

HERCULES
"The Gauntlet"

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THIS REPLACES ALL OTHER DRAFTS

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SECOND DRAFT
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HERCULES

"THE GAUNTLET"

TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. HILLTOP - DAY

XENA, bold and beautiful as ever, sits astride her horse, waiting for two riders approaching from the village below.

ANOTHER ANGLE

DARPHUS, scars of battle cruelty etching his face, leads. CRETUS, no less mean, but more subservient, follows.

XENA

So?

CRETUS

Darphus gave them your demands... just enough crops to feed our men... only the buildings needed to quarter them.

XENA

A better choice than my father and brothers were offered. Their answer?

Cretus defers to Darphus, who spits out their response.

DARPHUS

They've decided to defend themselves.

Disappointment and anger clouds Xena's eyes.

XENA

Stupid.

CRETUS

Maybe if we give them the night to sleep on it, they'll reconsider.

DARPHUS

Give them nothing! I say we attack now and wipe them all out. Let the gods sort out the women and children.

She cuts Darphus a disparaging glance.

XENA

We are warriors, not barbarians. You can satisfy your blood lust against the men.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

XENA (cont'd)

(turning)

Cretus, you made it clear, we'll spare no one who raises a sword against us, that all the men will die?

CRETUS

They said they'd rather die defending the fruits of their labor than give it to renegades.

XENA

Then they'll get their wish, at dawn.

INT. ROADHOUSE - DAY

HERCULES finishes a six-course meal (empty bowls suggest a fourth helping), pushes the last bowl away and leans back, satiated, when the cook, IPICLES, exits the kitchen.

HERCULES

Wonderful, Ipicles. Absolutely wonderful. A four-star meal for sure.

IPICLES

Why four stars?

Ipicles' confused look gives Hercules pause.

HERCULES

It's just a manner of speaking... something I picked up from an epicurean friend of mine.

IPICLES

Why not five stars? Or a constellation of stars?

Hercules realizes he can't explain it to the confused chef.

HERCULES

A constellation it is.

He slaps the chef on the back, sending him away happy. The door bursts open and a muscular young man stands in shadow, backlit by the sun.

ILORAN

Hercules?

For a moment, our hero doesn't know whether to defend himself or embrace the interloper. Then the man steps inside and is recognized as ILORAN, Hercules' cousin.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HERCULES

Iloran!

ILORAN

Hello, cousin. It's been a few years.

They grasp forearms, a family tradition.

HERCULES

That it has. How's my aunt?

ILORAN

She's fine... at least, the last time I saw her. We've got big problems in the Parthian province.

HERCULES

What sort of problems?

ILORAN

Marauders. And they're merciless. Last week they attacked a village north of us. Killed every last man. Look here.

Iloran takes a fork from the table and draws a map on the floor.

INSERT - MAP

A peninsula with a dozen dots representing villages. The fork stabs at several dots.

ILORAN (O.S.)

On my ride here I found out that six more villages have been destroyed in the last month.

HERCULES (O.S.)

Looks like they're intent on overrunning the whole peninsula.

The fork stabs another dot.

BACK TO SCENE

ILORAN (O.S.)

And Parthis, my mother's village, will be right in their path. And with no able-bodied males to defend it.

HERCULES

Then we don't have any time to waste.

And they take their leave.

EXT. VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Xena, in full battle garb, turns toward her lieutenants.

XENA

No word?

CRETUS

The only activity has been their attempt to fortify.

DARPHUS

We should've attacked yesterday.

XENA

It won't change the outcome, only make it more interesting. Let's go.

She turns and signals the rest of her troops. With a hair-raising battle cry, she leads them into the village.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Xena and her horsemen charge like Cossacks through the village streets. The hamlet's defenders, though brave, are no match. One after another they are cut down. And no one cuts better than Xena. She rides through one group of defenders, dispersing, then dispatching two of them -- then leaps from her horse to wade into the thick of battle.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Xena's sword whirs like blades in a blender as more victims fall. One, badly wounded, looks up, begging for mercy.

XENA

Runs him through without a second thought. Proud of her quick, clean kill, she extracts her blade and turns, looking for new conquests. So many opponents, so little time.

FADE OUT.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Smoke from individual funeral pyres rises up while women and children bemoan and wail their dead male population. In b.g., the remaining unburied village men lie strewn about as if flung by some petulant god tired of playing with his toys as Xena's warriors extract what booty they can.

XENA'S POV

Cretus is removing a short, pudgy woman from a feed bin. He prods her into moving by poking her derriere with the tip of his sword. For a woman, her gait is quite ungainly. As the two get closer, it's apparent why the "woman" walks funny.

BACK TO SCENE

She's a he; SALMONEUS, to be exact, decked out in wig and dress like a drag queen. A very frightened drag queen.

CRETUS

Look what we found hiding in one of the feed bins.

SALMONEUS

(a mile a minute)

Don't kill me please OW! Please don't kill me please spare me!

Darphus contemptuously lifts the wig from Salmoneus' head.

DARPHUS

Well, what have we here?

XENA

I wouldn't hazard a guess.

SALMONEUS

Please. Don't kill me. I beg you.

XENA

Give me one good reason.

SALMONEUS

It's not a nice thing to do.

(no reaction)

We haven't even been introduced.

(still no reaction)

My mother will cry.

XENA

Take him away.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

No, wait! It's not what you think.

(another prod)

Watch that thing! I don't even belong here. I'm a traveling salesman. As a matter of fact, I've got a great deal on some clay dinnerware and --

DARPHUS

Kill him. Slowly.

As Cretus starts to drag him off.

SALMONEUS.

Wait. Wait! You don't understand. I know people in high places. I know Hercules.

Xena holds her hand up, stopping Cretus.

XENA

What do you know about Hercules?

DARPHUS

He knows nothing about him. Kill the little toad.

Salmoneus looks fearfully from Darphus to Xena.

SALMONEUS

Listen... we... he...

(going for it)

I'm his best friend. We're like that.

Salmoneus puts his pointer and middle fingers together. Xena looks amused and the salesman is worried that she's misinterpreted.

SALMONEUS

(continuing)

Well, not like "that." We're more like...

He tries to get his pointer and ring finger to stand up while curling the others. He can't do it and settles on the pointer and pinkie.

SALMONEUS

(continuing)

That.

XENA

Come here, little man. You amuse me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 2

SALMONEUS

Oh, I can be very amusing.
 (into a standup routine)
 Guy goes into a roadhouse with a duck
 on his head. The innkeeper says,
 where'd you get that ugly --

XENA

Cease. I'll let you know when I want
 to be amused again.
 (to the others)
 Bring him along.

Salmoneus now starts to take the dress off.

XENA

(continuing)
 Leave it. It becomes you.

SALMONEUS

Ah, certainly. Exactly. Right on.

Salmoneus lifts his dress and follows along as Cretus shakes
 his head and Darphus glares.

EXT. STREAM - DAY

Hercules and Iloran move rapidly down a trail.

HERCULES

I'll never forget the time your mother
 hid Alcmena and me during one of
 Hera's rages. I was just a boy.

