

SHIPPER SEASON EIGHT

“A Very Merry Solstice”

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Logline

Xena, Gabrielle and their loved ones are in Potidaea for a Solstice celebration. But, as always, where the Warrior Princess and the Bard go, trouble is sure to follow.

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TEASER

FADE IN

A very dreary day, gray clouds cover most of the sky; only a few patches of blue are seen. An overhead view of a road amidst low hills, with a village or small town visible in the distance. The road is quite crowded. The camera pans down and zooms in on three riders--Xena, Gabrielle, and Eve. Xena and Gabrielle are wearing the same coats that they wore in the Norse Lands in "The Rheingold," and Eve has a similar coat on. It is obviously a cold day; their breaths can be seen in the air.

XENA:

Told you we should have taken the shortcut through the forest. We would have beaten the holiday traffic and gotten there already.

GABRIELLE (a little distracted):

I had no idea it was going to be so crowded.

EVE (wraps herself a little more tightly in her coat):

It's no fun getting stuck on the road during a cold snap. If the weather doesn't get any better, we're liable to spend Solstice in bed drinking lots of fluids.

XENA:

That's something we can't afford at any time of the year.

EVE (lifts her arm and looks at her sleeve):

Look at that--by the Heavens, I think it's snowing!

GABRIELLE (looks wistfully into the distance):

You know, the people in the lands to the north believe that it's not a real Winter Solstice unless there is snow. A white Solstice, they call it.

XENA (jokingly):

Hey, maybe whatever deities are in charge of the weather got their geography mixed up and brought a white Solstice to us instead of the folks up north.

GABRIELLE:

Maybe. (her smile brightens a little) Well, whatever weather we get, it will be good to celebrate Solstice with my family. It's been a long time since I've seen Lila and Sarah... (sighs) ...and even longer since we've spent Solstice together.

EVE:

Yeah. I just wish we'd taken Klymene along. She would have enjoyed it...and I miss her already.

XENA (gives her a warm look):

I know. But she'll be all right with the Amazons, Eve.

GABRIELLE (pensively):

You think Haimon and Darion are already in Potidaea?

XENA:

I'm sure they are. They left right after-- (her voice breaks off and she looks uncomfortably at Gabrielle)

GABRIELLE (looks down):

I hope Darion's okay.

XENA:

Of course he is. Haimon wouldn't let anything happen to Darion. He couldn't take better care of him if Darion was his own--

GABRIELLE (looks up):

That's not what I meant.

XENA (sighs and nods):

Yeah... (looks up meaningfully at Gabrielle) Darion is going to be all right.

GABRIELLE (quietly):

He wasn't all right when he was leaving with Haimon. (with sudden vehemence) Xena, I'm all he

has, and now he's afraid of me. I showed him a side of myself that frightens even me... (lowers her eyes) ...let alone a child.

XENA:

Gabrielle, of course he was scared--but it's not going to last forever. Darion loves you.

GABRIELLE:

I don't know if it's ever going to be the same. (she sighs) You know I've often wondered if the warrior's path is the right one for me...but this time it's affecting Darion, not just me.

EVE (a little uncomfortably):

You know, they say that Winter Solstice is a time of healing and reconciliation...

XENA (glances at Gabrielle):

Let's hope that's true.

GABRIELLE (smiles, obviously trying to dispel the tension):

Let's just hope we have a nice, peaceful holiday with my family. Darion can certainly use some holiday cheer. (glances at Eve) We may have a pleasant surprise in store for us, too.

XENA (warily):

What surprise?

GABRIELLE (grins a little):

Now, if I told you it wouldn't be a surprise anymore, would it?

EVE (nearly bumps into another rider):

Excuse me!

XENA (rolls her eyes):

At this rate, the pleasant surprise will be if we get to Potidaea in time for Solstice.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Eve ride through the streets of Potidaea. It's started to snow, light fluffy snowflakes falling on the ground. Many houses are decorated with ribbons, ivy, wreaths, red flowers and other festive symbols.

GABRIELLE:

Well, there we are. Lila's house is on the other side of the marketplace.

A raucous noise and shouts are heard in the distance.

XENA (lifts an eyebrow):

Sounds like some people have had a bit too much holiday cheer.

As they ride on, the noise grows louder.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Eve ride into the marketplace and stop in their tracks. What they see before them is utter chaos, a large crowd embroiled in a melee. The camera pans to two old men who are dueling with their walking sticks using them as swords.

OLD MAN #1:

It's *my* tree! Mine, I tell you!

The camera pans over other fight scenes: two men pulling each other's long hair, two women punching each other, a woman riding on a man's back and punching his head while he tries in vain to throw her off.

XENA (wryly):

So much for a nice, peaceful holiday.

GABRIELLE (to a woman who is staggering past them, her kerchief askew, her face scratched):

What's going on?

WOMAN (gasping for breath, shouts over the noise of the crowd):

Everyone's gone mad over those damn Solstice trees, trying to snap up the last ones!

As if to illustrate her words, a wild-eyed man clutching a pine tree makes his way past them, trying to run despite his burden.

EVE (shocked):

A fight over Solstice trees? But Solstice is supposed to be a time of love and--

She flinches and barely has time to duck as a shoe directed at the man with the pine tree flies past her, nearly hitting her in the head.

XENA (finishes wryly for Eve):

--peace.

GABRIELLE:

There's a shortage of solstice trees?

WOMAN (steadies her breath):

Terrible, just terrible. You see, Philemon and Carissa, the couple that usually sells solstice trees around here, had a huge fire on their farm just ten days ago. Everything burned down. Some new merchants have been selling trees, and charging an arm and a leg for them too. But there still aren't enough trees to go around.

She fixes up her kerchief and goes away.

XENA:

Well. We'd better do something to break up this wonderful tribute to the Solstice spirit.

She dismounts; Gabrielle and Eve do likewise, and they walk toward the melee. Just then, two men's voices are heard from the fighting crowd.

VOICE#1 (off-camera):

Stop! Stop! Show some decency, will you!

VOICE #2 (off-camera):

Mind your own business!

GABRIELLE:

Well, at least *someone* here is trying to do the right thing.

The two men with walking sticks are still fighting. Eve walks up to them and tries to separate them.

EVE:

Come on now--it's Solstice--

OLD MAN #1:

Show some respect for old age, young woman!

EVE:

I will--when you start acting your age.

The old men swing their walking sticks at her. Eve parries the blow, easily disarms them and throws the walking sticks in different directions.

OLD MAN #2 (grumbles):

Why, you insolent whelp!

OLD MAN #1 (shakes his head):

Young people these days...

The two old men hobble in different directions to pick up their walking sticks.

EVE:

I suggest you two keep that distance.

