off)

GABRIELLE (nods expectantly):

Darion isn't...what?

Xena smiles--though it seems a bit forced.

XENA:

Nothing. Forget it. I'm just being paranoid. (she studies Gabrielle.) You look good. Just a little tired though.

GABRIELLE (chuckles):

I've been kept on my toes lately. (Gabrielle studies her a moment and smiles warmly) You've put on some weight.

XENA (shrugs a big self-consciously):

Oh...yeah. I guess I'm not getting enough action these days.

GABRIELLE (shaking her head sadly):

Xena, what are you doing?

XENA:

Me? I was just about to walk down to the village for dinner at the local tavern. If we get there early enough it's half off--

GABRIELLE:

That's not what I mean and you know it. (she points to the sword and chakram.) What are you going to do with those?

XENA:

I don't know. (she smiles self-deprecatingly.) You want 'em?

Gabrielle frowns and sighs.

CUT TO

A blazing sunset out on the balcony of Nero's living quarters. He is sullenly plucking at his lyre. From over his shoulder, Tigellinus can be seen walking towards him. Nero gives no indication that he is aware that Tigellinus is behind him. Tigellinus waits patiently as Nero continues playing an unsettling, gloomy tune. Gradually Nero plays slower and softer until the music simply fades away.

NERO:

Tigellinus...

TIGELLINUS (clearing his throat uncomfortably):

You sent for me Caesar?

NERO (staring out over the city):

The people hate me, Tigellinus.

TIGELLINUS:

Caesar... (he shakes his head almost in pity for Nero.) The people love you. But someone has made them doubt you.

NERO:

They believe those vicious rumors that I set fire to the city.

TIGELLINUS:

Caesar--if I may... (he takes a small step forward, cautious as if in the presence of a venomous snake.) Now is the time to put those rumors to rest once and for all.

NERO:

If I were to prosecute the culprits responsible for destroying my city, I would win back the hearts of my people.

TIGELLINUS:

And their trust, Caesar.

Nero gazes out over the city, awash in an orange glow from the setting sun. There is a wistful look in his eye, as if regretting what he's about to do. After a long pause he nods.

NERO:

All right, Tigellinus. I must do what I must do. Rome has been threatened far too long by these subversives that challenge law and order. (Nero turns to Tigellinus) It's time they were brought to heel.

CUT TO

Xena and Gabrielle seated across the table from one another in the tavern. The chakram can be seen hanging from Gabrielle's hip.

XENA:

So you think Nero is responsible for the fire?

GABRIELLE:

No--I don't *think* he is. I *know* he is. (Gabrielle reaches out and squeezes Xena's hand.) Xena, I know how you feel. I feel terrible about what happened with Nero and Agrippina too. But we have to focus. Nero has to be brought to justice.

Gabrielle gives her an expectant look and Xena shakes her head.

XENA:

No, Gabrielle. I've learned my lesson.

GABRIELLE:

What about the lesson you taught me all those years ago? What about the greater good?

XENA:

Trust me. The best way I can serve the greater good is to not interfere in Rome's business any more.

Gabrielle is about to snap back angrily but bites off her retort when a wiry, middle-aged man with a weather beaten face diffidently approaches their table.

CROTUS:

Excuse me?

XENA (defensively):
What do *you* want?

The man looks at Gabrielle and points to the chakram on her hip.

CROTUS:
Are you Xena?

Gabrielle smirks and looks at Xena out of the corner of her eye.

GABRIELLE:
Can we help you?

CROTUS:
Oh--I *hope* so! My name is Crotus. I have a small farm about two leagues southwest of the village. I don't have much livestock...just some pigs and chickens and a few goats. I've had some disputes with my neighbor over water rights--he's been trying anything he can think of to drive me off of my land for months. (he wipes his misting eyes with the cuff of his shirt.) Yesterday he went too far. He stole my Selene!

XENA:
Selene is your wife?

CROTUS:
No! Selene is my prize milking goat. Yesterday she wandered off. No sooner did she cross the bridge that separates my land from Trollius' that he snatched her up. When I went to claim her Troillus refused to give her back. At first he tried denying he had her but I just knew Selene was there. (he rubs at his eye) I need Selene. I've got five little ones at home. Without her milk I don't know if I'll be able to feed them all.

GABRIELLE (nodding in empathy):
And when you saw us you thought we might be able to talk to Trollius?

CROTUS (pointing to the chakram):
Well everyone knows that Xena sticks up even for nobodies like me.

Gabrielle raises her eyebrows at Xena who rolls her eyes and looks away. Gabrielle is both shocked and disappointed at Xena's unwillingness to help but she masks that from Crotus.

GABRIELLE:
All right, Crotus. I'll go talk to Trollius for you and get Selene back. (she glances at Xena, then back at Crotus.) Just give me a minute, will you?

Crotus nods gratefully and retreats to the bar, a respectful distance away.

GABRIELLE:
Well it's not exactly the battle of Troy but it's a job, right? Are you coming?

XENA:
No thanks. You go ahead. I'll keep the home fires burning.

GABRIELLE (sighs in resignation):

Right. I'm headed back to Rome after this. If you need me--

XENA:

I know where to find you.

Gabrielle reaches out to squeeze Xena's shoulder affectionately and Xena reaches up to pat her hand. They pause a moment, sharing the affection between them. Then Gabrielle reaches for the chakram on her hip and runs her finger over its blade, obviously pondering something as we:

FADE OUT

ACT TWO

FADE IN

Gabrielle leading her horse by the reins into a stable. The chakram is not at her side. The hay is burnt and the walls are blackened with soot. Discernible on the wall despite the fire damage is a fish, the Elijan symbol. A young blond man of about twenty--his clothes also sooty from the fire--waves from where he mucks out a stall.

GABRIELLE:

Evening, Felix.

FELIX:

Gabrielle! I'm glad you're back! Where've you been?

GABRIELLE (smiles thinly):

Rescuing a goat.

FELIX (shakes his head):

You have such an interesting life.

GABRIELLE:

How are things here? Quiet?

FELIX (shrugs):

A few of Petronia's people were looking for you tonight. Rumor is there's going to be some trouble at this evening's prayer circle.

Gabrielle immediately tenses up.

GABRIELLE:

Trouble? What kind of trouble?

FELIX:

Can't say. Though these days wherever there's trouble you can bet Nero is involved.

Gabrielle's eyes widen in alarm.

GABRIELLE:

Where's the prayer circle being held tonight?

