

War for the Oaks

FADE IN:

EXT. CITY PARK - NIGHT

A large BLACK DOG trots through a deserted park as if he's on a mission. Beyond him are the lights of Minneapolis.

A male voice, young, resonant, a little rough:

POOKA (V.O.)

There's a woman who'll do, I think.

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - NIGHT

Nightclub area: bursts of MUSIC as young PEOPLE go in and out of clubs, dressed for a cold spring night.

POOKA

She makes music that moves the heart and body. In another age, we'd have sought her for that alone.

The dog weaves his way through the club-hoppers. A young WOMAN crouches and holds out a hand to him.

CLUB WOMAN

Here, doggy! Here, boy!

The black dog dodges away from her and lopes across the street between cars. One HONKS.

EXT. STOMPER'S - NIGHT

The dog approaches a working-class bar on a run-down street.

The neon outside buzzes and flickers: "Stomper's." The marquee reads, "Fri-Sat Only - InKline Plain."

POOKA (V.O.)

I can bring her to you. But whether she will do as we wish—

A woman's voice, cold and slightly sibilant:

GLAISTIG (V.O.)

She will do as we command. Pity her if she tries to stand against us.

INT. STOMPER'S - NIGHT

A small, ill-lit stage with faded flocked wallpaper on the back wall, crammed with gear for a four-piece band. Amid the amps and mike stands, EDDI tunes her electric guitar.

POOKA (V.O.)

Oh, I shall.

Eddi's young, good-looking, and full of something that makes you want to watch her: vitality, intelligence, a touch of vulnerability. Her clothes and hair are struggling-musician cool: cheap, but clever and flattering.

The rest of the bar—tables, stools, beer ads—is as shabby and out-of-date as the stage. A few PATRONS sit in booths or at the bar. The jukebox plays a top-40 song.

STUART, Eddi's boyfriend and the band's lead guitarist, sits at a table. He's a bit too well-groomed and well-dressed for this bar. The BARTENDER brings him a beer and carries off an empty.

Eddi sees the beer arrive. She hops offstage and walks to Stuart's table. As he reaches for the beer, she puts her hand on top of his.

EDDI
(gently)
You're drunk, Stu.

Stuart jerks his beer away from her and drinks deeply.

STUART
I'm OK.

EDDI
We can do easy stuff this set—

STUART
I said I'm OK.

Eddi gives his shoulder a weary pat.

EDDI
Good. You'll nail all the lead breaks, then.

She turns toward the stage. Stuart grabs her arm.

STUART
Eddi. You talk to the manager tonight?

EDDI
No, why?

STUART
Talk him up a little. You know. Flirt.

EDDI
Flirt?

STUART
He likes you, he'll book us next month.

EDDI
Stuart, after the set we just played, he should book us for murder.

STUART
Thanks a lot.

EDDI
You get gigs by playing good music, not by sending your girlfriend to bat her eyelashes at the manager.

STUART
I see where this is going.

(in a whining voice)
“Why don’t we do any of my songs?”
(back to normal)
Yeah, that’d get us lots of work.

Eddi steps back and clenches her hands.

EDDI
Then what am I here for, Stu?

STUART
Jesus, don’t start that relationship stuff now. I have to be able to concentrate up there.

Stuart finishes his beer and heads for the bar. Eddi watches him signal the bartender for another one. Suddenly, she LAUGHS. She can’t help it; it’s that or cry.

She springs on stage and picks up her guitar. CARLA, her best friend, is behind the drums. Carla’s hardly ever still; some little motion shows she’s listening to the beat in her head.

EDDI
Where’s Dale?

Carla mimes inhaling a joint.

CARLA
(holding her breath)
Parking lot.

EDDI
Great. The whole left side of the stage in an altered state. Let’s do a set list.

CARLA
We’ve got a set list.

EDDI
Let’s do a new one.

CARLA
Won’t Stuart be...
(slow, wicked grin)
Ah, the peasants are revolting.

Carla snatches the old set list off the side of her floor tom and picks up a pen.