The camera pans to Xena and Gabrielle trying to separate the people who are fighting. Some of the rowdies attack them, and we see them using some of their signature moves, even though their movements are hampered by the coats. Gabrielle manages to land a kick that sends an attacker sprawling on his back, while Xena uses a backward punch, with both hands, to knock out a burly man and an equally burly woman who try to tackle her from behind. A large stick flies through the air and lands at Gabrielle's feet. She picks it up, looks at it for a moment, flips it in her hands and starts using it as a staff.

Xena, Gabrielle and Eve make their way through the crowd as the fight starts to calm down, and get a glimpse of a man trying to separate the combatants.

GABRIELLE (stops in amazement):

By the heavens, it's Haimon!

A punch in the back takes her by surprise and she sprawls face forward.

XENA (alarmed):

Gabrielle!

GABRIELLE (rolls over and uses her staff to fend off a second blow from her attacker, a tall, red-faced, disheveled woman):

I'm all right.

She gets up. The camera pans to Haimon who stops, turns around and smiles as he sees the three women.

HAIMON:

Xena, Gabrielle--Eve! (walks toward them) Great to see you!

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Haimon. (they hug) What are you doing here? Trying to keep the peace?

HAIMON:

Believe it or not, I came here trying to get a Solstice tree for your sister's house.

GABRIELLE:

Oh no. Don't tell me Lila and Sarah didn't get one.

Haimon shakes his head sadly.

VOICE (off-camera):

That's it, my good people!

The camera pans to a rather corpulent man in a gold-embroidered, fur-lined purple and equally rich leather boots, standing in an area enclosed by a waist-high picket fence guarded by five burly menacing-looking men. The enclosure is empty except for some broken-off evergreen branches and twigs on the ground.

MAN:

The trees are all gone.

A disappointed "Ohhhh!" goes up from the crowd. Gabrielle, Xena and Eve look stricken as we:

FADE OUT

ACT ONE

FADE IN

Xena approaches the merchant and gives him a wry look.

XENA:

You've obviously got a pretty good thing going here.

MAN IN THE CROWD (bitterly):

Yeah, at twelve dinars for one tree!

MERCHANT (unctuously):

Now, now--let's not get excited. If you think about it, my assistants and I have just saved Solstice in your charming little town. We traveled over a hundred leagues hauling in those trees--surely we're entitled to a little extra compensation for our troubles. Of course you've had a terrible tragedy, and we're very sorry about it. (presses his hand to his heart) Just remember, fire prevention is a *very* important thing. (he shakes his head with a mournful air, then turns to one of the burly men guarding the enclosure) Come on, pick up the cashbox and let's go.

BURLY MAN:

Sure, Telemos.

He picks up a rather large wooden chest on the ground. Xena looks thoughtfully after Telemos as he walks toward the horse and the covered wagon that stands just outside the enclosure and climbs into the wagon. One of the men gets in the driver's seat in the front of the wagon and picks up the reins, while the rest untie their horses and get in the saddle. They leave the square while the disappointed customers walk away, grumbling.

HAIMON:

I'm sorry about that.

XENA (turns to him):

Let's go back to the house--we'll figure something out later.

EVE:

Good idea.

They go back to get their horses and walk through the square leading the horses with them. Haimon walks next to Gabrielle while Xena and Eve stay behind them.

GABRIELLE:

I hope you had a good trip.

HAIMON:

It was fine. This is a really nice place... (chuckles) ...when people aren't killing each other over Solstice trees.

GABRIELLE (a little timidly):

How's Darion?

HAIMON:

He was quite a surprise for Lila and Sarah. (after a brief pause) He's doing fine. Well, unless he gets sick from eating too many sweets. That kid certainly has a sweet tooth.

A brief silence.

GABRIELLE:

Did you talk about... (her voice breaks off) ...you know--

HAIMON:

I tried. (he sighs) He didn't really want to talk about it. (reluctantly) Actually, for the first day, he didn't talk much at all...he was shaken up pretty badly. (a close-up on Gabrielle as she looks down, a

guilty look on her face) I think he was trying to come to terms with--what happened. (he rests a hand on Gabrielle's arm) He isn't angry with you.

GABRIELLE (bitterly):

No, he's not angry. He's just scared to death of me.

HAIMON:

I think Darion knows you would never do anything to hurt him.

GABRIELLE (wistfully):

I hope you're right. It's just that--he's been through so much, for an eight-year old. I wanted to make him feel safe, and now--

HAIMON:

Gabrielle...he'll understand.

CUT TO

A small house with a large, fenced front yard where the ground is lightly dusted with snow. Gabrielle and Haimon walk up to the door, with Xena and Eve behind them. Gabrielle knocks. The door opens, and Sarah stands in the doorway.

SARAH (smiles brightly):

Gabrielle! There you are at last! It's so good to see you. And Xena--and Eve--and you've got Haimon with you, too!

LILA (comes up, smiling):

Gabrielle! (the sisters hug, then Lila turns to Haimon) So, did you bring the tree?

HAIMON:

I'm afraid that's kind of a...long story.

LILA (looks a little disappointed):

Oh. Well, come on in and then you'll tell us. (smiles) At least it's warmer in here.

Gabrielle sees Darion standing behind Lila and Sarah. He's looking at her, wide-eyed and a little nervous.

GABRIELLE (anxiously):

Hey, Darion.

Darion lingers. His face expresses a mix of shifting emotions: hesitation, excitement, fear, joy. There is a long, tense pause as Gabrielle and Darion look at each other while Xena, Eve and Haimon look on anxiously.

Then, Darion bolts toward Gabrielle.

DARION:

Gabrielle! (he wraps his arms around her waist and presses his cheek to her stomach, closing his eyes) I've missed you.

GABRIELLE (hugs him and strokes his hair, tears in her eyes):
I've missed you too...

The camera pans over the faces of Xena, Eve and Haimon, who are smiling with relief.

CUT TO

Inside Lila and Sarah's house. Everyone is sitting around the fireplace in which a cozy fire is flickering. Darion is sitting close to the fire, warming his hands and rubbing them together. Gabrielle is sitting between Lila and Haimon. Haimon picks up her hand and strokes it gently, and she smiles at him. Xena, who is sitting across from them, notices this and smiles warmly but a little wistfully.

GABRIELLE:

You know, it's been a long time since I've had a chance to spend time with my family, just relaxing.

XENA:

Relaxing? Don't forget, we still have a Solstice tree to hunt down.

HAIMON:

A worthy mission for the Warrior Princess.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

And here I thought you might get bored with no enemies to fight or people to save.

DARION (turns anxiously):

We're going to have a tree, right?

GABRIELLE (reaches out and pats him on the shoulder):

Of course we're going to have a tree, sweetheart.

DARION:

And we're going to have lots of fun.

LILA (sighs, almost to herself, like she's reminiscing):

Solstice is a wonderful time if you can spend it with your family--with the ones you love... (she hugs Gabrielle and Sarah) I'm so glad to have you here.

DARION (looks back at them):

My mom and dad used to sing songs around Solstice time. (dreamily) My mom had a beautiful voice. Are we going to sing songs?

