

# ~ She Who Talks to the Air ~

by Carole Giorgio

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**Spoiler Disclaimer:** If you have not seen *A Friend in Need* and do not want to be spoiled - **DO NOT READ THIS STORY**, come back after you have seen the final episode of *Xena Warrior Princess*.

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## Epilogue to *A Friend In Need*

There were few passengers on the ship headed south to the Land of the Pharaohs. The crew was getting used to the solemn face of the young woman who stood alone for candlemarks on end looking out to sea and talking to herself. The men would shake their heads as they passed, and all kept their distance out of fear that her affliction might be contagious. She seemed rational enough when asking questions or eating meals, but when she stood alone on the deck of the ship, she frightened the crew.

At times, forgetting that no one else could see Xena, Gabrielle would begin to argue with her, scaring the crew even more. "You talked me out of joining you, Xena, saying we would not end up in the same afterlife if I did that, and I know you can hear my thoughts. Because of that you know I'm not going to give up on bringing you back to me in this lifetime, and I'll not try to hide those feelings from you."

*You wouldn't be able to if you tried, Gabrielle. But listen, if a way can be found for me to return to you, without condemning the 40,000 souls we fought so hard to release into a state of grace, I will be the first to jump at the chance.* The bard felt a slight pressure on her shoulder, and her skin tingled at her lover's touch.

"These ashes are all I have left of you, Xena, these and the chakram. I will eventually take the ashes to Amphipolis, but not now."

*No, my Love, you have so much more than just the ashes and the chakram. I'm here with you as I promised. Even in death, Gabrielle, I will never leave you.*

"But you also promised never to die on me again."

*We both know that was a promise neither of us could truly keep. It wasn't our decision to make.*

"Actually, it was, Xena. You could have come back to me."

*And you would have hated yourself for the rest of your life, and I would have hated myself for letting you do that. And you would have begun to hate me, too. No, Gabrielle, we had no choice but to have it end the way it did. It was the right thing to do, and it was definitely for the Greater Good. As difficult as it is to acknowledge, we did what was best, and what was truly noble.*

"At least I'm still able to see and touch you," the bard finally conceded.

*I know, Gabrielle, but others can't see me, and if you continue to talk out loud to yourself they'll begin to think you're crazy.* There was tenderness mixed with humor in the warrior's statement.

*I love you, Xena; I don't want to spend the rest of this incarnation here on earth without you by my side. There's still so much living to do. I don't think we were brought back from the dead only to have one of us die again so quickly. I always envisioned us finally settling down and living out our golden years in peace among the Amazons.*

*When the time comes for you to do that, my Love, I will be there with you.* Xena placed her arm around her lover's shoulders and drew her close. She kissed her gently on the head and whispered in her ear that their love had already transcended death. She would be as real to Gabrielle as if she had never left her.

That evening, as they lay side by side in the small cot in the cabin below deck, Gabrielle was slowly becoming accustomed to the fact that the only time Xena would truly be with her was when they were alone. After discarding thoughts of suicide, she had considered traveling to Lesbos and living on the outskirts of civilization. There she would have been able to interact with Xena whenever she wanted. But the warrior would constantly intrude on her thoughts when they became morbid and self-effacing. She would gently remind Gabrielle that there was still much to be done in the real world, and that there were many people who would benefit from the knowledge and skills of a warrior-bard.

The only thing that kept the bard sane on the long journey south was the fact that Xena was still with her in spirit. She cringed at the thought of her ability to see and touch her soulmate being taken away from her; the mere threat of that happening, if only in her mind, was enough to start the flow of tears burning down the face of the still-mourning bard.

"Gabrielle, please don't cry. We have more together like this than any other couple on earth. When most people lose a loved one to death they're truly gone. We're lucky that the laws of the cosmos have been broken because of the circumstances of my death. Although I'm not allowed to leave this realm because of the 40,000 souls I avenged and freed from damnation, I am allowed to be here with you. The only stipulation is that I must remain in the spirit world so that they can remain in a state of grace. But to you, I am as alive as if I were truly flesh, blood, and bone."

She held her lover close, caressing the trembling body that she yearned to make love to. She wanted to see the old light return to Gabrielle's face. She missed the childish glee that used to brighten her every day.