ILORAN

They're sisters. Your mother would've
 done the same.

HERCULES

Still, it was a brave thing to do.
 I'll always be in her debt for that.

Hercules stops at a stream to gather some water when he
 notices something upstream -- and starts off toward it.

ANOTHER ANGLE

A dead body lies on the bank, three arrows stuck in its
 back. Hercules and Iloran approach and the latter points to
 the ground next to the dead man's hand.

ILORAN

Strange markings.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Hercules stoops to study the marks closer, then reacts to a strange strangled sound from his cousin.

ILORAN
(continuing)
May the gods help us.

Our hero rises and joins Iloran at the top of the rise. He, too, lets his breath out in a slow, disbelieving sigh.

THEIR POV

On the roadside below, as far as the eye can see, dead bodies are draped or hung on posts, pikes, cartwheels and makeshift crosses. It is an awful, gut-wrenching sight.

BACK TO SCENE

Iloran still can't believe his eyes.

ILORAN
Who... who could've done such a thing?

Hercules points down at the dead man below them.

HERCULES
I think he was trying to tell us.
Those marks are the Macedonian symbols
for warrior... and woman.

At Iloran's reaction:

INT. HUT - DAY

Xena and Darphus are at a long table. The latter points to a crude, makeshift map spread out between them.

DARPHUS
The villages north of Parthis are well
defended. The men are ex-soldiers, a
generation away from war.

XENA
If they were to surrender and join us,
we'd be truly formidable.

DARPHUS
If they don't, it could cost us half
our force. I say we go here.

Darphus points to another spot.

XENA
The western villages.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARPHUS

Lightly defended, we wipe them from the map. An easy victory.

XENA

Easy victories make for weak soldiers.

DARPHUS

(shrugging)

Weak soldiers are easier to command.

XENA

I don't want soldiers following me out of fear. I demand loyalty.

DARPHUS

Loyalty, fear... what does it matter as long as they obey orders?

XENA

It matters to me. A true leader commands by inspiration, not intimidation.

Darphus pulls up short of scoffing at her ideals.

DARPHUS

Maybe one day we'll get a chance to test our theories.

Xena warns him with a smile; he's close to insubordination.

XENA

I'll go north with my scouts to look for myself... then make my decision.

The cold looks that are exchanged bode ill for the future.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

The village decimated by Xena's troops. Hercules and Iloran ride in, as the women and children bury their dead. The male population is now nonexistent. Our hero approaches a grieving woman.

HERCULES

Who did this?

YOUNG WOMAN

Marauders. Renegades.

HERCULES

Did you see their leader?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

YOUNG WOMAN

She was like a demon from Hades.

ILORAN

She?

As they exchange looks, Hercules is getting a bad feeling.

HERCULES

There's only one mortal woman I know
capable of this kind of destruction.

Hercules looks around; there's nothing more they can do here. He rides off; Iloran follows.

INT. ROADHOUSE - DAY

Xena's men are scarfing down the plentiful bounty of food that come with commandeering the place. Salmoneus looks from his meager plate to a nearby soldier's, brimming with meat and potatoes. His mouth waters. He rises, walks over to a serving table, reaches for a leg of mutton -- and gets his hand slapped by Darphus.

DARPHUS

That meat is for warriors.

Salmoneus turns to Xena to plead his cause.

SALMONEUS

There's more than one way to wage war.

Xena regards Salmoneus' dress with a disparaging smirk.

XENA

Oh? Tell me about it.

SALMONEUS

Well... uh... an army such as yours...
with such a beautiful leader like
you... ah... you need publicity... you
know, public relations.

XENA

I prefer my relations to be private.

But Salmoneus is on a roll.

SALMONEUS

You could use someone to trumpet your
victories. But you don't want to come
across as overbearing or merciless.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS (cont'd)

Don't talk killing, talk population control. You gotta be like a tax collector, tell everyone you're doing this for their own good.

XENA

For a wretched little person, you are entertaining. Tell me more.

As Salmoneus babbles on, he can't help but notice that Xena, for all her brutality, has some healthy cleavage -- and nice lower extremities besides.

SALMONEUS

Well, when you address your troops, try to keep your right side to them. It's your best side.

(a worrisome thought)

Not that you have a bad side. You've got very good bone structure. As a matter of fact, you should try to smile more. Show off your cheeks.

(yet another worry)

Your face, of course, is what I mean.

Salmoneus gives her a weak smile, reaches tentatively for a piece of meat. He jumps back as Xena stabs a chicken breast next to his hand, then sticks it on his plate. She pulls the knife out, raises it eye level.

XENA

Don't stop amusing me.

SALMONEUS

No, of course not, your highness, I mean, your majesty, I mean, how would you like to be undressed -- I mean, addressed.

Xena won't dignify him with an answer, so Salmoneus backs off with groveling bows -- taking the chicken with him.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Hercules, waiting with the horses, shouts up to Iloran, who is climbing down a tall tree.

HERCULES

Any sign of marauder activity?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

I LORAN

None. But we're making good time. I can see the hills of Parthian province.

ANOTHER ANGLE

From the cover of a brushy knoll, another horseman follows their movements.

I LORAN

Jumps out of the tree, crosses to his horse.

I LORAN

Also, I think we're being followed.

HERCULES

I know. I saw him when we crossed the last gully.

Iloran gives him a knowing look and mounts up.

EXT. HILLTOP - NIGHT

Darphus, agitated, warms his hands at a low campfire. Salmoneus, eating again (of course) turns away from his glare. In b.g., horses snort; men stir; an army awaiting for battle as Cretus gallops up and dismounts.

CRETUS

Still no sign of her or the scouts.

DARPHUS

The men are ready for a dawn attack. We'll lose the element of surprise if we wait.

SALMONEUS

Ah... wouldn't Xena be... upset... if you didn't wait?

DARPHUS

You know, little man, you don't amuse me at all.

His no-nonsense tone leaves little doubt that Salmoneus' days are numbered. Darphus turns back to Cretus.

DARPHUS

(continuing)

We go now. And I don't want to see a living thing when you're through. Not a man, woman or child. Understood?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CRETUS

Don't you think Xena --

DARPHUS

I want the village burned. I want the fields burned. I don't want an insect alive when I get there.

CRETUS

But --

DARPHUS

Are you having trouble hearing, Cretus? I'm ordering you.

Darphus locks eyes with his subordinate, putting a hand on his sword. Cretus gets the message.

CRETUS

Yes, sir.

ANOTHER ANGLE

As Cretus rides over to the men in b.g. His AD-LIBBED orders elicit looks of surprise, confusion, but finally resignation and the men mount up.

SALMONEUS

Clears his throat and bows to the glaring Darphus.

SALMONEUS

I'd be glad to, uh, follow any orders you, uh, give me.

MONTAGE

A score of sword-wielding horse soldiers charge down the hill.

Men, old and young alike, fall beneath the marauders' onslaught.

Women run screaming through the village streets, infants in their arms.

Goats bleat. Cows moo. Pigs run for their lives.

A soldier sets a hut ablaze.