GABRIELLE (gives him a somewhat anxious look):

We certainly are. Xena, why don't you get us started?

XENA (shakes her head):

Sorry. I don't know any Solstice songs.

GABRIELLE:

Everyone knows Solstice songs. (teasing) And you have a *great* voice. (Xena shoots her a look of mock annoyance) Oh, come on, Xena. Darion wants to hear songs. You aren't going to disappoint him, are you?

XENA:

I'm afraid you'll have to sing without me.

GABRIELLE (to Darion):

Guess we're just going to have to show her how fun Solstice songs are, huh, Darion?

DARION (happily):

So, we're going to sing?

GABRIELLE (nods):

Yep. You have any special ones you like?

DARION:

"Solstice Night." That's my favorite.

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Hmm... I think I've forgotten that one. Tell you what, why don't *you* start and I'll join in.

DARION (doubtful):

Me?

GABRIELLE:

Sure. You have a great singing voice. (teasing) Even better than Xena.

DARION:

Okay... (he clears his throat and starts to sing)

Silent night, Solstice night,

All is calm, all is bright,

Nature slumbers in forest and glen...

As Darion sings, Gabrielle moves closer to him and, a little tentatively, puts her hands on his shoulders.

GABRIELLE (joining Darion):

Till in Springtime

She wakens again

Sleeping spirits grow strong...

They stop and smile at each other.

GABRIELLE:

Yeah, of course I remember... My mother used to sing it too. (looks at Lila) Remember, Lila? How Mother used to sing it to us when she put us to bed around Solstice, after she tucked us in.

LILA (nods, a little wistful):

I remember. I always used to fall asleep before she could finish.

GABRIELLE (chuckles):

And then you would ask her to sing it again every night during Solstice time, hoping you'd finally manage to stay awake through all of it.

LILA:

Yeah... (looks at Sarah) I taught it to Sarah, too, when she was little. It's become a family tradition.

SARAH (smiles):

At least I never fell asleep while you were singing.

DARION:

Let's sing some more! Hey--let's *all* sing together!

GABRIELLE:

Yeah. Why not? (looks at Xena and then Haimon) Are you going to join in?

XENA:

Nah, you have your fun. I'll just watch. And listen.

HAIMON:

Trust me, you don't want to hear me sing.

GABRIELLE (chuckles):

All right. But...I'm sure it'll get you into the Solstice spirit.

Xena and Haimon nod and Gabrielle looks at Lila, Sarah and then at Darion. They all start to sing except Xena and Haimon who just sit quietly, listening.

GABRIELLE, LILA, SARAH, and DARION (singing):

Silent night, Solstice night
Silver moon shining bright
Snowfall blankets the slumbering Earth
Yule fires welcome the Sun's rebirth
Yule fires welcome...

The sound of the singing begins to fade into the background as we close in on Xena who sits, watching them quietly as they smile. Gabrielle hugs Darion tighter and he leans back into her a little. They are clearly having a good time. Haimon moves closer to them as well and puts an arm on Gabrielle's shoulder, joining in the singing as well. The camera pans back to Xena, who smiles a little.

CUT TO

A bedroom with two beds and a cot, lit by a candle. Gabrielle has just finished putting Darion to sleep on the cot.

GABRIELLE (kisses Darion on the forehead):

Sweet dreams, Darion.

DARION (mutters sleepily):

Good night, Gabrielle...

CUT TO

Gabrielle comes out of the bedroom and heads to the main room, which is now empty except for Xena, who stands by the window looking out. The fire in the fireplace is flickering low.

GABRIELLE:

Where is everyone?

XENA:

In the kitchen.

GABRIELLE:

You should have sung with us, Xena. Even Haimon did and he said he couldn't carry a tune.

XENA:

You know singing in public isn't my kind of thing.

GABRIELLE:

I know. (comes up to Xena and puts a hand on her shoulder) But this is Solstice. You should try to get in the spirit.

XENA (sighs):

Maybe I'm just not into it as much as you are.

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Come on, Xena. Everyone has fond childhood memories of the Winter Solstice.

XENA (turns to her):

Well...some of mine aren't so fond.

GABRIELLE (her smile fades):

Xena...I'm sorry, I didn't--

XENA (smiles sadly and shakes her head):

It's okay. It's such a stupid thing, really. (looks away) See, Mom was a big believer in the Solstice spirit. She was always doing things for those who had less than we did--giving them food or shelter, helping them in any way she could. So, one Solstice Eve when I was eight, she let a poor old man who was passing through Amphipolis stay at our house. She invited him to dinner with us, and after dinner we all sat and sang Solstice songs together...

GABRIELLE:

And then--?

XENA:

And then Solstice morning came, and Toris, Lyceus and I woke up--and the old man was gone and so were all of our unopened Solstice gifts. (chuckles bitterly) So much for the Solstice spirit.

GABRIELLE (puts a hand on her shoulder):

I'm sorry. (smiles) But you know what? We're going to make this the best Solstice ever and help you put it all behind you.

XENA (smiles back at her):

Yeah, with all the other things from the past I've had to put behind me, this one should be easy.

GABRIELLE (looks at her inquisitively):

Is there something else bothering you?

XENA:

No...not really. (off Gabrielle's knowing look) Oh all right--when we were all sitting around the fireplace, I was remembering...

GABRIELLE (gently):

Remembering what?

XENA (shakes her head, embarrassed):

The farm...

GABRIELLE (with an understanding smile):

Well, Xena, if you're going to date the God of War you'd better not expect any cozy Solstice evenings at the fireplace with your boyfriend.

XENA (laughs softly):

Yeah...

Eve comes in.

EVE:

So. What are we going to do about the tree?

XENA:

Good question.

EVE:

Sarah said there was a pine-tree grove not far from the village. Maybe we can get a tree there?

GABRIELLE (shocked):

Not the Grove of the Nymphs!

XENA:

Why not?

GABRIELLE:

It's a local tradition that we don't cut down those trees...they're supposed to be sacred to the nymphs. (apologetically) I may not believe in such things anymore, but it's just not right to go in there and cut down--

XENA (wryly):

An innocent tree?

GABRIELLE:

Oh, go ahead and laugh. (indignant) The Winter Solstice is all about celebrating the rebirth of nature, and you want us to celebrate it by despoiling the natural beauty of a grove.

XENA:

So? The natural beauty of the grove will be poorer by one tree. (shrugs) You've seen one tree, you've seen 'em all.

GABRIELLE (throws up her arms in dismay):

Xena! What do you think would happen if everyone thought the way you do?

XENA (unperturbed):

I know what would happen if you thought the way I do. We'd have a tree for Solstice.

EVE (looks uncertainly from Xena to Gabrielle):

Gabrielle...you did promise Darion a tree. We want him to have a good Solstice, don't we?

Gabrielle looks at her, obviously wavering.