Drying her tears, Gabrielle looked into sapphire eyes that could still stop her heart, as they looked deep into her soul. She wanted Xena to hold her, to make love to her, to be everything she had ever been to her, and in her heart, she knew that it was truly a gift of the heavens that she would be allowed to have that desire fulfilled. But in her mind, she was still grieving and digesting the finality of their situation. If she had to go through her life being in love with a ghost, so be it. Xena was her whole life, and as long as she didn't lose her, that was all that mattered. As things stood, she knew that Xena would, indeed, be with her until her own death.

"I know I'm sounding selfish that I want things the way they used to be. But believe me, Xena, I'm truly thankful that you're still here with me. Tell me, where do you go when I'm sleeping?"

"Sometimes I just stay and hold you, and sometimes I travel the cosmos. Gabrielle, it's a wondrous place. We didn't get to explore when we died because we were always so busy fighting demons. But there are many beauties to behold and regions to explore while waiting to reincarnate."

Days passed uneventfully as the small ship continued its journey south. Each day found the bard more at peace with the reality she and her soulmate faced until she found the solution to bring Xena back to the land of the living and still atone for the deaths of the 40,000 souls.

Soon the land of desert, rivers, mountains, and pyramids was visible on the horizon. The seemingly solitary bard walked toward the gangplank, smiling to herself as she passed by the men on deck. She could hear their whisperings about "She who talks to the Air."

Xena and Gabrielle were not unknown names in the Land of the Pharaohs, but times had changed. Cleopatra's daughter, Cleopatra Selene, wife of King Juba II, had sent word that there was trouble in paradise, and Gabrielle arrived in Mauretania in answer to the plea for help.

"I don't know how they'll receive me without you along, Xena." Troubled green eyes looked up into thin air. "Don't do that!" she chided as Xena disappeared.

*Gabrielle, you must stop talking to me in public. If I have to become invisible to you for you to remember, then so be it.*

*I'll remember.* The bard's thoughts screamed at her lover. *Please, Xena, don't disappear on me. Just knowing that you are standing beside me will help see me through the initial meeting with Queen Cleopatra.*

*It's not like you don't know her, Gabrielle,* Xena retorted.

*I know, but it's been years. She's grown; I've grown; you're dead! How am I going to explain that I can do just as good a job without you when I'm not sure I can?*

*Listen, Gabrielle, what I have to tell you will make you feel better about tackling this task on your own. Because Yodoshi was such an evil presence, when I killed his spirit I was given several gifts. I have to remain dead for the time being, and although I cannot take my chakram and help you in your physical fights, Gabrielle, I am still able to be there with you, giving you my strength to add to your own. Your battles will still be my battles, as we go not side by side but truly hand in hand.*

The bard put a hand up to her mouth to stifle a gasp, *Oh, Xena, you don't know how much that means to me. You've given me confidence in myself, but I've never had to be totally on my own. I'm glad I won't ever have to be.*

*Believe me, you're not any happier than I am that I don't have to adhere to all the laws of the dead.*

They had reached the steps of the palace, and with the giving of her name, Gabrielle was led into the greeting chamber of the queen. Cleopatra was sitting on the throne with a confused look upon her face.

"Gabrielle, the guard only announced that you had arrived. Is Xena not with you?"

The small blonde swallowed the lump in her throat as she knelt respectfully at the foot of the throne. The younger woman swept her hand into the air indicating that the bard should rise up and stand before her.

"Queen Cleopatra." At the thought of speaking the next words out loud, Gabrielle could feel her stomach tighten into a knot. "Xena didn't make it through our last battle. She died while we were in Japan."

Visibly taken back by the statement, it took the queen a few seconds to reply. "I'm sorry to hear that, Gabrielle, but are you sure you can handle this crisis by yourself?"

"I will certainly try, but I'll need to know the nature of the problem before I can give you a better answer." Her spirits were beginning to weaken when she felt Xena's arm slip around her waist. All of a sudden her courage was awakened and she stood taller as she continued the conversation with the Mauretanii Queen.

The high priestess, standing slightly behind the queen's throne, gave the warrior-bard a strange look when the blonde's demeanor suddenly became more confident and warrior-like. She squinted as if she were trying to see what it was that had taken hold of the woman standing before the queen and what had caused her to change her posture so quickly.

"You are my honored guest, Gabrielle. I thank you for coming, and we can discuss the details over dinner this evening. I'm sure you're in need of some rest."

When she nodded her head, two servants appeared and ushered Gabrielle from the room and to her quarters in the palace. The rooms were lavishly furnished with a huge bed in one, a large bath in the other. She had a balcony that afforded a beautiful view of the city below.

After Gabrielle dismissed the women, she turned to Xena, who was standing in front of the mirror minus a reflection, making the bard cringe. She shivered and motioned for Xena to move away from the offending piece of furniture.