FELIX:

Down at the docks under one of those overturned fishing boats--

Gabrielle spins and runs towards the door.

GABRIELLE:

Come on!

CUT TO

Gabrielle and Felix running down the street towards the docks. She stops short when she sees the Elijans being forced into caged wagons by a band of Roman soldiers. She reaches down and pulls her sais from her boots.

GABRIELLE (to Felix):

Stay here!

She charges into the soldiers and the Elijans can be heard gasping in shock and awe.

"It's Gabrielle!" "I knew she wouldn't let us down!" "-just wait 'til Xena hears about this."

Gabrielle takes down three soldiers in rapid succession with kicks and punches. A large centurion finally squares off against her, deftly brandishing his sword. He and Gabrielle fight--she has a hard time laying a hand on him because his size prohibits her from getting too close. Her strategy is to keep low to the ground, ducking and tumbling out of his sword's reach. Finally he swings at her head and Gabrielle ducks, performing a tumble between his legs. She gains to her knees and before he has the chance to turn around, Gabrielle punches him in the back of the knee, collapsing it. The centurion crumbles to his knees. Gabrielle raises a sai high above her head, about to drive it down into the centurion's back. A hand shoots out and grabs her by the wrist.

PETRONIA (a tall, thin woman in her forties, wearing white, with light brown hair tied in a bun behind her head):

Gabrielle, don't!

Gabrielle looks up at Petronia, distracted long enough for the centurion to throw a punch, knocking Gabrielle to the ground, unconscious.

CUT TO

A large prison cell filled with three or four dozen prisoners. Seated in a circle are twelve to fifteen people. Petronia is seated in the center of the circle, leading her followers in meditation. Gabrielle looks on from where she leans against the cell door, her arms folded across her chest.

PETRONIA:

...by obtaining inner stillness you become a perfect vessel for love...

Gabrielle sighs impatiently and turns, gripping the cell bars tightly, as if she can bend them.

Someone approaches from behind.



SIRAN (meekly):
Gabrielle?

Gabrielle turns. It is obvious she doesn't recognize the girl.

SIRAN:
Do you remember me? Siran--

GABRIELLE:
Sabina's friend. I remember you. (she looks around.) What are you doing in here? I didn't know you were an Elijan.

SIRAN:
I wasn't--not until I saw Petronia and her followers stand up against Nero for the lives of a bunch of slaves they didn't even know.

GABRIELLE (nods):
After Senator Gracchus' murder...

SIRAN:
When you're a slave you don't realize there are actually good people in the world. And when I heard Petronia speak about peace and love I knew I wanted to feel it too. (She stares ahead of her for a moment, then her face clouds. She presses her lips together, looks down at her feet and speaks in a hushed voice) How is she?

Gabrielle gives her a puzzled look; then understanding dawns on her face.

GABRIELLE:
Sabina, you mean?

SIRAN (nods):
Is she okay? I just need to know.

Gabrielle reaches out and pats Siran's arm.

GABRIELLE:

The last I saw she was fine.

SIRAN:

You've seen her?

GABRIELLE:

A few months ago...right before she escaped.

Siran looks crushed and Gabrielle feels oddly compelled to boost her morale.

GABRIELLE:

But I'm betting that she'll find you as soon as she's able to. She's probably just lying low for right now.

SIRAN (reluctantly):

Gabrielle... I know Sabina has done some terrible things in the past. Do you think she would go back to that?

GABRIELLE:

I don't know. But I do know that a good heart can touch even the darkest soul. You have a good heart, Siran. If anyone could touch Sabina it would be you.

Footsteps and rough voices are heard. Gabrielle and Siran look toward the sounds, as do the other Elijans. A prison guard comes down the corridor, escorted by two soldiers. They stop in front of the cell. The guard scans the cell, as if looking for someone, and then points his finger at Gabrielle.

GUARD:

You. Say goodbye to your little friend. The emperor wants you.

He pulls a set of chains down from where they hang on the wall.

GUARD:

I was told you can be tricky and that you shouldn't be trusted. (he holds out the chains.) Stick your arms through the bars.

CUT TO

A room in Xena's cabin. Xena sits on the bed, turning the chakram in her hands.

AGRIPPINA'S VOICE (off-camera):

So she returned it. See--she knows you'll come back.

Xena looks up to see Agrippina standing in front of her, arms folded on her chest, a wry smile on her face.

XENA (wearily):

She *thinks* I'll come back.

AGRIPPINA:

She knows. (she comes over and sits down next to Xena; Xena gives her an alarmed look) The

only time she wore it, you were dead. (Xena turns away, a guilty look on her face) And she knows something else, too. No matter what, she can't fill your shoes.



XENA:

She doesn't have to be just like me. She's a different kind of warrior. Maybe she can do a better job than I have.

AGRIPPINA (contemptuously):

And what makes you think so? She was deceived as much as you were.

XENA (stares, not knowing what to answer):

Gabrielle will always do the right thing.

AGRIPPINA:

Sure. And maybe she'll get herself killed doing it.

Xena gives Agrippina a troubled look.

CUT TO

The two soldiers seen in the dungeon before are marching Gabrielle down a corridor in the imperial palace. Her hands are chained in front of her.

CUT TO

Nero in his throne room, flanked by Aquilo and Tigellinus. A squad of soldiers stand guard. Gabrielle is led in.

Nero raises his eyebrows at her.

NERO:

Those chains are rather...becoming on you.

GABRIELLE (glares):

More courtship from a Roman emperor?

NERO (sighs wearily):

Gabrielle, what can I say to convince you that you've been duped? First by Agrippina then by my enemies that would have you believing--



GABRIELLE:

The truth. I know what you are.

NERO:

It was the Elijans that started the fire, Gabrielle. I have proof.

Gabrielle gives a short, dry laugh and tosses her head in contempt.

GABRIELLE:

Proof? What kind of proof?

NERO:

Claudius' temple was the first to be burned down. Everyone knows the Elijans disapprove of the worship of the old gods--including the emperor gods.

GABRIELLE:

And that's *proof*?

Nero sighs and leans forward on his knee, resting his chin on his hand.

NERO:

You know, if I was the monster you're making me out to be I would have you thrown to the lions--the fate that awaits your precious Elijans. (pan to Gabrielle; she is in shock) Call me a sentimental fool, but I can't help having a soft spot for you, Gabrielle. I'm letting you go. You'll forgive me if I wait to unchain you until you're outside the palace. The emperor of Rome can't be too careful, can he? After all, what would the people do without their beloved emperor?