The POOKA, a dark, handsome man, enters the bar. He’s dressed well, with a hint of previous centuries about his clothes: high-collared vest, long narrow-waisted overcoat, ruffles showing at his wrists.

On stage, Eddi and Carla are joined by Stuart and DALE, a long-haired, chubby bass player in a fringed leather vest. Stuart tests his guitar sound and drains his beer.

EDDI
(into microphone)
Here’s an original.

Stuart looks up, startled. Carla taps out the beat. Stuart frowns at her—but she ignores him. He glares from her to Eddi and joins in on guitar, a little too loud.

It's a peppy, weirdly cheerful SONG about making the same bad choices over and over. Even with Dale's simple bass line and Stuart's over-busy lead guitar, it makes you want to dance.

As Eddi sings the first verse, the bartender looks up from the beer tap. The glass he's filling overflows before he remembers to look down.

A GUY at the bar in a Vikings jacket turns to watch the stage. He begins to nod and sway to the song.

Eddi tosses her hair, catches Carla's eye and grins.

A WOMAN pulls her DATE out of the booth and onto the dance floor. The other COUPLE in the booth join them, LAUGHING.

Two YOUNG MEN in hip-hop clothes peer into the bar from the game room and nod appreciatively.

Eddi spots the Pooka at the back of the room, watching her intently. She meets his eyes, sings to him. He smiles at her.

Stuart sees this byplay. His pout deepens.

More DANCERS come onto the floor, lured by the song and Eddi's intense delivery. Maybe the night can be saved...

Stuart's guitar sound turns crackly, then fades out as his amplifier dies. He kicks it.

STUART

Piece of shit!

Stuart yanks off his guitar, lets it fall and heads off stage. Eddi tries to keep the song going, but Dale falters, stops. Eddi shrugs at Carla. They finish the verse and end.

The BAR MANAGER intercepts Stuart beside the stage.

BAR MANAGER

Where the hell are you going?

STUART

You don't want to know.

BAR MANAGER

You started late, you drank more beer than the customers—

STUART

Don't jerk me around—

BAR MANAGER

You play 'til one. It's in your contract.

STUART

The one I wiped my ass with?

Stuart pushes past the manager, who follows him. Eddi unstraps her guitar.

CARLA

We're not gonna get paid, are we?

EDDI

Another magic moment in show biz.

EXT. ALLEY BEHIND BAR - NIGHT

Eddi and Carla load Carla's drums and Eddi's guitar and amp into Carla's old station wagon.

CARLA

You're breaking up with Mr. Potato Head?

EDDI

I'm not breaking up with Mr.—Stuart. I'm just quitting the band.

Carla gives her a long, stern look.

EDDI (cont'd)

He's a pretty potato.

CARLA

So's a nice Idaho russet, but I wouldn't date one.

The black dog trots up to Eddi, his tail wagging.

EDDI

Hey, pooch. Where'd you come from?

Eddi squats to scratch the dog's ears. He licks her fingers.

CARLA

That's what you need. Affectionate, loyal, warm, and not a drunk.

Eddi holds the dog's head and looks into his eyes.

EDDI

How 'bout it, buddy? Are you a girl's best friend?

The dog licks her chin. Eddi rubs his head and stands up.

EDDI (cont'd)

You're right. If I quit the band, I have to break up with Stuart.

CARLA

So InKline Plain loses the only real players in it and dies horribly.

EDDI

You're quitting, too?

Carla's gesture takes in the back of the bar with its grafitti'd door and overfull dumpster.

CARLA

I'll miss these swanky venues. So start a band I can drum in.

EDDI

Start your own band!

CARLA

Uh-uh. I'm not band leader material.

EDDI

(laughing)

And I am?

Carla frowns at her, surprised.

CARLA

'Course you are. Come on, it'll be great.

EDDI

All that work, just to play Van Halen songs for drunks screaming, "Take off your top"?

Carla finishes loading the station wagon and SLAMS the door.

CARLA

Depends on what you do and who you do it with, E.

Eddi gives the dog a final scratch.

EDDI

Go home, big guy. Fun's over.