*Let's sit on the bed,* Xena suggested.

Gabrielle shook her head no.

*Oh, please, it's so soft and comfortable.* Xena pleaded.

"Xena, don't you understand . . ."

*I think you had better either keep your voice down or just think to me. You don't want to do the crazy warrior-bard thing here, now do you?*

Gabrielle lowered her voice and replied, "I don't think anyone can hear me through the door." She couldn't help but laugh as she walked over and plopped down on the soft bed. Lying with her head on one of the pillows she stared up at the ceiling. "This is really difficult to get used to, Xena. I see you and yet I can't talk openly to you because no one else can see you. It's only been a few moons, and sometimes I forget and fall back into thinking that you're still alive."

Xena continued to speak mentally to her lover, not wanting anyone to overhear her conversing with Gabrielle. *I am alive to you, my Love, but not to anyone else. Now come here and let me hold you.*

The bard didn't need a second invitation; she rolled over into an embrace that was as comforting as if Xena were actually alive. "Xena, how am I going to pull this off on my own? We've been a team for what seems like forever, and now . . ."

"We're still a team, Gabrielle; I've already told you I will be there with you in more than just spirit, and we'll talk about how you're going to rectify this situation." She stroked the soft flaxen hair as she had done so many times before and knew there were tears falling from the sea green eyes. Every time the bard cried the warrior's heart ached a little more. "We'll get through this, Gabrielle, we always do. Now stop crying; you've a banquet to attend. What do you say we take a nice warm bath?"

She didn't have to ask a second time. The women had informed Gabrielle that the tub was full, and without going into great detail, they had also informed her that through a complicated structure of pipes and steam, the water remained perpetually warm and renewed.

"Tell me something, Xena," Gabrielle asked while washing her hair. "If we do find a way to get us out of this predicament, are there any other acts you performed in the past that I need to know about? Is there anything that could put us back into this kind of situation, again?"

A crooked smile crossed the warrior's face, "No, Gabrielle, you know everything I know now."

"Good," came the singular answer as the bard dipped under the water to rinse her hair.

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That evening at the banquet honoring Gabrielle, Cleopatra explained the dilemma that had caused her to send for help. The king was out of town arranging for allies to assist, and the queen was a little concerned that without Xena things were going to be more difficult than she had expected.

Gabrielle listened as Cleo began the discussion. "As you know, Gabrielle, the river Molochath is the boundary between the territory of my people, the Mauretanii, and that of the Masaesyli. Both of our peoples are peace loving and nomadic by nature. But we are coming under attack by the Pharusii, who have come down from the lands north of our kingdoms. They have decided they want to settle and establish colonies along the fertile river. We are no match for their barbaric ways. They arm themselves with scythes, arrows, and swords, while our peoples are used to living peacefully alongside one another and carry only small lances and shields. To make matters worse, they greatly outnumber us. We are trying to form allies with adjacent territories, that's where my husband is as we speak. Do you think you'll be able to help us?"

"I don't see why not," the warrior-bard answered in her most confident tone. "I'll need to have a look at some maps of your kingdom and neighboring ones and have as close a count as possible of both your allies and enemies."

The women concluded that they would meet again in the morning to discuss these subjects. Cleopatra seemed pleased with the warrior-bard's answers and promised a full count of foes and friends as well as terrain and regional maps. They parted company and on the way back to the room, Gabrielle began talking to Xena. Occasionally she would forget to stop talking when someone passed them in the hallway, and the warrior would gently put a finger to her bard's lips to remind her that talking to one's self was a good way to end up in a loony bin.

There was much to be discussed after they arrived at Gabrielle's accommodations, and the bard was grateful to find a bottle of wine and a bowl of fruit that had been placed on the table beside the bed. She was upset that there was only one goblet until Xena reminded her that she no longer required food or drink. They talked almost until dawn, when the dark-haired beauty insisted that her lover rest before meeting again with the queen.

Gabrielle's meeting with Cleopatra had been set for midday. The warrior-bard formulated question after question, and the queen was always ready with an answer. Gabrielle found out that the barbarians, although they seemed to have superior weaponry and more troops, were not well organized and were extremely superstitious.

The high priestess, Nessia, was once again at the meeting between the queen and the warrior-bard. She stood silently in the background, taking in all that transpired between the two strong women. Occasionally, she would give Gabrielle an unusual look as though she was trying to see through her, to see if the warrior-bard was who she said she was. Gabrielle felt slightly uncomfortable, but resigned herself to the fact that the priestess was probably just looking out for the best interests of her queen and was wise to be wary of strangers.