Nero rises and positions himself in a dramatic pose.

NERO:

Nero the Compassionate.

Gabrielle gapes in disbelief.

CUT TO

A long shot of the two soldiers leading Gabrielle out into the palace courtyard. There, one of them removes the chains from her arms. Rubbing her wrists, Gabrielle walks toward the exit. An exterior shot of the palace as she emerges from the door guarded by two soldiers. She walks past them, rubbing her wrists, and across the square.

CUT TO

A busy street in Rome; it's early evening. Gabrielle walks briskly down the street, looking worried and preoccupied.

A loud angry roar rises suddenly above the din of the crowd. Gabrielle flinches, stops and turns in the direction of the roar. She sees that she is passing by the Colosseum. The road is joined by another and then another.

OLD MAN:

It's the lions, little lady. Hungry ones. They're not feeding them much so they're good and ready when they go out into the arena.

Gabrielle looks sickened. She stands still for a moment, then walks on, a look of quiet determination on her face.

CUT TO

Gabrielle walks down a deserted street. Hearing a sound behind her, she stops. Before she can turn around, she is grabbed from behind and a dagger is held to her throat.

FEMALE VOICE (off-camera):

Hello, Gabrielle.

The camera pulls back to show Sabina (dressed as a Vestal Virgin in a white robe and a veil that covers her head) behind Gabrielle, an arm around her shoulder, holding a dagger to her throat as we:

FADE OUT

ACT THREE

FADE IN

On the same scene--Sabina holding a dagger to Gabrielle's throat.

SABINA (with a chilly smile):

We've got to stop meeting like this.

GABRIELLE (sighs in exasperation):

What do you want?

SABINA (chuckles):

How much time have you got? For the moment, I just want to talk. In private. (she glances at an arched entryway to a building) This way, if you don't mind. Or even if you do.

She backs up, pulling Gabrielle with her.

CUT TO

The passage under the arch. It's dark. Sabina, still holding the dagger on Gabrielle, stops by the wall.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

Sabina...we can have a much better conversation if you're not holding a dagger to my throat.

SABINA (grins):

Better for whom? I'm really not interested in one of your sensitive chats, Gabrielle. All I need is some information.

GABRIELLE:

About what? What are you doing in Rome, anyway? You're under a death sentence--are you suicidal?

SABINA:

Your concern is most touching...but I don't plan on getting caught. Anyway-- (she pushes the tip of the dagger up against Gabrielle's throat) I ask the questions, you answer. Deal?

GABRIELLE:

Why don't you move that dagger--or I could move it for you.

SABINA:

And I could kill you.

GABRIELLE:

But then you'd never get your questions answered, would you?

Sabina thinks a moment and lowers the dagger, releasing Gabrielle. Gabrielle turns around.

SABINA:

Rumor has it, you were taken to prison with a bunch of Elijans.

GABRIELLE (increasingly irritated):

So what if I was?

SABINA:

One of the people they rounded up happens to be-- (she stumbles momentarily) --a friend of mine.

GABRIELLE:

Siran? I saw her in prison.

SABINA (her voice a little hushed):

How--how is she?

Gabrielle pauses, pondering her response, then shakes her head sadly.

GABRIELLE:

Sabina--it's not good. Nero is going to have them thrown to the lions in the arena.

A close-up on Sabina's face; she remains outwardly impassive but her jaw tightens a little. After a moment she squeezes out a cold smile.

SABINA:

Of course, our dear Xena is not going to let that happen.

Gabrielle looks at Sabina for a moment, obviously pondering whether to tell her, and then finally makes up her mind.

GABRIELLE:

Sabina... Xena is-- (she swallows) Xena is--not in business anymore.

SABINA (can't quite suppress a gasp):

You mean--she's dead?



GABRIELLE:

No, she's--retired.

SABINA:

Oh, come on. Xena? If she ever tried to retire, she'd change her mind the moment some villager's goat got stuck in a tree. You're telling me she won't come back for *this*? You have to go and--

GABRIELLE (shakes her head):

I can't take that risk, Sabina...I don't have any time to waste. I have to get them out myself.

SABINA (laughs):

You? You're the Elijans' only hope? Then they really are doomed.

Gabrielle eyes Sabina for a moment, pondering something. Then she speaks with an obvious effort.

GABRIELLE:

You could help me. (off Sabina's scornful look) To help your friend. (pauses) Siran asked about you, you know.

SABINA (not quite able to disguise her emotion):

She did?

GABRIELLE:

And I told her you'd come back for her, as soon as you had a chance. You wouldn't want to make a liar out of me, would you?

Sabina stares back at her thoughtfully.

CUT TO

Gabrielle and Sabina walk down the street. It's nearly dark and there are few people out.

SABINA:

I must be going soft in the head--agreeing to work with *you*.

GABRIELLE (coldly):

I'm not enjoying this any more than you are. Let's just focus on the job at hand. There's got to be a way to get inside that prison.

SABINA:

Well, the easiest way is getting arrested--but you already tried that one. (She smirks at Gabrielle and points to her Vestal Virgin outfit) Here's our ticket in. Vestal Virgins are allowed to minister to the condemned.

GABRIELLE (eyes her admiringly):

Good plan. (thinks a moment) What about me?

SABINA:

A Vestal Virgin? I bet a goody-two-shoes like you is qualified for the job. Maybe even *overqualified*. (Gabrielle purses her lips in exasperation; Sabina gives a mock sigh.) Too bad you can't walk just into a dress shop and get a Vestal Virgin's outfit. (smirks at Gabrielle) But you can always go as my slave.

GABRIELLE (through clenched teeth):

You're loving this, aren't you?

SABINA (eyes her mockingly):

Poor little Gabrielle. Don't you wish Xena were here? (off Gabrielle's glare) Believe it or not--so do I.

CUT TO

Night. Xena's cabin. Xena stands by the window looking out at the moon.

AGRIPPINA (off-camera):

I wonder what Gabrielle is doing right now.

XENA (sighs):

Won't you ever quit?

AGRIPPINA:

The way you did? (she comes up to stand next to Xena)

XENA:

Whatever Gabrielle is doing, she doesn't need my help... (bitterly) I don't want her to have to bail *me* out.

AGRIPPINA:

Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Do you really think you haven't got it anymore? Come on, Xena. You're a better warrior now than you were ten years ago.

XENA (chuckles bitterly):

Better?