Another lights a wheat field on fire.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

DEROS, Xena's scout, rides past an outcropping and reins up.

SCOUT'S POV

Ahead of him, Iloran has stopped and is drinking from a stream -- alone.

BACK TO SCENE

WHIP PAN as the Scout quickly looks left, then right, then behind him. He can't see anyone. Too late, the scout realizes that our hero is on the rock above him.

HERCULES

Leaps down, knocking the man off his horse. It's not a long fight. One quick punch and Xena's man sees stars.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CAMPFIRE - DAY

The scout, DEROS, regains consciousness to find himself down to an Ancient Greek version of skivvies, hands tied above him to a tree, and Hercules dissecting his armor.

HERCULES

Why were you following us?

DEROS

My name is Deros.

Hercules, not happy at Deros' intransigence, breaks the man's sword, adds it to the pile of scrap.

HERCULES

Who do you work for?

DEROS

My name is Deros.

Hercules now throws the rest of the clothes on the pyre, then chops up the man's sandals for good measure.

HERCULES

We can do this the easy way, or we can send you, naked and unarmed, back to that village your men destroyed. I think the orphans and widows would be happy to see you.

DEROS

Women and children don't scare me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HERCULES

Who commands your barbarian hordes?

(a beat)

A woman?

A flicker of recognition, then the scout hardens again.

SCOUT

We're not barbarians. We're soldiers.

HERCULES

(a derisive snort)

Right. Xena? Is she your leader?

Figuring he's not telling Hercules anything he doesn't already know, Deros drops the name-rank-and-serial bit.

SCOUT

When she finds out I'm missing, she'll have you two for breakfast.

HERCULES

Where is she headed?

SCOUT

Does it matter? You're too late anyway.

The scout nods towards the distant hills. Dark smoke spirals to the heavens. The knowledge that another hamlet is being destroyed sparks a glint of anger in Hercules' eyes. He turns and flings his sword at the scout.

ANOTHER ANGLE

It neatly slices the rope tying his hands together.

HERCULES

Get out of my sight.

The man looks at the sword, then back at Hercules. He has half a notion to pick the weapon up and fight. Something in our hero's eyes tells him that's not a good idea, so he flees into the woods.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Rather, what is left of the village. The desolation is immediately apparent and horrifying. Bodies, animal and human, lie scorched and lifeless. There is hardly any distinction between the fields and the hamlet. Buildings and crops alike are reduced to smoldering ashes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

XENA

Rides slowly through the destruction, aghast. This isn't what she ordered. She turns to Darphus, uncomprehending.

XENA

What... what have you done!?

DARPHUS

A message... to those who defy us.

XENA

You killed women and children?

DARPHUS

If this doesn't strike fear into the northern villages, nothing will.

XENA

You're not a warrior, you're a butcher!

She dismounts, strides up to her lieutenant, hand on her sword. He backs off, hand on his own sword. Cretus is looking for some place to hide.

XENA

(continuing)

Your disobedience will not go unpunished.

DARPHUS

I expected as much.

But before he can draw his sword, something catches their attention. A baby's cry. They turn in its direction.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Salmoneus, his face blanched, and Cretus also react to the sound. All four converge to where a young woman's body folds protectively around a 6 - 12 month old infant.

DARPHUS

His eyes flash angrily at his subordinate.

CRETUS

Sorry. I thought I killed them both.

He raises his sword, ready to rectify his oversight.

XENA

Stop!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 2

Sword poised in midair, Cretus is now caught on the horns of a dilemma. And mighty pointed horns at that. Xena on one side; Darphus on the other.

DARPHUS

If you spent less time collecting booty, and more following orders, you wouldn't have this problem.

XENA

You kill that baby and you die next.

Cretus, sweating, looks back and forth between Darphus, who is enjoying his predicament immensely, and Xena, who is not.

XENA

(continuing)

Contrary to what some might think, I still lead this army.

She stoops, picks the crying infant up in one arm, pulls her sword out with the other. And Cretus, opting for discretion in favor of valor, lowers his.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Vultures circle the smoke-darkened sky above where the village stood. FOLLOW ONE DOWN to the scorched earth below.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Hercules can't believe his eyes as he walks through the smoking ruins of the hamlet. Nothing is standing. Nothing is alive. He absently picks up a small grindstone; it easily separates from its charred handle.

ILORAN

Stunned, he can barely speak as he joins his cousin.

ILORAN

No one is alive. Not even a child.

HERCULES

They killed children?

ILORAN

They killed everyone. Women, children, babies. They even slaughtered the livestock.

Hercules' rage is so great that, for a moment, Iloran is even at risk, just because of his close proximity. Barely containing himself, when our hero can speak again, his voice is gravelly, low.

HERCULES

We've been late twice now. I swear by my mother, this won't happen again.

He clenches his fist, channeling his rage to the grindstone -- which he crumbles to dust. Iloran, a solemn witness to the feat, knows this is a promise that will be kept. He's almost afraid to voice his next concern.

ILORAN

If we bury them, it will cost us time.

HERCULES

Then we will bury them faster.

And he starts toward the first of the bodies.

EXT. CAVE - DAY

Salmoneus and a young SHEPHERDESS are inside Xena's refuge when they react to approaching hooves. They exit to find:

XENA

On horseback, holding the infant in one arm.

XENA

What are you doing here?

SALMONEUS

I thought you might need help taking care of the baby so I found this shepherdess and --

XENA

I have no intention of taking care of this infant. I merely saved him.

SALMONEUS

No, of course not. If you had any maternal instincts, you would've... I mean, not that you don't have maternal instinct... but if --

The goat girl saves him.

SHEPHERDESS

I made up some milk.

She goes to Xena, takes the baby from her. As Xena dismounts, Salmoneus slips next to her.

SALMONEUS

Xena, can we talk for a minute?

XENA

About what?

He looks nervously about.

SALMONEUS

It's Darphus. He scares me.

XENA

Everyone scares you.

SALMONEUS

True, but... I get the feeling he's not exactly in your corner, either.

XENA

You mean... his insubordination?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

That... and he's been stirring up the men... about you saving the baby.

Xena raises an eyebrow. This is new to her. If she has concerns, she covers them.

XENA

I have no reason to doubt my soldiers' loyalty. And I'll deal with Darphus.

SALMONEUS

Sure. Of course. I just... well, sometimes the best course of action... I mean, given that you and Darphus are at odds, certainly there's no harm in just... leaving.

The mere suggestion that someone could even think she was capable of something like that is a slap in her face. Xena turns her full wrath on Salmoneus.

XENA

I don't run from my problems! I confront them. I will deal with Darphus.

SALMONEUS

Certainly. Of course. It was just a thought.

He backs off, not daring to irritate her further. Xena turns toward the cave. There's the tiniest part of her that wants to go in and see what's going on. But she doesn't.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

It's getting late in the day as Hercules and Iloran throw the last dirt on the makeshift graves. Both are exhausted from their efforts. Too wasted to notice they are being observed from the forest at the edge of the village.