It was during their meeting that the king returned home and was introduced to Gabrielle. In his wake followed an army of 1,000 foot soldiers from neighboring lands. Strategies were discussed until servants entered the room with the announcement that the evening meal had been prepared. The royal couple and the warrior-bard continued to formulate plans while eating. Finally agreeing that the element of surprise was best, they set the start of retaliation against the Pharusii at dawn.

When they arrived back at Gabrielle's quarters, the bard and warrior went over the plans one last time, and then Xena insisted that Gabrielle get some sleep. She promised not to leave the bard's side and held her close as the smaller woman closed her eyes in mental exhaustion.

The hour before dawn, Xena whispered into her bard's ear that it was time to get up; the sun would soon be peaking over the horizon. Gabrielle started to answer with her usual statement that she would rise but refused to shine when the realization of what the day had in store for her prompted her to open her eyes and jump out of bed.

The success of their scheme relied on the element of surprise, and during the night, King Juba's soldiers had infiltrated the area, surrounding the campground of the Pharusii leader. It was also where the greatest number of Pharusii troops were concentrated. If Gabrielle's formulations were correct and these people were truly barbaric, vanquishing their leader would quickly deter them from proceeding further into the land of the Mauretanii and the Masaesyli.

As the sun began to rise, Gabrielle stood on the top of a nearby hill, her confidence enhanced by the knowledge that she wielded the strength of both herself and Xena. King Juba stood next to the warrior-bard and gave the order that started his men's attack on the still-sleeping horde of barbarians. With one toss of the chakram, Gabrielle freed all of the horses of the Pharusii, scattering them into the awaiting Mauretanii foot soldiers, who were eager to be able to ride, instead of march, into battle.

If everything went according to their plan, the Pharusii leader would be either talking with them peacefully or dead before the sun reached her apex this afternoon. Sais in hand, Gabrielle charged the camp with King Juba's soldiers at her side, while the king remained on the top of the hill to await her signal.

The leader's tent was decorated with colorful flags, setting it apart from all the others. When he opened the flap to assess what was happening to his troops, Gabrielle was there to greet him. Taken by surprise, he glared at her and reached for his weapon. "We can stop this now and have a peaceful end to this madness," Gabrielle yelled above the clamor. His voice was lost in the

cacophony, but his body language as he raised his weapon gave the warrior-bard his answer. There would be no amiable end to this confrontation.

Gabrielle dodged as he swung his sword, turned swiftly, and kicked him in the back, throwing him off guard. His balance was quickly recovered and he charged her again. This time she made contact with his body, lancing him with one of her sais.

As he grabbed his arm she tried one last time to reason with the unreasonable. "Stop now and you and your people will live to go back to your homeland."

His defiance never faltered. Cursing her he attacked again, only to receive a blow double the strength of any Gabrielle alone could have delivered, and his sword fell from his grasp. The dark-haired warrior had joined in; there would be no harming of the warrior-bard in this battle, not if she had anything to say about it.

Gabrielle had her sais readied when the leader of the invading army attempted to retrieve his sword. He scrambled to recover it and quickly regained his composure. On the offensive again, he rushed toward the warrior-bard only to receive a sai puncturing his chest in the area of his heart. The final time he fell, he did not attempt to get up.

Gabrielle pulled the defeated leader from the ground and held his lifeless body in front of her, his vacant face turned outward toward his soldiers for all to see. She made a signal to King Juba, who was watching from afar, and a horn sounded, calling attention to all the troops. Cheers escaped the lips of the allies as the foreigners looked on in panic at the body of their fallen leader. With no one to guide them, they lost their confidence and ran from the battleground.

During the dinner that followed their return to the city, the king and Gabrielle spoke of the success of their strategy. Their assumption had been right that without a leader the barbarians would turn and run back to their homeland. Cleopatra, like her mother before her, pledged an everlasting friendship to the warrior-bard, and King Juba made her an honorary member of his royal court. Gabrielle wished she could tell everyone that Xena was also an intricate part of the scheme of things but got a nudge in her side when she even considered the thought.

After she said goodnight to the royal couple, Gabrielle was met in the hallway by the high priestess. "I would like also to give you something for traveling so far to help my king and queen." Nessia bowed in respect to Gabrielle. "You came here at grave danger to yourself to help my people. What can I do to repay you for your actions here in my land?"