AGRIPPINA:

You don't let yourself be blinded by anger. You know when to solve a problem without violence--when to walk away from a fight.

XENA:

I also know when to quit. Too bad I didn't know it sooner--when I didn't walk away from a power struggle between two crazy Romans.

AGRIPPINA:

Do you know why you didn't walk away, Xena?

XENA (sarcastically):

Enlighten me.

AGRIPPINA:

A part of you desperately wanted to believe that there was something good in Rome--that the power of the empire could be put to the service of the Greater Good. You thought you could help make that happen.

XENA:

And that's supposed to make me feel better? (shakes her head bitterly) I let my guard down and forgot the most important lesson I ever learned.

AGRIPPINA:

And what lesson is that, Warrior Princess?



XENA (growling):
Never trust a Roman.

AGRIPPINA:

You wanted to see the best in people--even Romans. That's a lesson you learned from Gabrielle. And that makes you wrong?

Xena stares at her, obviously struck by this thought and not knowing what to reply.

The familiar "whoosh" is heard behind her back, and there is a flash of blue light. Xena turns to see Ares standing behind her.

XENA (sighs):
Ares.

Ares reaches out to touch her cheek. She puts her hand over his and closes her eyes for a moment.

ARES (lowers his hand and nods toward the sword and the chakram lying on the bed):
You kept your toys. That's a good sign.

XENA:
Still hoping I'll come back?



ARES (reaches out to stroke her cheek):
I know you will. The only question is, how long will it take.



XENA (bitterly):

You want me back in business? Why? So you can watch me fail again?



ARES (with suddenly brusqueness):

Will you stop feeling sorry for yourself? (his face softens when he sees her hurt look, and he puts his hands on her shoulders) Listen to me, Xena. You're a better warrior now than you used to be. You know when to fight and when not to fight.

A close-up on Xena's face; she flinches slightly and gives Ares a strange look.

XENA (pensively, as if talking to herself):

A better warrior...

ARES (grins slightly):

Never thought you'd hear me say that, did you? (with mock horror) I'm starting to sound like Gabrielle.

XENA:

Gabrielle...is she all right?

ARES (shrugs):

Who knows? Keeping an eye on your sidekick isn't my job.

CUT TO

The prison, dimly lit by a couple of torches mounted into the wall. In the cell, some of the Elijans are asleep while others seem to be meditating. The same guard we saw before is sitting on a stool dozing off, snoring. Another guard comes up, followed by Sabina in her Vestal Virgin disguise and Gabrielle in a grey cloak that covers up her leathers.

GUARD No. 2:

Hey, wake up.

GUARD No. 1 (stirs and sits up):

Huh? (he rubs his eyes)

GUARD No. 2:

The lady's here to comfort the condemned.

GUARD No. 1 (grumbles):

All right, all right. (He gets up, takes the keys off the hook on the wall and opens the door to the cell.) Get up, you! You've got a visitor.

The Elijans stir and mutter.

ELIJAN WOMAN:

It's one of the Vestal Virgins!

Petronia rises and walks toward the bars of the cell and sees Sabina.

PETRONIA (with quiet dignity):

I thank you for your mercy, dear lady. But we do not follow the old gods.

FELIX (belligerently):

There's nothing you can do for us.

SABINA:

You'd be surprised.

Quick pan to Siran, whose eyes widen as she recognizes Sabina's voice.

With a swift motion, Sabina knocks out Guard No. 1. Gabrielle throws off her cloak; there are gasps among the Elijans. Guard No. 2 stares in shock, then tries to draw his sword but Gabrielle kicks it out of his hand and then punches him hard so that he staggers backwards and falls.

FELIX:

Gabrielle!

GABRIELLE:

We're getting you out of here. Come on!

The Elijans come out of the cell.

PETRONIA:

Gabrielle--you know how we feel about violence--

Sabina rolls her eyes.

GABRIELLE (impatient):

Can we talk about this later?

Siran comes out of the cell and rushes toward Sabina.

SIRAN (joyfully):

Leonia! (hugs Sabina, then lifts her head) I mean--Sabina--

Sabina hugs her awkwardly, obviously uncomfortable and trying not to show emotion.

SABINA (pats Siran's hair, businesslike):

Come on, Siran. No time to get all blubbery--

They break the embrace. Sabina looks around, picks up the sword dropped by Guard No. 2 and raises it over the unconscious guard. Siran grabs her arm.

SIRAN (horrified):

No!

SABINA (gives her an exasperated look):

We have to make sure they can't follow us!

GABRIELLE:

We get out of here right away, before they recover. Right now! All we need to do is get the guards at the entrance to unlock the doors. (She picks up her cloak and turns to the Elijans) You stay behind so they don't see you until we've--taken care of them. (A close-up of her face, full of grim determination.)

CUT TO

The entrance area of the prison. Sabina and Gabrielle approach in disguise. Three guards are seated by the door, rolling dice on the top of a barrel. Hearing footsteps, they look up.

GUARD No. 3 (somewhat surprised):

That was quick.

SABINA:

The infidels turned me away.

GUARD No. 4 (shakes his head):

Them Eli people--they got no respect for anything.

GUARD No. 3 (gets up):

I'll let you out.

He takes a bunch of keys off his belt and unlocks the front door. Sabina surreptitiously pulls out the sword concealed in the folds of her gown and aims to slam the hilt into the guard's head. Just then, a cry is heard from inside the prison--it's the voice of one of the guards.

GUARD No. 1 (off-camera):

Watch out!

Guard No. 3 turns and sees the sword in Sabina's hand.

GUARD No. 3 (shocked):

You! You're not--

Before he can go on, Sabina brings the sword down on his head, knocking him out, but the other two guards leap to their feet. Gabrielle throws off her cloak and battles them, using her sais to fend off their swords. Meanwhile, Sabina motions to Siran, who peers out cautiously from behind a corner. Siran and the other Elijans come forward.

GUARD No. 4 (yells):

Help! Treason!

Gabrielle brings him down with a powerful kick and battles the other guard as the Elijans run toward the exit. A side door opens and several soldiers run out of the guard room, swords at the ready.

Pan to Gabrielle battling the guard; she parries his blows with her sais, then spins around and downs him with a kick.

Pan to Sabina, who kills one of the other guards, running him through with her sword.

Pan to the Elijans, who gasp and murmur; Petronia shakes her head in disapproval. A close-up of Siran's dismayed face.