XENA (grins):

Grove of the Nymphs, here we come.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

Oh all right...we'll go out there in the morning and get a tree. (looks at Xena and smiles) I promised you, too, didn't I?

XENA:

Promised what?

GABRIELLE:

That we'll have the best Solstice ever.

Xena comes up to Gabrielle and Eve and puts her arms around their shoulders.

XENA (smiles warmly):

I know we will. (squeezes their shoulders and lets go) Now let's turn in. It's been a long day.

As they head toward the door, it swings open and Haimon comes in, carrying a load of firewood.

HAIMON:

Hey. I thought the fire could use a little more feeding.

He throws a couple of logs on the fire, which flares more brightly, lighting his and Gabrielle's faces.

XENA:

Thanks, Haimon. Good night.

EVE:

Good night, Haimon.

Xena and Eve leave. Gabrielle and Haimon stand by the fireplace and continue to stare into the fire.

GABRIELLE:

Haimon? (Haimon turns his head and looks at her, expectantly and a little anxiously. She reaches out and takes his hands) Thank you for taking care of Darion.

They continue to hold hands, gazing at each other in the firelight, as we:

FADE OUT

ACT TWO

FADE IN

The kitchen in Lila and Sarah's house. It's morning and the sky in the window is bright blue. Xena, Gabrielle, Haimon, Eve, Darion, and Lila are sitting around a table laden with bread, fruit and pancakes, huddled rather closely because the table is too small for such a large crowd. Darion is sitting between Gabrielle and Haimon. Sarah comes in carrying a pitcher and starts pouring milk into cups.

SARAH:

So, you've decided to go out and get a tree at the Grove of the Nymphs.

GABRIELLE (makes a face):

Don't rub it in. (with a forced smile) At least it'll be an adventure.

XENA (wryly):

Yeah, maybe some nymphs will come after us and we'll have to kick their butts.

EVE:

Gabrielle, I almost forgot. You said something about a surprise.

DARION (looks up, animated):

We're going to have a surprise?

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Wait and see. It could be here any minute.

DARION:

Can I go out with you to get the tree?

GABRIELLE:

Sure you can. (points to the cup) If you finish your milk.

Darion picks up the cup and takes a sip, then makes a face and spits it back out.

DARION:

Ewww! The milk tastes gross.

GABRIELLE (sternly):

Darion! Sweetie, that was *not* a nice thing to say.

DARION:

I'm just telling the truth. You try it.

GABRIELLE:

You know it's perfectly good milk. Sarah just milked the cow this (tastes the milk in her cup, then

winces and finishes with her face scrunched up) morning. (looks at Sarah) He's right. The milk is sour.

SARAH (amazed):

Can't be--I got it less than an hour ago. (sniffs at her milk, then sticks out her tongue and tastes it carefully) Well...yes, it is. Sorry about that. We'll just have to do with water, then.

She takes the cups and pours the milk back in the pitcher, then goes to rinse the cups in a basin. There is a knock on the door.

DARION (excited):

Hey, we have more guests!

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Maybe that's the surprise.

Lila rises from the table. Gabrielle follows her.

CUT TO

The front door of the house. Lila opens the door. Standing on the porch is Virgil with his brother and sister--Kara, who looks about thirteen, and Theon, who looks about eleven--at his side. They are all wearing coats.

GABRIELLE (beams):

Virgil! I'm so glad you could come.

VIRGIL:

Thanks for the invitation, Gabrielle.

Virgil and Gabrielle hug.

GABRIELLE (to Lila):

Lila, this is my good friend Virgil--he's Joxer's son...you remember Joxer, right?

LILA:

Sure. A pleasure to meet you.

GABRIELLE:

And his brother and sister, Kara and Theon. Well, come on in.

CUT TO

The kitchen. Gabrielle comes in followed by Virgil, Kara and Theon, now without their coats.

EVE (looks pleased but also a little taken aback):

Virgil! (smiles at the children) And Kara and Theon. (to Gabrielle) So that was your surprise?

GABRIELLE:

Yeah--I wrote to Virgil in Athens and asked him to come spend Solstice with us.

EVE (quietly):

Good to see you again, Virgil.

VIRGIL:

You too, Eve.

Close-ups of Virgil's and Eve's faces as they look at each other a little tensely, then smile.

CUT TO

The main room in the house, where everyone is sitting around the fireplace. The sounds of children shouting and laughing are heard from the outside.

CUT TO

The yard outside. Darion, Kara and Theon are running around playing ball.

CUT TO

Inside the main room.

SARAH (looks out the window, a little wistfully):

Darion is such a great kid, Gabrielle. You're lucky to have him.

GABRIELLE (nods pensively):

Yeah...I know.

XENA (rises to her feet):

So...why don't we go out and get that tree.

EVE:

I think I'll stay here and help decorate the house.

VIRGIL:

That's a great idea. I can help too.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon, wearing their warm clothing, come out of the house. Gabrielle goes over to Darion, who is running around with Kara and Theon still playing ball. She talks to him while Xena and Haimon watch (we don't hear what she's saying). Darion shakes his head and goes back to playing with Kara and Theon while Gabrielle rejoins Xena and Haimon and they walk toward the barn behind the house.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon walk into the barn.

HAIMON:

I guess Darion is really taken with his new friends.

GABRIELLE (nods):

It's good for him to be around other kids.

They walk up to their horses and Xena rubs Argo's muzzle.

XENA:

Hey, girl--good morning. (Argo neighs) I've got good news for you. We're going out for a little ride.

Argo nuzzles Xena. Xena smiles, then pauses with a puzzled look on her face as she notices that Argo's mane has been braided.

XENA (looks strangely at Argo):

Well, that's weird. (bringing Argo out into the light, she notices that her tail has been braided too) And this is even weirder.

GABRIELLE:

What?

XENA:

Argo's had a visit from a hairdresser.

GABRIELLE (looks at her horse):

Not just Argo. Look at this.

HAIMON:

It's all the horses.

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Personally, I think it looks kind of pretty.

Xena rolls her eyes and Argo whinnies and tosses her head.

XENA (chuckles):

Argo obviously disagrees with you.

HAIMON:

Why would anyone do such a thing?

XENA:

Bad taste?

GABRIELLE:

Look, it's obviously a prank. Why worry about it? Let's just go.

XENA:

Oh no. You may want to go out there on a horse that looks like an over-pampered lapdog, but you can count me out. (Argo whinnies indignantly) You're not going out there looking like that, are you, girl? (Argo whinnies again; Xena looks at Gabrielle and Haimon) See, she said no.

Xena starts to unbraid Argo's mane.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon riding through the streets of Potidaea.

CUT TO

Outside Lila's house. Eve and Virgil are decorating the house, hanging up ivy, ribbons, and long strings with sparkling pieces of glass and metal on them. The glass and metal sparkles brightly in the sun. The children are playing in the yard, occasionally stopping to watch Eve and Virgil decorating. They glance at each other until Virgil breaks the silence.