CLOSER ANGLE

The man has the hardened, cold-blooded killer look of one of Xena's warriors. He watches intently; absently, repeatedly jabbing a knife into the dirt next to him.

HERCULES AND ILORAN

Throw their shovels down. Iloran sits, taking a break.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ILORAN

You seem obsessed with burial... as if you take it personally.

Hercules looks off to the graves, then to the setting sun for the answer. He's not sure it can be put into words.

HERCULES

I've dedicated my life to helping people. Somehow it seems even more important when they can no longer help themselves.

Iloran nods; he can accept that.

ILORAN

Shall we camp here for the night?

HERCULES

Not here. We have a long road ahead of us. I want to make up as many miles as possible between Xena and us. Then we'll rest.

The tired men rise up and prepare to leave.

IN THE WOODS

The watcher then moves back and mounts his own horse.

INT. HUT - NIGHT

Darphus pores over a crude map when he hears a movement behind him. He doesn't bother turning; he knows who it is.

DARPHUS

Yes, Xena, what is it?

A sword slashes down, cutting the map in half. Darphus turns, smiles pleasantly.

DARPHUS

(continuing)

You're angry.

Angry isn't the word. Xena seethes. Her efforts at containment constrict her movement and her speech. Her displeasure comes out in a low hiss.

XENA

You defied me.

Darphus steps around the table, keeping it between them. His mood is confrontation, but he's not stupid.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARPHUS

You wanted the village destroyed. We destroyed it.

XENA

I didn't order you to burn it... or to slaughter every living thing.

DARPHUS

I gave you my reasons.

XENA

You were supposed to wait for me.

DARPHUS

You weren't there! The men were ready to fight. To delay costs them their edge and the element of surprise.

She points her sword at him, no-nonsense.

XENA

I'm relieving you of command.

DARPHUS

My men won't allow that.

Cretus and three other soldiers enter from another room -- swords drawn. Outside, Xena can hear more swords being unsheathed. Her astonishment is evident.

DARPHUS

(continuing)

Yes, my men. You forget, Xena, that rape and plunder are the driving forces behind these kinds of soldiers. They don't give two spits about honor and loyalty.

(a beat)

You're the one who's steeping down. And you'll leave by the ritual you created.

The unpleasant surprises keep raining like body blows. Xena is reeling.

XENA

The "Gauntlet?"

At his nod, and her reaction:

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

PAN ACROSS the flickering remains of a campfire warming the sleeping bodies of Hercules and Iloran. Their sleep is as hard and deep as their exhaustion.

ANOTHER ANGLE

A dark figure moves stealthily through the brush. He pulls an arrow from a quiver, fits it to a bow as he creeps closer. Another step -- and a leaf crackles.

CLOSE ON HERCULES

As he awakens, instantly alert. He rolls over -- just as an arrow thuds into the space he was sleeping in. He grabs his sword, reacts to the sounds of someone fleeing -- and runs in that direction.

HIS POV

Darkness. Silence.

BACK TO SCENE

Iloran joins his cousin, sword in hand.

ILORAN

Bandit?

HERCULES

Maybe. Or another of Xena's men.
We'd better trade watches the rest of
the night.

EXT. FOREST - ANOTHER PART - DAY

Dawn. Xena stands, unarmed, almost naked, facing a score of hardened warriors divided into two lines of escalating brutality. The first tier is unarmed like herself. They will use fists and feet to punish her. The next two tiers will have staffs and clubs. If she survives that, she will then face knives and short swords, then finally spears and long swords. Freedom lies a long ways away.

DARPHUS

Steps to the front of the line, takes out his sword, draws a line in the dust.

DARPHUS

You will start here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

Looks on in disbelief as Darphus walks through the gauntlet. He turns to a SOLDIER next to him.

SALMONEUS

Can she really make it through that?

SOLDIER #1

No one ever has.

Darphus draws another line in the dirt at the gauntlet's end.

DARPHUS

And, if you make it, end here.

(to Cretus)

Take her sword and armor.

Xena snarls smugly at Cretus.

XENA

You sniveling little coward. The rest of my men wouldn't think of lifting a hand against me. We'll bury you with your new commander.

Cretus, stripping her of weapons, is not so sure.

XENA

Confidently approaches the first tier, certain her troops are too loyal to raise a finger against her. The first fist to the side of her head proves her wrong. It's quickly followed by equally painful body blows and kicks. The onslaught drives her back and to her knees.

ANOTHER ANGLE

A foot drives her to the ground and she lies there, doubled-over, panting. The emotional hurt of betrayal is more punishing than any physical blows. After a long moment, she rises shakily to one knee.

XENA

Please, I --

She reaches a hand up in pitiful supplication to the nearest soldier. He's stupid enough to take it -- and gets pulled down into a head butt for his efforts. Before this turnaround can sink in, she's on her feet, spinning and kicking and punching her way down the line to the second tier -- where she separates a surprised soldier from his staff.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 2

SALMONEUS

Excited that she's still alive, vicariously participates in her triumphs with pantomimed movements mimicking hers as she fights her way down the line of sticks and clubs.

SALMONEUS

Go, Xena! Go!

His zeal is dampened when he realizes that Darphus is a few feet away. The warrior leader is not happy with the outcome of the ritual so far, nor with Xena's cheerleader. Salmoneus dials down his enthusiasm.

THE NEXT TIER

Knives, short swords and their bearers are next for Xena. She uses her staff to good avail: blocking thrusts and stabs, disarming several attackers. She stoops to pick up a discarded knife -- carrying it in her teeth for later use -- then fights her way up to the final tier.

DARPHUS AND CRETUS

Exchange surprised glances. This is not going the way they had hoped. But Darphus' frown turns to a smirk, as he looks at the long swords and spears being readied to rid him of his adversary.

XENA

Staggers, weakened by pain and exhaustion -- and a soldier steps forward to take advantage. Big mistake. The stricken soldier looks down to where his sword and intestines were -- then collapses -- dead. And Xena goes into the final fray with a long sword.

THE FINAL TIER

It is brutal and ugly and Xena endures her share of minor cuts and wounds. But her opponents fare far worse. One of the smarter spear-carriers decides to lay back and throw his weapon from a safer distance. For his efforts, the knife comes out of Xena's teeth and flies into his chest.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Finally, she battles her way to the end line -- and falls across it, exhausted -- probably dead. Her troops look down at her in awe. No one has ever made it through this before. A shame she had to die for her efforts.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 3

XENA

And an amazing "resurrection" takes place. A shudder, then Xena pulls herself to her knees -- much to Darphus' chagrin. He motions to the soldiers standing closest to her.

DARPHUS

Kill her.

Though battered, bloodied and beaten, there are murmurings of discontent among the troops in the line.

SOLDIER #1

But... she made it through.

DARPHUS

Good for her. Now, finish it.

The nearest SOLDIER can't believe what he's hearing.

SOLDIER #2

She fought fairly... by the rules. I won't cross that line.

The soldier backs up -- throws his spear to the ground. Several others fling their weapons down.

DARPHUS

Then I'll finish her myself.