Pan to the guard Gabrielle was fighting; he tries to get up, she picks up a stool and crashes it down on his head, knocking him out.

Pan to Sabina fighting another guard. More soldiers come out of the guard room. Sabina kills another one of them and starts to fight another, but when she tries to kick her movements are hampered by the dress. She retreats, knocks down the barrel and pushes it toward the guards. It takes them by surprise, and several of them stumble and fall.

Pan to Gabrielle, who rushes to the door--which is unlocked, the keys still in the keyhole--and pushes it hard. The door opens with a screech. Two of the soldiers charge Gabrielle and she fights back, kicking and punching.

Pan to the Elijans, who stand watching the fight with obviously mixed emotions.

Sabina stops for a moment to survey the situation, then leaps toward the Elijans, grabs Siran and pulls her toward the door.

SIRAN:

What are you doing?

SABINA:

What do you think? Getting you out. Come on--the others will follow!

Sabina and Siran run out through the door. Gabrielle glances at them as they leave; she is obviously troubled but continues to fight the guards. One of the guards tries to close the door; Gabrielle punches him and then brings him down with a swift kick. She stands in the doorway fighting off the guards.

GABRIELLE (yells to the Elijoans):

Come on--the way's still open!

FELIX (to the Elijans):

What are we waiting for? Let's go!

The Elijans rush toward the door. One of the Roman soldiers, an officer judging from his commanding look and ornate armor, points toward them and yells.

OFFICER:

Don't let them get out, or we'll be food for the lions in their place!

Several soldiers rush to push the Elijans back. Pan to Gabrielle, who continues to fight.

Pan to Felix, who forcefully pushes back a Roman soldier who grabs him. The soldier falls and drops his sword, which falls to the floor with a clatter. Felix stares at it and then moves to pick it up.

PETRONIA:

Felix--no! Remember, our only weapon is--

FELIX (bitterly):

--love. Well, maybe we should just let ourselves be fed to the lions out of love for the poor famished animals.

Pan to Gabrielle, who is still fighting two soldiers. She looks over to see the Elijans being herded back down the corridor.

GABRIELLE (shouts):

Felix, Petronia--no! Don't just stand there! Get out!

Her lips tighten in a grim look of hopelessness as she sees the Elijans being pushed back. She hesitates a moment, then turns, knocking down one of the soldiers with a spin move as she does so, and runs out the door.

CUT TO

Gabrielle running through the deserted forum, in the middle of the night.

CUT TO

Sabina and Siran huddled behind the corner of a building.

SABINA:

I'm telling you--we have to go *now*!

SIRAN (shakes her head):
Not without Gabrielle and the others.

SABINA (exasperated):
Siran--

SIRAN (suddenly excited):
Look--Gabrielle! (crestfallen) She's alone...

Gabrielle comes up, out of breath; she has a light but bleeding cut on her shoulder.

SIRAN:
Where are--

GABRIELLE (shakes her head sadly):
They couldn't get out. (bitterly to Sabina) Thanks for the backup.

SABINA:
Don't tell me you expected loyalty from me.

GABRIELLE:
Maybe just a little decency.

They glare at each other. In the meantime, Siran suddenly turns and takes off running.

SABINA (dashes after her):
Where are you going?

SIRAN (glances back over her shoulder):
I'm sorry...I have to go back.

SABINA:
Siran--no!

She runs off after Siran. Left alone, Gabrielle leans against the wall, her arms folded on her chest, and sighs sadly.

There is a flash of light next to her. Ares appears. He eyes her calmly, arms folded on his chest.

ARES:
That didn't go too well, did it.

GABRIELLE (bitterly):
Here to gloat?

ARES (shrugs):
No, just to check up on you.

GABRIELLE:
I know what you're going to say. I'm not Xena.

ARES:

You don't need me to tell you that.

GABRIELLE (fiercely):

Well, I don't care. I'll do whatever it takes to save them. I'll go out into the arena and fight for them... (she pauses) ...the way Xena did once.

Close-up of her determined face; then pan to a close-up of Ares' face as he looks at her thoughtfully.

CUT TO

Outside Xena's cabin. Xena is walking toward the cabin with a bunch of firewood in her arms. She pushes the door open and walks in.

FEMALE VOICE (off-camera):

Hello, Xena.

Xena freezes in her tracks. The camera pans to show Sabina sitting on the edge of Xena's cot, in the same posture as Agrippina at the end of the teaser.



Close-up on Xena's shocked face as we:

FADE OUT

ACT FOUR

FADE IN

On the same scene as before, with Xena facing Sabina.

XENA (getting over her shock):

You are just about the last person I expected to see.

SABINA (looks over the cabin and over Xena):

How the mighty have fallen.

XENA (throws down the firewood):
What do *you* want?

SABINA:
I want to talk to Xena. The *real* Xena.

Xena glares at her but Sabina wins the staring contest, and Xena looks away grimly.



XENA:
There *is* no other Xena. This is it.

SABINA (gets up and slowly approaches Xena, then stops facing her):
So you decided to throw in the chakram. (pauses, looking at her inquisitively) Why?

XENA (brusquely):
None of your business.

SABINA (cocks her head, looking appraisingly at Xena):
Rumor has it, Nero's mother was murdered on the island where she was sent into exile. Rumor also has it that she was a friend of yours--and that you were on the island with her at the time. (Xena stares at her, saying nothing) Is that it? Someone you promised to protect was murdered on your watch--and you've lost your nerve?

Xena gives her a long, thoughtful stare, then lowers her eyes.

XENA:
I don't owe you any answers.

SABINA (with a small cold smile):
Maybe not. But I think you just answered my question anyway. (She turns and paces slowly around the room, then stops and looks at Xena again.) So here you are, dressed like a common peasant, lugging firewood. And meanwhile, your beloved little bard is out there trying to serve the Greater Good all by herself.

XENA:
If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to get me to come back.

SABINA:

Apparently, you *don't* know better.

XENA (narrows her eyes at Sabina):

All right. What's your game?

SABINA:

Maybe the world just doesn't feel right when Xena's not in business. (smiles) Come on, Xena, you know I'm your biggest fan. You think I want you walking off the job before I've had a chance to take you down?

XENA (with a crooked grin):

I could almost believe you. (shakes her head) But that's not the whole story, is it.

Sabina paces around again, circling the room, then stops and sighs.

SABINA:

You know there was a big fire in Rome, don't you?

XENA (reluctantly):

Yeah.