VIRGIL:

So, Eve...is this the first time you're spending Solstice with your mother and Gabrielle?

EVE (her eyes seem to mist up a little):

Yes, it is. (she smiles fondly, remembering) But you know, I loved Solstice time when I was young. Larus and I would always stay awake late on Solstice Eve waiting until our parents... (sighs) ...well, my adoptive parents...went to sleep, and then we'd sneak out of our bedroom and take a peek at our gifts without them knowing. That was so much fun. (her smile grows wistful) That is, until our parents caught us one night--after that, they started hiding the gifts in places we couldn't find them.

VIRGIL (gives her a surprised, warm look):

Really? You're not going to believe this but the exact same thing happened to me when I was a kid. I used to get up at night and take a peek at my gifts until my parents caught me and started hiding them.

Eve and Virgil smile at each other, then grow clearly uncomfortable at the mention of parents as the implications of this sink in. They turn away and continue to hang up a string of sparkling decorations around the door.

EVE:

I guess everyone has their favorite Solstice memories from childhood.

VIRGIL (smiles):

Mine actually has something to do with your mother.

EVE (surprised):

My mother? But you didn't even know her--

VIRGIL:

When I was five, my father... (he stumbles and gives Eve an uncomfortable look)

EVE (softly):

Go on, Virgil. I--I want to hear this.

VIRGIL (clears his throat):

...my father read me one of Gabrielle's scrolls for the first time. It was the Solstice story one about how Xena and Gabrielle helped an embittered king change his ways and find the Solstice spirit, and how they saved an orphanage. It was a beautiful story. (he smiles) I remember I was so captivated by it--right away, I knew I wanted to become a writer just like Gabrielle.

EVE:

You knew what you wanted to be when you were *five*?

VIRGIL (smiles a little shyly):

Yeah, I guess I did.

EVE:

Well, I'm glad to see you stuck by your goals.

VIRGIL:

I try to. It's just that, between working at the shop and taking care of Kara and Theon, I haven't had much time for writing--not as much as I'd like to.

EVE (gives him a guilty glance):

It's tough for you--doing it all on your own, isn't it.

VIRGIL:

It's all right. (gives her a slightly forced smile) But I do write. Maybe one of these days I'll write something for you.

EVE (pensively):

For me... (she looks at Virgil and smiles) I'm really glad Gabrielle invited you, Virgil.

VIRGIL:

I'm glad you're here.

CUT TO

Outside Potidaea, Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon are riding along a road through the hills.

GABRIELLE:

We're close now--the grove is right over that hill.

The camera follows Xena, Gabrielle and Eve as they climb the hill and reach its top. They stop. The camera pans to their faces as they look down in amazement and dismay. Then it pans to the view below the hill.

There is a large patch of what obviously used to be a grove, but now there are only tree stumps left, as well as some evergreen branches and twigs lying around on the ground.

GABRIELLE (stares in dismay):

The Grove of the Nymphs...

XENA:

Obviously, the nymphs weren't doing a very good job of looking out for it.

GABRIELLE:

Xena! This isn't funny!

XENA:

No, of course not. We still don't have a solstice tree.

HAIMON:

Obviously, other people who couldn't get a tree on the market had the same idea.

GABRIELLE:

All right, call me an idealist--

XENA (chuckles):

--oh, we will.

GABRIELLE:

--but I can't believe the people in Potidaea would do this.

XENA (gives her a thoughtful look):

Maybe they didn't. Let's take a look at the crime scene, shall we?

HAIMON:

What do you think you're going to find?

XENA:

I don't know yet.

She gives Argo a nudge in the sides and rides down the hill. Gabrielle and Haimon exchange a puzzled glance and follow her.

Downhill, Xena dismounts and walks around, staring at the ground, while Gabrielle and Haimon remain in the saddle, waiting patiently.

XENA:

Aha!

GABRIELLE:

What?

XENA (looks up with a triumphant grin):

There's something to be said for cold weather.

GABRIELLE (runs her shoulders under the coat, her teeth chattering slightly):

I'm glad to hear that.

XENA (points to the ground):

Look at that. The ground was muddy when somebody made a footprint here. Then the freeze came, and here it is--perfectly preserved.

GABRIELLE (rides closer):

And this footprint tells you what?

XENA (suddenly very businesslike, mounts Argo in a swift motion):

We've got to track down those guys who were selling trees at the market yesterday.

HAIMON:

We don't even know which way they went.

XENA:

We'll find out. Come on, you two--we've got a job to do.

GABRIELLE:

But Xena, it's--

XENA:

Yah!

She takes off at a gallop over the top of the hill.

GABRIELLE (finishes into the empty air):

--Solstice Eve.

She turns to Haimon and shrugs, helplessly turning up her palms in a "what can you do" gesture, as we:

FADE OUT

ACT THREE

FADE IN

Inside Lila and Sarah's house, where the main room now looks very festive, decorated with ivy, holly, wreaths and ribbons. Virgil and Eve, assisted by Darion, are finishing putting up the decorations; they are fixing up a string of glass and metal beads around the window. There is a fire burning in the fireplace. Outside, it's already getting dark.

VIRGIL:

Almost done.

DARION (enthusiastic):

I love decorating for Solstice. (steps back and looks around) Now we just need the tree.

EVE:

Don't worry, that's coming soon. (chuckles) You know how Mother is when she puts her mind to something.

VIRGIL (chuckles):

Yeah, Xena always gets her bad guy. Or her Solstice tree.

Lila and Sarah come in, followed by Kara and Theon.

SARAH:

How are you doing here? We're all finished decorating the rest of the house.

EVE:

So are we.

LILA:

I'm just going to light these candles here.

She goes up to the fireplace where some small candles are lined up and starts to light them.

SARAH (looks out the window):

I don't know what's taking them so long... The grove isn't that far away. They should have been back at least an hour ago.

LILA:

I hope they didn't run into trouble.

EVE (chuckles):

If they did, Trouble had better watch out.

CUT TO

Telemos' wagon is rolling down the road, accompanied by five men while the sixth is driving the wagon. It has started snowing lightly again.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon galloping down the road in hot pursuit. Telemos' wagon and its escort are visible in the distance.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon catch up with the wagon and slow down.

XENA:

All right, boys. We need to see some ID.

MAN #1 (glares at her):

Huh?

MAN #2:

What are you talking about? What ID?

XENA:

The one on the soles of your boss's boots.

MAN #1 (to the driver of the wagon):

Never mind her. She's crazy.

XENA (suavely):

You know, people who say that usually regret it...

She yanks on the reins of the horse pulling the wagon, bringing it to an abrupt half. Man #1 draws his sword and is about to attack her when she elbows him in the chest with her left arm; as he doubles over gasping, she punches him in the face with a backward blow, knocking him off his horse.