He steps forward and raises his own sword -- only to find himself staring at another sword point -- Xena's. She glares up at him... and he backs away, lowering his weapon.

DARPHUS

(continuing)

Enjoy your exile.

Xena staggers to her feet, stumbles off. Darphus turns to satisfy his blood lust elsewhere.

DARPHUS

(continuing)

Where's her wretched little jester?

CRETUS

Salmoneus? He's right...

Cretus turns but Salmoneus is nowhere to be seen.

CRETUS

(continuing)

He was right here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 4

DARPHUS

Find him! I want his head!

He stalks off in an agitated state of murderous interruptus.

EXT. FOREST - ANOTHER PART - DAY

Now on foot, a tired Hercules and Iloran are nonetheless jogging along in their quest to catch up to the marauders before they can strike again. Iloran is breathing hard.

ILORAN

(between gulps of air)

Hercules, how about a break?

HERCULES

We'll rest when we find them.

ILORAN

(still gasping)

We won't be in any shape to fight if we don't stop soon.

HERCULES

When we find them.

They round a bend and an arrow flies out of the brush and into Iloran's shoulder. He drops like a stone.

HERCULES

Picks up his cousin, drags him to cover. His wound, while temporarily incapacitating, does not appear to be serious.

HERCULES

(continuing)

You'll be all right.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Another arrow thuds into the oak a foot above them.

BACK TO SCENE

Hercules looks at the arrow above, then follows its trajectory to a wooded area to their left front.

HERCULES' POV

The leaves still shake from where the missile was fired.

HERCULES (O.S.)

I see movement.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BACK TO SCENE

Hercules unsheathes his sword.

HERCULES

Stay here till I get back.

He then charges in the direction of the movement.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Our hero charges through the underbrush under a large tree -- and puts on the brakes.

HERCULES' POV

A trip wire is barely visible in the brush.

BACK TO SCENE

Hercules slashes at it with his sword -- and a large net snare swoops up from the ground. Hercules looks at it, then smiles at his attacker as he steps from behind a tree, short sword in hand. This is SPIROS, who's been following them.

HERCULES

You missed.

SPIROS

I don't need traps to kill the murderer of my wife and child.

HERCULES

Steps back into a defensive posture -- and trips another snare. A huge log, suspended by ropes, swings down out of the tree toward him. Hercules drops his sword, throws his hands out. Only his agility and tremendous strength keep his chest from being crushed. Still, the huge mass of wood slams into him, knocking the wind out of him.

SPIROS

(continuing)

But I don't mind their help.

An unarmed Hercules slumps, pinned against the tree trunk -- as Spiros raises his spear -- and charges.

HERCULES

Off his groggy reaction:

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - DAY

A stunned Hercules tries to clear the cobwebs as Spiros, with a cry of grief and rage, runs at him.

ANOTHER ANGLE

At the last second, our hero lifts the log, deflecting Spiros' sword blows. Hercules then holds onto the log as it swings back -- and kicks out at his attacker, knocking him off balance.

SPIROS

Fueled by the adrenaline of grief and anger, scrambles to his feet and runs at our hero once more.

HERCULES

Uses the man's wildness against him. He easily dodges another sword thrust, then flips his assailant end over end. But the man is not to be denied. He rises, attacks again -- with more or less the same results. This is starting to get old, so on the next assault, Hercules disarms Spiros and pins him against a tree, the sword hilt against his throat.

SPIROS

Go on, kill me. I have nothing to live for anymore.

HERCULES

Who are you? Another of Xena's men?

SPIROS

I'm Spiros. You killed my wife and son.

HERCULES

I'm Hercules and I didn't kill anyone.

Spiros relaxes a tad, but he's still uncertain.

SPIROS

Hercules? But I saw you looting the bodies at the village.

HERCULES

We were burying them. They were already dead when we got there.

The man slumps, the fight now out of him, and Hercules

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

tosses his sword aside. Spiros looks up at him with pleading eyes, knowing the answer, but still hoping.

SPIROS

My wife and child were in that village.

Hercules puts a comforting hand on his shoulder.

HERCULES

I'm sorry. Come on, let's see what damage you've done to my cousin.

Spiros follows Hercules toward Iloran in b.g., coming toward them, holding his wounded shoulder.

EXT. BACKWOODS TRAIL - DAY

Salmoneus, out of breath, moves quickly down a path. Stopping for a moment to catch his breath, he turns to check the trail behind him -- and doesn't like what he sees.

SALMONEUS' POV

In the far distance, three horsemen move along a path that winds across the valley floor. They stop as one dismounts.

CLOSE ON HORSEMEN

From Darphus' camp, the two mounted soldiers are skeptical of the one studying the ground in front of him.

SOLDIER #1

What make you think he fled this way?

SOLDIER #2

He knows Darphus plans on attacking the villages in the other direction. Why would he go that way?

SOLDIER #1

He could as easily gone north or south.

The second soldier bends, studies the tracks, then rises with a satisfied look.

SOLDIER #2

But he went this way.

He points off into the distance toward:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

Who reacts, although too far away to be seen. No rest for the weary, he starts off again. Figuring he'd better get off the well-traveled path, he heads into the brush.

ANOTHER ANGLE

He's barely ten yards in when he sinks into mud up to his knees -- and keeps sinking. He's up to his thighs before he realizes that he's blundered into quicksand. He reaches for the nearest tree branch. It breaks. Near panic, he grabs for another -- as he starts to sink out of its reach.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

A bandaged Iloran tends to the horses in b.g. while Spiros relates his tale of woe to Hercules.

SPIROS

I should never have left.

HERCULES

Why did you?

SPIROS

No one wanted to leave their families. But we knew someone had to go for help. So we drew straws. I drew the short one.

HERCULES

Then it's not your fault. You did what you could.

SPIROS

(no consolation)

I still shouldn't have left. Everyone I loved... they're gone now. Dead.

Hercules puts a hand on the young man's shoulder.

HERCULES

I once lost my family, too. I know what you're going through.

SPIROS

Then you know there's nothing you can say that can make me feel better.

Hercules reflects, then gives a resigned nod.

EXT. BACKWOODS TRAIL - DAY

Darphus' searchers now come to the part of the road where Salmoneus left it. The lead horseman is confused as he's lost sight of his quarry's tracks. Another doubles back, finds where Slippery Sal went into the woods.

SOLDIER #1

Over here!

The other two double back and follow him into the woods.

ANOTHER ANGLE

They barely get a few feet into the brush before the lead horse balks. The footing is turning treacherous.

SOLDIER #2

Look!

He points off in front of where the lead horse has stopped. A few yards away, Salmoneus' tunic floats on the muddy surface. The first soldier dismounts, takes a tentative step, sinks up to his kneecap and hastily retreats.

SOLDIER #1

Quicksand.

He reaches for the branch that broke off in Salmoneus' hand, uses it to snag the half-submerged garment.

SOLDIER #2

It's the jester's. I don't think we have to search anymore.

The first soldier gathers up the proof of Salmoneus' ignominious demise, remounts his horse. The three searchers then retrace their steps back to the road. PAN UP to a tree several yards away from the edge of the quicksand. A relieved, nearly naked Salmoneus wipes his sweating brow.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hercules leads Iloran and Spiros down the road.