SABINA:

Your little friend tells me it was Nero who set it. (she pauses, waiting for Xena to say something, but Xena remains silent) Well, Nero needed a scapegoat. Who better than the people who don't worship the gods of the Romans?

XENA (flinches slightly):

The followers of Eli...

SABINA:

That's right. Twenty-five of them are to be thrown to the lions in the arena.

XENA (brusquely):

When?

SABINA:

In three days. We'll just make it.

XENA (eyes her skeptically):

Don't tell me you're interested in saving a bunch of Elijans.

SABINA:

Who knows--maybe I've become a do-gooder just like you.

XENA (sarcastic):

Right. (looks probingly at Sabina) It's that girl, isn't it? Siran?

Sabina flinches slightly and pauses, then finally speaks.

SABINA (defiantly):

And what if it is?

XENA (wonderingly):

You care about that girl.

SABINA (cuts her off, raising a finger in a warning gesture):

Don't. Don't start telling me that you see something good in me. We don't have time to waste on sentimental nonsense.

XENA:

So she's an Elijan now. And she's sentenced to death.

SABINA:

That's right. (Still self-possessed but with a touch of passion in her voice) I promised I'd always protect her, Xena. You know what that's like, don't you?

XENA:

And you want me to help you save her. (with sudden bitterness) Why me?

SABINA (as if it's self-evident):

Because you're Xena. (pauses) I'd love to tell you that I can do the job just as well. But you're still the best...at least for now. (A close-up on Sabina's face as she stares at Xena, looking as if she's trying to overcome her own resistance to something she has to say. Finally, she speaks in a choked voice.) *Please*.

Close-up on Xena's face. She looks bewildered and moved.

CUT TO



An overhead shot of the Colosseum.

Pan to a close-up of Nero, flanked by Tigellinus and Aquilo, sitting in the imperial box. He is smiling slightly, the expression on his face cold yet with a hint of eager anticipation.

The camera pans over the murmuring audience, then to the still-empty arena. The roaring of lions is heard. The camera zooms in on a metal grill on one side of the arena, with two attendants standing

on the sides of the grill. Behind the grill, we see several lions; they are roaring and pacing around impatiently.

Pan to a metal grill on the other side of the arena, where we see the Elijans, dressed in white, and two Praetorians who are guarding them.

Pan back to the imperial box. Nero rises and raises his hand. A hush falls over the amphitheater.

NERO:

Good people of Rome! Recently, a great tragedy befell our beloved city. It was swept by a fire that started in the temple of the divine Claudius and blossomed like a scarlet flower--a terrible scarlet flower of evil. (He looks almost poetic as he speaks; the camera pulls back to show Tigellinus and Aquilo exchanging worried looks.) Hundreds of Romans perished in that dreadful fire. Thousands were left without abode. (He pauses dramatically) We have found those responsible for the disaster, and they will now pay for their contemptible crime here before you. They belong to a sect that holds Rome and her gods in contempt-- (he pauses again, and then points to the arena with a dramatic gesture) --the followers of Eli!

The amphitheater bursts out in shouts and boos. Cries of "Traitors!", "Criminals", and "Death to the Elijans!" are heard.

Pan down to the arena--first to the grill behind which the Elijans are held, just as the attendants raise the grill; then to the grill behind which the lions are held, where the attendants prepare to raise the grill simultaneously.

Pan up to Nero, who sits down, a satisfied look on his face.

Pan down to the arena; the camera zooms in on a side entrance, also grilled, where we see Gabrielle standing next to an attendant. She is holding a staff.

ATTENDANT (nervous):

I hope I don't get in trouble for this.

GABRIELLE:

Don't worry, no one will ever know.

Pan to the Elijans, who are being pushed and prodded out into the arena. The camera pans over them, lingering on Siran and Felix before zooming in on Petronia.

PETRONIA:

May our God help us die for our faith as bravely as Eli did!

Pan to the lions, who rush out into the arena. The arena is surrounded by a wooden fence with sharp spikes at the top.

The camera cross-cuts between the lions, who are charging at the Elijans, and the Elijans; Petronia and a few others, including Siran and Felix, stand calm and resigned in the middle of the arena, while some other Elijans scatter and run and huddle by the fence. As the lions get closer, Siran flinches and clutches Petronia's hand.

Pan up to Nero, who leans forward, watching avidly. Then, suddenly, a frown comes over his face as the audience erupts in murmurs.

TIGELLINUS:

It's that little-- (Nero shoots him a warning glance and he swallows nervously) --bard.

Pan down to the arena, where Gabrielle now stands in front of the Elijans, swinging her staff.

GABRIELLE (raises her voice):

Caesar! I'm here to fight for these people as their champion!

Pan up to the imperial box.

TIGELLINUS (looks worried):

Caesar--shall I have the guard arrest her?

NERO (thinks a moment and purses his lips):

Let her fight. (He rises and speaks up so that his voice rings through the arena) You may fight for these criminals, Gabrielle. If you defend them successfully, then I will spare-- (he pauses dramatically) --three of them, of your choosing. The rest will be put to death.

Pan back to Gabrielle, who freezes, hesitation and doubt on her face. One of the lions swipes a paw at her, nearly knocking the staff from her hands; she flinches and strikes back, hitting the lion across the muzzle. He recoils with a growl.

Pan up to Nero, who watches avidly.

Pan back to Gabrielle, who is still shielding the Elijans and fighting off the lions with her staff, leaping from one spot to another to block the lions' way as they try to charge their prey. She is doing an impressive job but she is clearly outnumbered. One of the lions leaps past her and knocks down Felix, who wrestles with the animal, trying to protect himself from its teeth.

GABRIELLE (turns and sees that Felix is in trouble):

Felix!

She leaps toward him and jabs at the lion with her staff. The lion turns toward her, snarling, while another lion approaches her from behind; she spins and delivers a kick that at least for a moment drives it away. A scream is heard and she sees a young Elijan woman being mauled by a lion. Using her staff as a lever, Gabrielle leaps and kicks the lion in the side, pushing it off the young woman. She gets up, bloodied and battered, and limps toward the edge of the arena.



The lions are growing bolder and more aggressive, and while Gabrielle is fending off two of them others are starting to move in on the Elijans.

Pan up to Nero, who smiles with cruel satisfaction.

NERO (mutters to himself):

You could have had everything, Gabrielle...