XENA:

--if they live long enough.

MAN #2:

Hey! What do you think you're doing? (reaches for his sword)

XENA:

Let me show you.

She grabs him, head-butts him and throws him off his horse at another one of the riders. Both of the men go tumbling down. Haimon points his sword at one of the two remaining men and Gabrielle draws her sais.

Taking advantage of the fact that Xena has let go of the reins, the driver of the wagon flicks the reins to get the horse to move again. Xena grabs the reins from him and, with a warning gesture, lifts her fist clutching the reins to the driver's face.

XENA:

Anyone else need more explaining? (looks around, smiling brightly) Good. Now, where were we?

TELEMOS (sticks his head out the wagon):

What's going on?

XENA:

Oh yeah--now I remember. (she releases the reins, shooting a warning look at the driver, and rides up to Telemos with a nasty smile) Listen, Telemos, back at the market last night, I couldn't help noticing what nice boots you had. Mind if I take a look?

TELEMOS (gapes at her):

Are you insane?

GABRIELLE:

Maybe you could save yourself a lot of trouble and answer a simple question. Did you and your friends chop down the trees in the Grove of the Nymphs?

TELEMOS (his eyes shifting):

I don't know what you're talking about.

XENA:

Well, then you don't have any cause to worry.

She grabs Telemos by the collar, shoves him back so that his feet are in the air, and yanks off one of his boots. She examines the sole, grins broadly and shows the boot to Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE:

Yeah, that's the one. (sighs and shakes her head as she looks at Telemos, who sits up with an indignant look on his face) Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

XENA:

So you burned down the tree farm, chopped down the grove and sold the trees to the villagers. (shakes her head) And you were stupid enough to do it in fancy boots.

CUT TO

The house. The main room is fully decorated now and Lila is lighting a row of candles lined up on the fireplace.

LILA (steps back):
All right, that's it.

SARAH:
Everything looks great.

DARION (points to the window):
Hey, look! It's snowing again!

While everyone looks in the window, a strange breeze blows through the room. The candles flicker and go out, and so do the flames in the fireplace, leaving the room half-dark. A faint sound that vaguely resembles cackling is heard. The children cry out in fright.

KARA:
What was that?

LILA:
I have no idea. Maybe a gust of wind--

SARAH:
From where? All the doors and windows are closed.

LILA:
Not to worry, I'll just light it again.

She lights the candles, then uses one of them to restart the fire in the fireplace. The same cackling sound is heard again, this time louder.

DARION (uneasily):
I'm scared.

SARAH:
Don't worry, it's probably just the wind.

EVE:
It sounded like it was someone--or something--in the house.

CUT TO

Xena, Gabrielle and Haimon riding through Potidaea, past the marketplace. The sun is setting and the winter sky has an almost silver hue. Large snowflakes are falling, swirling in the air.

HAIMON (to Xena, somewhat awed):
I can't believe you remembered what Telemos' boot-print looked like, just from seeing it once in the fresh snow.

Xena looks pleased.

GABRIELLE (teasing):

She's about to tell you she has many skills.

XENA:

There's nothing to it. It's just a matter of knowing how to focus.

As they ride past a house, the lights go out in the windows and exclamations of surprise and annoyance are heard from inside.

GABRIELLE (sighs):

Well, we've delivered Telemos and his gang to the magistrate, but we still don't have a Solstice tree. (jokingly to Xena) Maybe if you focus really hard, you can scare one up for us.

XENA (not amused):

Very funny.

Once again, the lights in the window in a house they are riding past go out, and shouts are heard from inside the house. A woman's voice is heard saying, "What's going on?"

A faint shadow, only slightly darker than the smoke, floats out of the chimney of the house and down to the ground, then glides away as Xena looks on in amazement. A second shadow floats off the wall of another house ahead of them, in which the windows have also gone dark.

XENA:

Look--what's that? (points to the shadows, which have already melted away into the snow)

GABRIELLE (peers into the near-darkness):

I don't see anything.

HAIMON:

Neither do I.

XENA:

What did I say about learning how to focus?

CUT TO

Inside Lila and Sarah's house. Everyone seems to be having a good time: Virgil and Eve are sitting on two chairs near the fireplace talking quietly, while the children are sitting on the rug on the floor eating nuts from a large plate.

LILA (comes in carrying a tray with clay mugs on it):

Hot cider for everyone!

Suddenly, a strange breeze seems to blow through the room again. Virgil and Eve look up. The children stop eating and look around, alarmed.

Two barely visible bluish-gray shadows materialize in the room and glide through it so quickly that they are barely visible. They sweep over the candles on the mantelpiece, extinguishing them, and

then through the fireplace where the fire instantly goes out. They melt into the near-darkness, and once again a faint cackling sound is heard. Lila cries out and drops the tray, which falls with a loud clatter. The children scream. Eve runs over to hug Darion and Virgil hugs Kara and Theon.

EVE:

Don't worry, Darion--everything will be all right.

SARAH (runs in):

What happened?

KARA:

The candles and the fire went out again!

DARION:

Did you see them?

SARAH:

Them?

THEON:

Those--*things!*

LILA (in a trembling voice):

I think we have ghosts in the house!

VIRGIL:

Just keep calm, everyone. Let's light the candles.

THEON (fretfully):

They'll just put them out again!

As Eve starts lighting the candles, a door is heard slamming and everyone turns around, startled.

XENA (off-camera):

We're back!

LILA (sighs):

Oh...thank the Gods!

DARION:

Gabrielle!

He races toward Gabrielle just as she comes into the room with Haimon. Darion grabs her hands, frightened.

GABRIELLE (concerned, squats down and puts her hands on his shoulders):

What's the matter, sweetie? Did somebody scare you?

DARION (scrunches up his face, trying not to cry):

The ghosts.

GABRIELLE (frowns):

Ghosts?

SARAH:

We've had the candles and the fire go out a couple of times.

EVE:

We definitely saw something here. A couple of shadows or something, moving around the room. They passed through the fireplace and the fire went out that instant.

XENA (comes in):

I saw them too--out in the street. If it's ghosts, then the whole village has got them. There've been lights going out in a lot of houses.

VIRGIL:

What sorts of ghosts would go around putting out candles and fires?

Gabrielle stands up, patting Darion on the head, and gives Virgil a thoughtful look. Then, her eyes light up suddenly.

GABRIELLE:

I've got it! Xena, remember how all the horses' manes and tails were braided this morning?

XENA (rolls her eyes):

You're telling me these ghosts did that too?

GABRIELLE:

Wait, wait...I'm trying to remember...something else happened today that was odd...

EVE (teasing):

You and Mother spent a whole day without chasing any bad guys?

XENA:

Wrong. (off Eve's surprised look) I'll tell you later.

LILA:

How about the milk turning sour this morning?

GABRIELLE:

Yes! That's it! They're not ghosts at all--they're Kallikantzaroi.