HERCULES

We'll find Xena and her army. I promise you.

Spiros is silent for a long moment, then mounts up, a new resolve in his eyes.

SPIROS

I know this countryside well. I can be your scout.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HERCULES

Done.

And they all step up their pace.

INT. CAVE - DAY

The Shepherdess nurses the infant from a sheepskin flask when she reacts to a noise behind her. She looks up -- and reacts to a horrifying sight.

XENA

A mass of bruises and matted blood, staggers into the cave. She takes another step and almost collapses. The Shepherdess puts the infant down and runs to her.

SHEPHERDESS

Let me help you.

But Xena waves off the girl's aid and somehow manages to stand on her own. All of this despite reopening a wound.

XENA

I can take care of myself.

The girl, unsure, goes back to caring for the baby.

SHEPHERDESS

One of your men came here looking for you today.

Xena gives a derisive snort as she tends to her wounds.

XENA

I have no men.

SHEPHERDESS

He said his name was Deros.

This gets her attention.

XENA

What did he want?

SHEPHERDESS

He said he needed to warn you that Hercules was on your trail.

XENA

Hercules?

And that starts her thinking.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Iloran and Hercules react to a shout and bloodcurdling scream coming from the underbrush ahead of them.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Drawing their swords, they charge through a stand of trees into a small clearing -- and react again.

THEIR POV

A man is tied, spread-eagled, to four stakes. Spiros kneels over him, dripping a honeycomb slowly over the man's face. The CAMERA MOVE IN -- revealing the man to be Salmoneus.

SALMONEUS

Help me! Somebody help me!

BACK TO SCENE

As Iloran and Hercules run up to the men.

HERCULES

What's going on?

SALMONEUS

This lunatic has me staked to an ant -- Hercules! What are you doing here?

HERCULES

Salmoneus! I could ask you the same question.

SALMONEUS

Would you get this crazy man to untie me! I was just minding my own business when this wild man comes up and --

HERCULES

Quiet! Spiros?

SPIROS

This is one of Xena's men.

SALMONEUS

No you're wrong I mean I rode with them because they caught me hiding and made me wear a dress but I never killed anybody I just --

HERCULES

Salmoneus, pull yourself together.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

(calming)

Would you tell him to stop dripping
that stuff! I'm allergic to honey.
It makes me break out in hives.

Hercules turns to Spiros.

HERCULES

I know this man. Set him free.

Spiros cuts him loose and the former toga salesman runs
behind his savior like a petulant child. Using Hercules as
a shield, Salmoneus lashes out at his tormentor.

SALMONEUS

You're lucky you caught me by surprise
or I'd have... I'd have...

HERCULES

Enough. You rode with Xena's army?

SALMONEUS

They made me. It's a long story.

HERCULES

Where are they now?

SALMONEUS

Headed for Parthis. And if it's like
the last place, when they get through,
there won't be any Parthis left.

At their respective reactions:

INT. HUT - DAY

In another war room, a now-dressed Deros nods deferentially
to Darphus and Cretus, then exits.

DARPHUS

So the great Hercules is on our trail.

CRETUS

Maybe it's time to change our plans.

DARPHUS

No. Deros says he leads a small
force, on foot.

CRETUS

But Hercules --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARPHUS

Can be defeated like any other man.

(a beat)

He doesn't know that we know he's on our track. That gives us an edge.

He unfolds another section of map and points.

DARPHUS

(continuing)

Here. Outside Parthis where the road splits. That's where we spring our trap.

CRETUS

But suppose he --

DARPHUS

We'll crush him like a bug.

On a roll, Darphus pounds the table in emphasis. Cretus nods, more out of fear than agreement.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hercules and Salmoneus walk side by side; Iloran is slightly ahead of them.

SALMONEUS

When can we take a break?

Salmoneus stops, removes a pebble from his sandal.

SALMONEUS

I don't know how I get mixed up in these things.

HERCULES

I don't know how you got mixed up with bad news like Xena.

SALMONEUS

It wasn't exactly by choice. And she's not as evil as you make her out to be.

HERCULES

Of course not. She kills only to satisfy her blood lust, not for sport.

SALMONEUS

At least she gives people a chance to surrender before massacring them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HERCULES

She's all heart.

SALMONEUS

Really. She's not into that scorched earth stuff like Darphus.

Hercules looks over at Salmoneus, incredulous.

HERCULES

You're serious, aren't you?
 (at Salmoneus' look)
 That she's not a cold-hearted, evil bitch.

SALMONEUS

Believe me, next to Darphus, she looks like the Goddess of Love and Light.

ILORAN

Hercules!

Hercules and Salmoneus react to where Iloran points.

THEIR POV

Off the side of the trail in front of them, Xena steps from out of the brush in full battle garb.

HERCULES (O.S.)

Looks like we may get a chance to see which one of us is right.

BACK TO SCENE

XENA

Hercules. We meet again.

HERCULES

I've been looking forward to it.

She points nearby, where Spiros is tied to a tree.

XENA

Your scout would never make it in my army.

HERCULES

No, he's not a baby killer.

This hits a nerve, but she shrugs it off. She draws her sword, then motions at Salmoneus and Iloran.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 2

XENA

You're not going to spoil this by bringing your friends into it, are you?

HERCULES

No, Xena. This is between you and me.

And he draws his own sword as the other two back off, giving the combatants room.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Xena and Hercules circle like two boxers.

HERCULES

We've been down this road before. The last time, you almost cost me a friendship.

XENA

This time it'll cost you your life.

She lunges at him with a quick looping slash that he barely avoids. As they square off again:

ANOTHER ANGLE

SALMONEUS

Xena, why are you doing this?

XENA

If I can bring back the head of Hercules, I can get my army back.

HERCULES

So you can murder more women and children.

XENA

That wasn't my idea.

HERCULES

It was your army.

A sore point with Xena, she again attacks -- and Hercules once more deftly avoids the onslaught of her slashing sword.

SALMONEUS

You shouldn't be fighting each other. Darphus is your enemy. You should be on the same side, against him.

His answer is a fantastic sword-move by Xena -- countered by an equally sharp defensive move by Hercules. The only casualty is Salmoneus' borrowed belt. Cut in two, it separates -- and his water gourd falls to the ground.

SALMONEUS

(continuing)

On second thought, maybe you should work it out between you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He picks up his gourd and steps back, joining the other two spectators as the two warriors go at it.

HERCULES

Whatever qualms he has about fighting a woman are quickly quashed as Xena steps up her attack. She puts on an astounding display of swordsmanship that he barely rebuffs.

HERCULES

You're good, but you'll need to be better.

XENA

I intend to.

ANOTHER ANGLE

She now maneuvers backwards into a small grove. She raises her sword and slashes a small vine next to her. A mirrored shield drops at an angle -- blinding Hercules with the sun's reflection.