A wide shot of the arena. A whooshing sound is heard, and something is seen hurtling through the air. Gabrielle turns her head, and a momentary look of disbelief and, incongruously, joy flashes across her face. The chakram is hurtling toward the arena; it slashes at a lion who is about to attack one of the Elijans. The lion roars in pain and rears back.

Gabrielle looks up and sees Xena--wearing her leathers again--in the audience; as stunned spectators look on, she catches the chakram.



A murmur swells up through the amphitheater. Pan up to Nero, who has an incredulous and outraged look on his face.

AQUILO:

It's Xena!

Pan back to Xena. She runs down the steps toward the arena and then, with a piercing battle cry-- "A-yi-yi-yi-yi!" --launches herself over the spiked barrier, flipping in the air. She lands in the arena, a gleeful grin on her face. She and Gabrielle face each other, and Xena's grin turns to a tender smile. Gabrielle smiles too--only to turn quickly and use her staff to beat back one of the lions.

Siran looks up and her face lights up suddenly.

SIRAN:

Leonia!

Gabrielle looks up, stunned, to see Sabina--wearing leather armor and wielding a sword--leaping over the barrier and into the arena.

GABRIELLE (to Xena, clearly shocked):

She's here with you?

Before Xena can answer, a snarling lion leaps at them and Gabrielle beats the animal back.

Sabina runs toward Siran when the camera pans over to Petronia. A lion is crouched in front of her, preparing to leap. Petronia stands frozen in terror.

Siran points to Petronia, screaming. Sabina jumps toward her, flipping in the air, and lands between Petronia and the lion. The lion charges and Sabina drives her sword into its chest.

Siran winces visibly.

PETRONIA:

You didn't have to do that!

SABINA (rolls her eyes):

Of course not--I could have just tossed the big kitty a ball of string.

Pan back to Xena and Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE (breathless):

Xena--we have to do something do get them out of here--did you hear what Nero said?

XENA (grimly):

Yeah--he's going to execute all but three of them... We have to do something.

SABINA (approaches them):

I have an idea.

She runs toward the barrier surrounding the arena and starts chopping at it with her sword, then turns toward Xena and Gabrielle, who look at her, puzzled.

SABINA:

Come over here, Gabrielle--maybe you can actually do some good with your little stick!

Pan up to the imperial box. Nero, Tigellinus and Aquilo stare down at the arena. We see a wide overhead shot of the arena, with Xena and Gabrielle trying to hold back the lions and Sabina chopping at the barrier.

TIGELLINUS:

Who's the third one?

AQUILO (nonplussed):

And what's she doing?

Pan back to the arena.

GABRIELLE (wielding her staff to fend off a lion, shouts):

What's the idea?

SABINA:

If we start a panic, everyone can get away!

With a powerful blow, she chops through the wood and starts widening the opening. Xena and Gabrielle are still fending off the lions as they talk to her.

XENA:

A panic?

GABRIELLE (with dawning horror on her face):

You mean--you want to let the lions loose?

SABINA (continues to chop):

Clever girl.

XENA:

You can't release a bunch of wild animals on the people out there!

SABINA:

A bunch of Romans who came to watch some poor fools being torn to pieces by lions? Don't you think turnabout is fair play? (chops at the barrier, where the opening is now large enough for a person to get through)

Xena looks at her thoughtfully.

XENA:

I've got a better idea. You and Gabrielle hold back the lions. I'll work on the audience.

SABINA (turns around, skeptical):

What are you talking about?

XENA (forcefully):

Do it!

As she speaks, she beats back a lion with the flat of her sword and kicks another one in the face. It retreats, its snarl turning to a whine.

Sabina gives Xena a thoughtful look, then shrugs and starts racing back toward Xena and Gabrielle; on her way, she leaps and flips in the air, landing next to them.

Xena steps forward and holds up a hand.

XENA:

People of Rome--listen to me!

Pan up to the audience; people are looking at Xena curiously.

WOMAN:

It's Xena, Warrior Princess!

Murmurs of "Xena!" roll over the audience.

Pan back to the arena. While Xena speaks, we see Gabrielle and Sabina fending off the lions in the background.

XENA:

These people--the followers of Eli--did not set the fire that ravaged your city.

As Xena pauses, pan to a close-up of Nero, his face distorted by rage. Pan back to Xena.

XENA (points to the imperial box):

Your own emperor did!

The camera pans over the audience as it erupts in louder and louder murmurs, then over to the imperial box.

NERO (leaps to his feet, shaking with rage):

Lies!

Pan back to Xena.

XENA:

The same emperor who sent assassins to murder his own mother! (The camera pans over the audience as it erupts in shouts and exclamations of shock, then back to Xena.) I was there when she died. I couldn't save her--but at least I can expose her murderer!

The shouts drown out her voice. The camera pans up to Nero, whose face turns purple.

NERO (shouts even louder, but his voice can hardly be heard over the pandemonium):

Lies!

The camera pans over the audience.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN:

So it's true!

YOUNG MAN:

I've heard it too!

MAN IN HIS THIRTIES:

She's lying!

YOUNG WOMAN:

Why would she lie? She fought for Nero--she helped him become Emperor!

The camera pans over several people, young and old, male and female, shouting "Murderer!" Then the camera pulls back to show some people getting out of their seats and running up toward the imperial box.

A close-up of Xena as she smiles, obviously satisfied with the result.

Pan up to the imperial box.

AQUILO:

It's a riot!

Nero turns to Tigellinus, his lips trembling with rage.

NERO (shouts):

This has to be stopped!

TIGELLINUS (leans out of the box and gestures to the Praetorian guard standing around the box):

Get out there--stop this!

The guards scatter into the audience, pushing the people back, knocking some of them down.

Pan back to the arena, where Gabrielle, Xena and Sabina are still holding the snarling lions back while the Elijans huddle by the barrier. They look shaken; some of them are bloodied.

XENA (turns to the Elijans):

Come on-- (points to the opening in the barrier) --now we can get out!

The Elijans approach.

PETRONIA (shocked):

People are going to get hurt! You--you can't sacrifice them for our escape!

SABINA (glances at her contemptuously):

Oh, save it for later.

Petronia gapes at her, dumbstruck.

XENA:

Let's get out of here.

Xena, Gabrielle, Sabina and the Elijans get out through the opening in the barrier, Xena and Gabrielle helping some of the injured Elijans.

Pan up to the imperial box. Nero is standing, his hands convulsively gripping the edge of the balcony; an overhead shot of the arena shows Xena, Gabrielle, Sabina and the Elijans getting out. Nero turns to Tigellinus and grabs his shoulders.