XENA (frowns):

Kallika-what?

GABRIELLE:

Kallikantzaroi--spirits that come out only during Solstice time. They're mischievous creatures--they like to cause trouble and play pranks. Like putting out fires, braiding horses' tails, souring milk...

SARAH (curious):

How do you know that?

GABRIELLE (a little smugly):

Sometimes, book-learning pays off. (smiles) There was this scroll I read once about ghosts and spirits. I didn't even know if the Kallikantzaroi really existed--I thought they could just be a folk tale. Well, apparently, they do.

DARION:

Are they scary?

GABRIELLE:

Not really. They don't hurt people--they just like to play pranks. They like a good laugh.

EVE:

How do we get rid of them?

GABRIELLE:

There's no way to really get rid of them. Not until the Solstice is over, anyway. That's when they go back underground and stay there until next year. But there's a way to keep them out of our home... (she scrunches up her forehead, remembering) You have to burn salt outside the front door and next to the fireplace. Then the Kallikantzaroi can't get in--they're repelled by the scent of burning salt.

VIRGIL:

Then that's what we have to do.

LILA:

We need to tell the other people in the village, too.

CUT TO

Lila is on the front porch of the house, setting a pot of burning salt by the door. In the background, Xena, Gabrielle, Haimon, Eve and Virgil can be seen walking down the street knocking on doors.

DISSOLVE TO

The front porch later. It is night now. The snow has stopped falling but the branches of trees, the roofs, and the ground are blanketed in white. The moon is bright and the strings with beads of glass and metal that decorate the house are sparkling in the moonlight. There are lights in the windows of Lila's house. Lights can be seen in other windows down the street too. The pot of salt stands by the door, wisps of smoke still rising from it.

The camera pans around the house to one of the windows. From the outside, we see Xena standing by the window, looking pensively outside.

CUT TO

Inside the room. Xena is looking out the window at the white snow that blankets the ground and the trees, and at the lights burning in the windows. Gabrielle comes up to her.

GABRIELLE:

What are you doing?

XENA:

It looks like your remedy worked. We've taken care of the Ka...the spirits.

GABRIELLE (stands next to Xena, looking out the window with her):

Yeah.

XENA (pensively):

I haven't seen snow like this in many years.

GABRIELLE:

It's beautiful, isn't it?

XENA (smiles):

You're asking me? I'm not the one who likes to get all poetic about the beauty of nature.

GABRIELLE (smiles):

I think you appreciate it more than you admit.

XENA (after a brief pause):

You know something funny? Remember that story I told you, about how the old man stayed at our house in Amphipolis on Solstice Eve and then our Solstice gifts disappeared the next morning?

GABRIELLE:

Sure.

XENA:

Well, I just remembered that the candles in our house kept going out that evening--and when Mother and I went to the barn in the morning, the cow's tail was tied in a knot.

GABRIELLE:

You had Kallikantzaroi in the house.

XENA:

Do you suppose they might have--

GABRIELLE:

That's right! That's another thing they do sometimes--steal Solstice gifts.

XENA (chuckles):

So maybe that old man didn't steal our Solstice after all.

GABRIELLE (smiles):

Are you saying that you just got your faith in the spirit of Solstice back?

XENA (smiles at her warmly):

Yeah, thanks to you. After all this time, you're still helping me see the good in everything.

They hug, then break their embrace, looking tenderly at each other.

GABRIELLE (obviously moved):

I told you this was going to be the best Solstice ever.

XENA (smiles, trying to control her emotions):
Maybe.

Darion pokes his head in.

DARION:
Hey, Gabrielle--what happened to that tree you were going to bring?

XENA (her smile fades):
Or maybe not.

A close-up on the worried look on Gabrielle's face as we:

FADE OUT

ACT FOUR

FADE IN

The same scene as before.

GABRIELLE:
Darion, I'm really sorry... I'm afraid some bad people took all the trees.

Darion looks upset, then his face lights up suddenly.

DARION:
Why don't you ask Ares to get one? I bet he could. He's got all sorts of tricks.

XENA:
Powers.

GABRIELLE (looks at Xena a little mischievously):
You know, Darion has a point.

XENA (brusquely):
Gabrielle, I'm not going to call on Ares just so he can get us a Solstice tree. We're talking about the God of War here.

A familiar blue light flares up. When it clears, Ares is seen sitting in a chair.

ARES:
You are?

XENA (sighs):
Hello, Ares.

DARION (overjoyed):

Ares! Can you get us a tree for Solstice?

XENA (firmly):

He's not going to get us a tree for Solstice.

ARES (gets up and gives her a playful look):

Worried about ruining my reputation?

XENA (chuckles):

Maybe.

GABRIELLE (teasing):

She's right, you know. At this rate, you'll be rescuing cats from trees next.

ARES (points a finger at her in pretend outrage):

Hey, hey, hey. I don't have to take that from *you*. (turns to Xena) So. You want a tree or not?

Darion opens his mouth but Xena glares at him and he stays quiet.

ARES:

I mean, if you do, just say the word. I've got an eye on this great tree on a rock on Mount Athos. It's about three hundred years old...

DARION:

Wow!

GABRIELLE (in dismay):

What! You want to cut down a three-hundred-year-old tree on a mountain peak? What a horrible--

ARES (grins):

Thanks for the extra incentive. (to Darion) Come on, kid. I'm going to teach you something about the spirit of Solstice.

Before anyone can say a word, he sweeps Darion up in his arms and vanishes in a flash. The sound of Darion's excited squeal hangs in the air.

XENA (looks at a distressed Gabrielle and shrugs):

Well, it was your idea...

CUT TO

A moonlit rock high in the mountains where a lonely tree stands. There is a flash of light; Ares appears with Darion in his arms and sets him down on the ground.

ARES:

All right. Now watch. This is what we do with trees.

He raises his hand, taking aim.

ARES:

Bang. You're dead.

He shoots a lightning bolt from his hand, neatly slicing off the upper half of the tree just below the branches. The tree sways and falls.

CUT TO

The same room as before. Ares appears in a flash of light with Darion on his right arm and the tree under his left. He puts down the tree by the wall.

ARES (grins, putting down Darion):

At your service.

Xena responds to his grin with a mischievous half-smile.

GABRIELLE (distressed):

Did this tree actually stand on a mountain?

DARION (excited):

Yeah, it sure did! It was really exciting! (raises his arm) Ares just did like this and--

GABRIELLE (sighs):

All right, all right. I don't want to hear the details. (glares at Ares) If it's here, we might as well decorate it.

ARES (smirks at her):

You're welcome.

Gabrielle goes out of the room, dragging the tree with her.

DARION (to Ares):

Hey, merry Solstice! (runs out of the room after Gabrielle, shouting) Hey, everyone, we got a tree!

Left alone, Ares and Xena stand facing each other at close range, looking at each other silently.

XENA (smiles a little):

I can't believe it...you actually gave me a Solstice gift.