HERCULES

As he holds up his hand to block the sun's glare, he doesn't see the bolo flying at him until it's too late. The leather thong wraps around his windpipe, one stone weight glancing off his temple -- stunning him, driving him to his knees.

XENA

Charges -- and Hercules barely shakes the cobwebs in time to raise a sword and parry her thrust. He can't fight with air to his lungs and blood to his brain being choked off, but if he drops his sword, he's unarmed. Xena enjoys his dilemma.

HERCULES

Opting for air, he drops the sword and grabs for his neck. Xena's next charge gives him just enough adrenaline rush to snap the strangling leather and dive aside. Her singing sword chews up the ground, but not our hero.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Xena presses her advantage; she backs her swordless opponent against a tree, slashing at his head -- and taking out a chunk of bark. She hacks at his knees; he grabs a vine and leaps up out of harm's way -- planting a kick to her shoulder that slams her into a tree trunk.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 2

HERCULES

Uses the moment to dive for his dropped sword. He comes up slashing. Xena is still reeling from the kick.

ANOTHER ANGLE

It's all over but the shouting. Hercules puts on a dazzling display of bodacious bladery that leaves everyone -- including Xena -- in awe. With a nifty lunge and thrust, he disarms her, his blurring blade flipping her weapon into the underbrush, before nestling against her throat.

XENA

Go on. Finish it. You've convinced me. You're the greatest warrior.

HERCULES

I don't have to prove anything. And maybe, for once in his life, Salmoneus is right.

(at her look)

We have a common enemy in Darphus. Will you join us?

Xena, humiliated in defeat, shakes her head.

XENA

No.

Frustrated, disappointed, Hercules lowers his sword.

SPIROS

Being untied by Iloran, shouts at Xena as she moves away.

SPIROS

Coward! You can make war on defenseless villages, on women and children... but you can't fight a worthy opponent.

Stung, Xena stops, then shakes off the insult and goes on. Spiros starts for her, but Hercules puts a hand on his arm.

HERCULES

She's not worth the effort.

If Xena hears this, she gives no indication as she and her wounded pride disappear into the underbrush.

EXT. WOODS ABOVE PARTHIS - DAY

At a fork in the road, Darphus holds up his hand, halting his troops. He turns toward the hapless Cretus.

DARPHUS

You know your orders?

CRETUS

I take the smaller force, set up camp.
You'll be concealed in the woods.
When Hercules and his men attack...

DARPHUS

We ambush them from behind... and cut them down like dogs.

CRETUS

This isn't just any man we're dealing with. This is Hercules.

DARPHUS

And by last light tomorrow, I'll carry his heart on my sword.

Still not convinced, Cretus nevertheless turns and signals his contingent to follow him down the lower road.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS ABOVE PARTHIS - DAY

At the same fork in the road, the others gather around Spiros as he points to the tracks in the ground, then off to the lower road. Fifty yards away, on the upper road, Hercules shouts to them.

HERCULES

Spiros!

Spiros runs over to where our hero points to the ground.

ANOTHER ANGLE

HERCULES

(continuing)

More tracks.

Spiros looks at the road behind him.

SPIROS

They tried to cover them up to this point. Looks like a larger body of troops went this way.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HERCULES

Let's see what they're up to.

He motions to the others in b.g. to wait for them while he and Spiros start off into the woods.

EXT. ANOTHER PART OF THE WOODS - DAY

From a brush-covered rise, Hercules points down at a contingent of soldiers, encamped alongside a road.

THEIR POV

A dozen soldiers surround a campfire, eating, cleaning swords, etc. Cretus wanders among them, but his eyes are glued to the road.

BACK TO SCENE

Spiros nods and is about to start back when Hercules grabs his shoulder, then points in another direction.

HERCULES' POV

Hidden in the underbrush above the encampment, barely visible, more soldiers lie in ambush.

BACK TO SCENE

Hercules leans over and whispers in Spiros' ear.

HERCULES

That's their surprise. Maybe we can spring one of our own.

He then motions for Spiros to silently follow him back.

EXT. FORK IN THE ROAD - DAY

Salmoneus, Iloran and Spiros gather around as Hercules draws in the dirt.

HERCULES

About a dozen soldiers have set up camp about here.

ILORAN

Then let's wipe them out. We can handle a dozen.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HERCULES

(shakes his head)

That's what they expect us to do. Two dozen more are waiting in ambush.

SPIROS

What do we do?

HERCULES

We even the odds. A cavalry without horses is not a cavalry.

At their perplexed reactions:

EXT. ANOTHER PART OF THE WOODS - DAY

One of the soldiers lying in ambush reacts to a sound. He stands up, draws his sword and turns left. He should have turned right. Iloran's club drops him like a sack of grain. Hercules' cousin then drags him into the underbrush.

AND ANOTHER PART

Another soldier sharpens a sword, then sees something out of the corner of his eye. He stands, astonished to find Salmoneus waving at him. He starts forward -- only to walk into Spiros' fist. Another drop-and-drag scenario.

YET ANOTHER PART

Two soldiers lean against a thick tree, gambling over captured booty. Their games is short-lived as two large hands appear from behind the tree and conk their heads together. Hercules steps from behind the oak, gathers them by their tunics and hauls the soldiers off.

AND STILL ANOTHER PART

Another soldier, guarding the horses, reacts to a sound in the underbrush, draws his sword and moves into the brush.

SALMONEUS

Uses the diversion to cut the horses loose and shoo them into the woods.

THE SOLDIER

Realizes his error too late. He runs back to where the animals were tethered -- only to find them gone.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The next morning a panicked Cretus approaches Darphus.

CRETUS

I lost half my men during the night.
Our horses were driven off.

DARPHUS

(in grudging admiration)
Hercules.

CRETUS

They've gone around us. My scouts say
they've entered Parthis.

DARPHUS

They've gone into the village?

CRETUS

They must outnumber us.

DARPHUS

If they outnumbered us, they would've
attacked in force last night. Their
tactics prove we're still stronger
than them. But I think they made a
major mistake. Gather the men.

CRETUS

But, Darphus --

DARPHUS

Now. We're attacking the village.

INT. VILLAGE HUT - DAY

Hercules turns as Salmoneus comes through the door.

HERCULES

Women and children all evacuated?

SALMONEUS

And the old men and boys, too. I
still say we should've kept some.

HERCULES

They're no match for that army out
there.

SALMONEUS

And we are? All four of us?

HERCULES

At least the villagers cooked up some
surprises. That'll help.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

And what happens when the surprises
are all used up?

HERCULES

We'll find out soon enough. You'd
better get to your post.

He points off to the edge of the woods in b.g., where the
first wave of Darphus' army now gathers.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Like Zulu warriors, the first wave now charges; then the
wave behind it, then another.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

As the first wave hits the edge of the village, Spiros
slashes at a rope -- and a wall of sharpened stakes springs
up and takes out a half-dozen surprised soldiers.

ILORAN

Waits, sword in hand, seemingly an easy conquest as a
contingent of soldiers advances on him. They run recklessly
over a thatched mat -- which drops out beneath them -- then
fall onto more sharpened spikes. Another half-dozen gone.