NERO (shouts):

Do something! Don't let them get away!

Tigellinus runs out of the box and races down the steps.

Pan down to Xena, Gabrielle, Sabina and the Elijans. All around them, people in the audience are running, shouting, shaking their fists. The amphitheater is now in full pandemonium.



GABRIELLE (raises her voice to be heard by the Elijans):

We have to scatter--it's easier for us to get out that way!

FELIX:

Priscus' cobbler shop on the outskirts of the city--we'll meet there! We can hide out there until we can leave Rome!

The Elijans scatter into several groups and disappear into the audience.

Tigellinus runs down to the front-row benches, pushing the people aside, as the Praetorians around him try to control the crowd. He catches up with Petronia and grabs her.

TIGELINUS:

In the name of Rome--

SABINA (off-camera):

Pick on someone with a sword.

Tigellinus releases Petronia and steps back, drawing his sword. As he recognizes Sabina, his eyes widen.

TIGELLINUS:

You!

SABINA (chilly smile):

Yes, it's me. That means it's personal.

Tigellinus and Sabina fight as the pandemonium continues around them.

Pan to a nearby section of the audience where a woman shouts, "Down with Nero!" A Praetorian guard grabs her and shoves her; as she stumbles, she bumps into Tigellinus from behind. He loses his footing for a moment--enough for Sabina to knock the sword from his hand and bring him down with a kick to the midsection. As Tigellinus tries to get up, Sabina plants a foot on his chest. A shot of Sabina from below, a slight, cold smile on her face.

SABINA (with a slight headshake):

Xena would have spared your life. (grins a little) Too bad for you I'm not Xena.

She brings down her sword, running him through.

Pan up to the imperial box. Nero is still leaning over the edge of the balcony, his eyes wild, his lips trembling.

The camera zooms out for an overhead shot of the Colosseum as the shouts of the crowd grow more faint.

CUT TO

A road cutting through a field with a few scattered trees, early morning. The walls of Rome are visible in the distance. What looks like a caravan of merchants--three covered wagons, each drawn by two horses, loaded with goods--is moving down the road. The camera pans to Xena and Gabrielle, riding across the field.

GABRIELLE:

There they are.

Xena and Gabrielle continue to ride until they reach the road. The three wagons slow down, then come to a stop not far from a pine tree. The camera zooms in on the driver of the head wagon, a woman in a bright embroidered robe with a turban on her head. It's Sabina.

XENA:

So, you got them safely out of town.

SABINA:

As you can see. (she grins a little) You know, you and I make a pretty good team.

Petronia, Felix and Siran come out of the head wagon. Xena and Gabrielle dismount and approach them.

PETRONIA:

Xena, Gabrielle...we *are* grateful. If we haven't shown it as much as we should, it's because the bloodshed saddens us deeply....

FELIX:

Even in our defense.

PETRONIA:

Especially in our defense.

SABINA (rolls her eyes):

By the time I get these people to Greece, they'll drive me insane.

GABRIELLE (shocked):

Back to Greece? You're going to take them?

PETRONIA (gives Sabina a dubious look, obviously not sure whether this is good news):

I thought you were just going to get us past the city gates, and then we would be on our own.

SABINA (wryly):

On your own, you'd be sure to get Siran killed.

Close-up of Siran's face; she looks at Sabina with a timid, affectionate smile.

Pan to Xena and Gabrielle, who stare at Sabina in amazement, and then back to Sabina, who catches their stares and smiles scornfully.

SABINA:

I hope you don't think I'm about to start saving babies from marauding armies or anything of the kind. Just looking out for a friend. (Her face turns almost tender as she smiles to Siran) Now--let's get moving.

GABRIELLE (takes Felix's hands):

Good-bye, Felix. Good luck.

FELIX:

Thank you.

GABRIELLE (walks over to Siran):

Siran...

They hug.

SIRAN:

Good-bye, Gabrielle. And thank you. (she smiles) You told me Sabina would come back for me...and she did.

XENA (smiles a little, obviously moved):

Good-bye, Siran. (looks up thoughtfully at Sabina) Sabina...

SABINA:

What?

While they talk, Siran, in the background, can be seen picking dandelions.

XENA (with an effort):

Thank you.

SABINA (grins a little):

That must have been hard.

XENA (her face hardens):

Just remember...if you go back to your old tricks, you're going to hear from me.

SABINA (mockingly):

Is that a promise?

Xena shakes her head with a small exasperated smile.

SABINA (to Siran):

Come on, Siran--we'd better get moving. (points to the space next to her at the front of the wagon)
You can sit up front with me and get some air now that we're out of the city.

SIRAN (a small bunch of dandelions in her hands, smiles at Sabina):

Okay.

Xena pats her on the shoulder, and Siran climbs up on the wagon next to Sabina.

SABINA (nods toward the flowers):

What's with those?

SIRAN (grins girlishly):

I love dandelions. (thinks a moment) Hey--want me to make you a bracelet?

SABINA (shakes her head):

You're such a baby...

SIRAN:

Come on--hold out your wrist, I want to see how long to make it.

SABINA (rolls her eyes but complies):

I'd have to be out of my mind to wear such a thing...

The camera pulls back. From a distance, we watch as Gabrielle and Petronia hug, and Xena shakes Felix's and Petronia's hands. Then, Petronia and Felix get back into the wagon and the wagon starts moving.

The camera moves, once again, on Xena and Gabrielle as they watch the caravan leave.

GABRIELLE:

You think she's really changed?

XENA (shrugs):

I trust her to do right by that girl. That's as far as it goes.

GABRIELLE:

You've always said that one good deed can be enough to turn someone's life around...

XENA:

Depends on where they want to go from there.

GABRIELLE:

Speaking of which...I guess you're back in business?

XENA:

Nah, I just thought I'd come back for one last gig. (off Gabrielle's stricken look, she smiles tenderly) Of course I'm back.

GABRIELLE (smiles back, obviously relieved):

What made you change your mind?



Xena gazes thoughtfully into the distance. The camera follows her gaze. We see the figure of Agrippina, standing by a pine tree, smiling.

XENA (stares at her for a moment, then turns back to Gabrielle):

I guess I finally listened to my conscience.

Gabrielle smiles at her. The camera pulls away to show them from the back, watching the wagons. Xena puts her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and gives her shoulder an affectionate squeeze as we:

FADE OUT

THE END

[The lions missed their lunch during the production of this motion picture.]