ARES:

What, that? It was just a chance to kill something on Solstice Eve. Even if it was only a tree.

XENA (teasing):

Must be a tough time of the year for you, with all the talk about the spirit of peace...

ARES (makes a face):

Awful. But hey, I appreciate *some*things about Solstice...

XENA:

Like what?

ARES:

Like you and me being under the mistletoe right now.

XENA (raises an eyebrow):

No, we're not.

ARES:

Yes, we are. Look.

He moves his finger. A twig of mistletoe fixed over the door detaches itself from the door frame, floats through the air and hovers right over Ares and Xena. Xena looks up, smiles and shakes her head. They come closer and melt into a tender, passionate kiss. Still locked in a kiss, they sink down on their knees on the rug.

The camera pans to Eve, who comes up to the door and stops short as she sees Xena and Ares kissing. She looks troubled. In a moment she turns and walks away.

CUT TO

Eve walking in the hallway. Virgil comes up to her, a clay mug in each hand.

VIRGIL:

Lila's serving mulled wine--I thought you might want some.

EVE:

Thanks. (she takes one mug from him and starts to sip the wine, an absent look on her face)

VIRGIL:

Is something wrong?

EVE (distracted):

What? Uh--no. I was just going outside to get some air, that's all.

Still sipping the wine, she walks away into the anteroom, grabs her coat, which is hanging on a hook by the front door, and walks out. Virgil watches her as she goes, looking somewhat concerned.

CUT TO

Xena and Ares pull apart from their kiss, the mistletoe still hanging in the air over them. They open their eyes and smile at each other.

ARES:

See you soon.

He vanishes in a flash of light. The twig of mistletoe floats down gently into Xena's lap. She picks it up and looks at it pensively.

CUT TO

Eve standing on the porch. The snow has started to fall again. Eve stands silently, watching the snow fall and sipping the wine. The door behind her is heard opening and Virgil steps out, with his warm coat on as well. They stand silently for a few moments.

VIRGIL:

So, is this Solstice everything you thought it would be?

EVE (with a faint smile):

It is. It's good to spend this time of the year with family and friends. I haven't done it in a long time...if ever.

VIRGIL (looks at Eve who still has the distant look on her face):

But something is bothering you.

EVE:

Not really. It's just...I've got some things on my mind. (after a pause, she turns to him and smiles again) I shouldn't shut you out. All right, it's seeing my mother and Ares together. It just...feels strange.

VIRGIL (nods and looks down):

Oh. (looks up again) Are you still--

EVE (vehemently):

No! It's not that at all. It's more that... (sighs) ...it was so tempting to blame him for everything I had become, everything I did (her voice drops) as Livia. Including-- (her voice breaks off)

VIRGIL:

Eve... (he touches her hand)

EVE (quietly):

How can you bear to touch me?

VIRGIL:

Eve...Solstice is supposed to be a time of forgiveness and renewal. You've found a new life, and you and I have come a long way toward finding forgiveness. Maybe now is the time for us to reach the end of that path.

They turn and look at each other, staring into each other's eyes, and start leaning closer to each other very slowly. Then they stop.

EVE (softly):

Are you sure?

Instead of replying, Virgil leans even closer until their lips touch, and they share a brief but tender kiss. The camera pulls back to show them kissing against the snowy backdrop. Almost immediately, they pull back and look into each other's eyes, only now fully realizing what has happened. They seem confused and slightly embarrassed; finally they smile at each other.

VIRGIL:

Why don't we go back inside--you must be getting cold.

EVE (smiles at him):

I'm not.

They stand still for another moment. Then Virgil gestures for them to go inside and they do so, Eve going inside first and Virgil following.

CUT TO

The main room. The Solstice tree is fully decorated now, with gifts wrapped in brightly colored fabric lying under the tree. A large table has been brought into the room; it is laden with food--roasted meats, vegetables, bread, fruit, sweets--and drink. Everyone is sitting around the table. The camera pans around the table to show Xena saying something to Eve; Virgil putting food on Kara's and Theon's plates and then talking quietly to Eve; Gabrielle stopping Darion from reaching for sweets and pointing to the plates with meat and vegetables first; Haimon putting a choice cut of roasted goose on Darion's plate; Lila and Sarah looking happily at the gathering at their table.

Everyone is talking and laughing, the voices blending together. The camera moves back in the room to show everyone at the table, passing food around and eating. The sound of laughing and talking echoes through the house.

DISSOLVE TO

The same room, late at night. The festive noise fades away. The fire in the fireplace has almost burned out, a few flames still flickering amidst the glowing embers. A couple of candles are still burning on the mantelpiece. Everyone is gone except for Gabrielle and Haimon, who are finishing cleaning up the table.

GABRIELLE:

That should be about it. (smiles at Haimon) Thank you for helping out.

HAIMON:

Thank *you* for the best Solstice I've ever had. Good night, Gabrielle.

Haimon puts his arms around her. Gabrielle is stiff until gradually her body begins to relax and she rests her cheek on his chest. Haimon tenderly strokes her hair.

GABRIELLE:

This is nice.

HAIMON:

It is. Too bad that it has to end.

Gabrielle pulls back to look up at him, startled. Haimon chuckles ruefully.

HAIMON:

This *is* the part where we both agree that we're not ready to be together yet, isn't it?

GABRIELLE (sighs):

Haimon, you don't know how badly I want to say yes to you. But it wouldn't be right. It would seem too much like I was running away from my problems. Something's been going on inside me for a long

time that I haven't wanted to face. I can't do that anymore. It wouldn't be fair to you--and I know it wouldn't be right for me.

HAIMON (nods sadly):

I know. I think I knew that even before what happened with Taphius...even back in Corinth. Being here with your family made me realize how much I've missed having one of my own. I guess I wanted to be part of something like that so badly that I was trying to push us into something before we were ready for it.

GABRIELLE (strokes his cheek):

You'll always be family, Haimon--no matter what happens.

HAIMON:

I know.

He kisses the top of her head and remains pensively silent a long moment.

HAIMON:

I love you, Gabrielle.

GABRIELLE (nods shyly and looks away):

I know...

HAIMON:

Some day we're going to be together.

GABRIELLE (nods again, still not meeting his eyes):

I know that too.

They stay still, his cheek resting on the top of her head, their eyes closed, as the last flames behind them flicker out in the fireplace.

CUT TO

Gabrielle returning to her bedroom with a candle in hand. She puts down the candle on a nightstand by her bed, sits down on the cot where Darion lies fast asleep, and looks at him wistfully, then bends down to kiss his forehead. The camera pans over to Xena, who lies asleep in her bed. As the camera moves in closer, we see that lying on Xena's open palm on the pillow is the twig of mistletoe.

FADE OUT

THE END

[The Ancient Greece Conservation Society attests that no actual trees were killed or otherwise harmed during the production of this motion picture.]