SALMONEUS

Waits nervously on a hill as soldiers charge toward him. He
cuts a rope -- unleashing a pile of logs that rumble down
the hill and wipe out another half-dozen of Darphus' army.

FROM THE WINDOW OF A HUT

Hercules fires arrow after arrow into the advancing troops.
He drops two, then six, then a dozen, but still they come.
Now a half-dozen charge into the hut he's firing from.

OUTSIDE THE HUT

Hercules slips outside and pushes on a supporting pillar.
The ceiling and beams of the building collapse -- crushing
the soldiers underneath. Another half-dozen gone.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Hercules, Spiros, Iloran and Salmoneus now back toward the
center of the village. Their surprises used up, vastly
outnumbered, they fight bravely in hand-to-hand combat.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALMONEUS

Unskilled, does what he can, which is mostly keep one of the soldiers at bay until someone else can give him a hand.

ILORAN

Shows a ferocity unseen before as he battles his attackers.

SPIROS

Fights with a tenacity one would expect of one avenging the death of his family.

HERCULES

No less tenacious or fierce, and taking out three and four opponents for every one that Spiros or Iloran dispose of.

ANOTHER ANGLE

The sheer number of soldiers seem to spell doom for our hero and friends when -- from the woods rides a mounted warrior.

XENA

With a blood-curdling yell, charges into the battle, killing two marauders with her spear. Losing that, she draws her sword and slaughters three more, using her horse as a weapon to disorient and terrorize the soldiers on foot.

THE SOLDIERS

Surprised and disrupted, start to panic and flee.

DARPHUS

Runs at them, sword drawn in threat and exhortation.

DARPHUS

Fight! Or die by my sword.

Now the marauders, further dispirited and confused by Xena's charge, seem surrounded by death. The tide is turning.

SPIROS

Finds himself pitted against Cretus. Neither knows the other's identity, but the battle is as brutal as any vengeance feud. As Cretus loses his sword -- a gold earring spills out of his booty bag. Spiros is stunned.

SPIROS

Where did you get that?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 2

CRETUS

Wait! I have its mate.

Seeing a chance, he reaches into his booty bag.

SPIROS

It was my wife's!

Cretus pulls out a hidden knife -- but Spiros' sword is already on its downward path. And vengeance is sweet.

HERCULES

Dispatches another three attackers, then spots Darphus nearby, shouting orders. Our hero starts forward -- only to be cut off by Xena.

XENA

He's mine. You can have him if I fail.

HERCULES

Don't fail. We need all the help we can get.

Xena charges off as Hercules dodges the spear of a soldier who'd hoped the distraction would work in his favor. It doesn't. Our hero dispatches both him and his compadre.

ILORAN AND SPIROS

Battle on. The only difference between their intensity and Hercules is that they take on their opponents one at a time -- Hercules fights off two, three and four at once.

XENA AND DARPBUS

Square off and the confrontation is as bitter and cruel as expected. No quarter asked; none given. They slash and parry and thrust their way across the village square.

ANOTHER ANGLE

More moves and countermoves -- and Darphus miscalculates -- and Xena takes advantage. A quick thrust and:

DARPBUS

Pulls back, jerking Xena's sword out of her hands. Unfortunately, it is stuck deep in Darphus' mid-section. He staggers a few feet, then falls, mortally wounded.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: 3

HERCULES

Dispatches several more attackers, then crosses to help Iloran and Spiros who, tiring, are being overwhelmed by a half-dozen opponents. Our hero expertly kills two, then routes the others.

ANOTHER ANGLE

The three turn to continue the battle -- and suddenly find themselves without foes. Against overwhelming odds, they've won. Xena heads back toward them from the b.g. as Iloran looks around, stunned and saddened. The carnage tempers his sense of victory. Hercules picks up on his emotions.

HERCULES

Don't waste your pity on those who
kill mothers and babies.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. STREAM - DAY

At the rivulet at the village edge, Hercules and Xena wash off the blood and dirt of battle.

HERCULES

Why did you come back?

XENA

Darphus. He took my army from me. I
wanted to pay him back.

Before he can pursue that, Iloran, Spiros and Salmoneus join them, leading five horses behind them.

ILORAN

We found some horses. For your ride
back.

Hercules nods his appreciation, but notices the ashen look on Spiros' face.

HERCULES

Spiros, what is it?

SPIROS

Salmoneus told me that Xena saved a
baby boy at my village.

XENA

Salmoneus has a busy mouth.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She seems embarrassed by the incident. Spiros approaches her, hoping against hope.

SPIROS

Was he... did he have a birthmark on his right leg?

(at her nod)

That's my son! Gods above, thank you. I don't know how --

XENA

Suppose I don't give him up?

The chill in her voice cuts his celebration short.

SPIROS

What do you mean?

XENA

I put my life on the line for him. Would you?

SPIROS

In a minute. I'll fight you if I have to.

XENA

You'd lose. You already did once.

SPIROS

It doesn't matter. He's my blood.

A tense moment. Spiros stands tall, ready to draw his sword. Xena likes what she sees, a brave man about to defend his offspring.

XENA

Salmoneus will take you to him. Just raise him to be as brave as you.

Xena goes to her horse, mounts up. Hercules turns to her.

HERCULES

What will you do now? With no army and no wars to fight?

XENA

I'll think of something.

And they watch the warrior princess as she rides off.

EXT. VILLAGE CENTER - DAY

Darphus lies still, surrounded by death. Blood is caked around the sword, still buried in his side. A strange, hooded figure glides over to him, grasps the lethal sword, which seems to glow as it's pulled from the corpse. Darphus stirs, his "resurrection" more amazing than Xena's.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Darphus rises, looks down at his healed wound in disbelief, then turns to the cloaked figure. Face hidden in blackness, only glowing eyes visible under his hood, this is the EMISSARY.

DARPHUS
What... what's going on?

EMISSARY
Feeling better?

DARPHUS
Who are you?

EMISSARY
Call me an Emissary of Ares.

DARPHUS
(a knowing, fearful look)
Ares? The God of War? What would he want with me?

EMISSARY
He wants to give you your revenge against Xena. But first you must do something for him.

Darphus gives the creepy figure a questioning look.

EMISSARY
(continuing)
You must kill Hercules.

DARPHUS
Hercules! How? He decimated my army.

EMISSARY
You'll need help. More help than any army can give you.

And Darphus reacts, first to the sound of an unearthly snarl and growl behind the Emissary -- then to the actual sight of the origination of those ungodly sounds.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARPHUS' POV

A horrifying, revolting sight -- Graegus, Ares' War Dog, snarls and spits. The giant mongrel's eyes glow with evil. The Emissary laughs.

EMISSARY

(continuing)

This beast can give you that help.
Under your control, it can destroy
Hercules once and for all.

BACK TO SCENE

From Darphus' reaction, it's unclear whether he wants to be in control of such a creature. But his eyes turn hard as he ponders the possibilities. And this time the Emissary's laugh is joined by Darphus'. As the evil laughter echoes across the village, SUPERIMPOSE:

TO BE CONTINUED

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FOUR