Xena whispered that just being able to help was enough of a reward, and Gabrielle started to parrot the words when the priestess looked deep into emerald green eyes and smiled.

Nessia stopped Gabrielle in mid-sentence. "I have been watching, Gabrielle. The servants call you 'She who talks to the Air,' but I do not believe this to be the truth. When you arrived, you told the story of Xena's demise and the fact that she had to stay with the souls she had redeemed to avenge their deaths."



Gabrielle tilted her head to one side as if listening to an inner voice. She smiled as she touched the chakram, and goose bumps ran the length of her arms when Xena protectively placed an arm around her shoulders. "'She who talks to the Air,' is it? To tell you the truth, I've heard the whispers. But it's not really to the air that I speak."

"It's to Xena, isn't it?" the priestess queried.

"Yes," Gabrielle answered unashamed. "I know you might think me mad but . . ."

"Not at all, Gabrielle, and I might be able to help you with your dilemma."

"How?" Her attention was definitely focused now.

After taking a moment to study the warrior-bard's expression, the priestess began, "There's a land across a large expanse of water that you have never crossed. It's a mass of land that would easily accompany all the souls in Xena's keeping. Once those souls reincarnate, her obligation to them is released and she may come back either reborn as they do, or because you hold her essence and her ashes here in this world, she can come back to you and continue this lifetime to a timely conclusion."

"I know of that land," Xena told Gabrielle, and the bard related the fact to the priestess. "I have seen it on my night travels while you sleep. It is vast and fruitful. People would thrive in an environment such as what I have seen there, and it would be like a paradise to the newly arrived souls. But leading them there and convincing them that now is the proper time for them to return might take more than just a little effort; they were probably expecting to return to the home of their ancestors." Gabrielle repeated to the priestess what Xena told her.

The warrior continued, "Gabrielle, you wouldn't believe how much larger the world is than we ever imagined. There was so much we didn't get to explore when we were on the other side together."

"Xena wants to know how you propose to bring her back. We're far from the fountain of strength and it's been many moons since her death."

"Xena," the priestess smiled in the direction of the ghost, "you keep your end of the bargain, and I promise to reunite you in the flesh with your soulmate."

The smile on Gabrielle's face and the hope in her eyes brought tears to the eyes of the warrior. Although she had never left Gabrielle's side, she realized that their life together was a strain on the bard whenever they were in the company of people. She had reminded Gabrielle that if she was reanimated that they would both be vulnerable again, and at any time one of them might die. Gabrielle still insisted that she wanted the "real Xena" back, the one she could fight side by side with and write stories about. She was sure that the next time something happened to them the powers that be would allow them both to go simultaneously.

Later that evening when the bard was sleeping, Xena traveled back to the realm of the 40,000 souls. Akemi was the first to greet her upon her arrival, and she wondered at the fact that Xena had been absent in the sacred realm. When the warrior told her of the gifts she had been given for killing Yodoshi, Akemi's demeanor changed. She wanted Xena to stay with her and was disappointed to hear about the pact with Nessia in Mauretania. When Akemi realized that Xena had no intention of reincarnating with the rest of the souls, she refused to cooperate in trying to convince the other spirits that the large mass of land to the east of Japan would be an advantageous place to reenter the world of the living. She had figured that when Xena died she would come back to her, and with her plans thwarted she had become a rather unhappy spirit.

Xena reiterated that Gabrielle was her true soulmate and the only one she was destined to spend eternity with.

Finally realizing that she would never win the argument, Akemi agreed to help with the migration to a promised land where there were no Lords of the Darkland.

With the incantation that Nessia had given her, Xena was able to allow the souls to spontaneously be born into flesh, bone, and blood. They were divided into five nations and scattered throughout the countryside. It was an unusual vision Xena watched as the souls reincarnated. Some appeared as small children, and some babies, while others became teenagers, young adults, adults, and elders with the memories that life would have held for them had they actually lived the journey. As they dispersed themselves throughout the land, Xena was told that they would call themselves The People and begin a new civilization grounded in the belief that Mother Earth was a sacred place to be cherished and taken care of. They, once again, thanked their benefactor as they took leave of the afterworld into the world of the living. Akemi was the last to leave, and with sorrow in her voice she bid a final farewell to the warrior.

Upon returning to Gabrielle's quarters, Xena crawled in beside the sleeping bard. The movement of the bed woke the small blonde, who had only slept sporadically since the warrior had left her side. With questioning eyes, she looked into the face she loved and raised an eyebrow, as she had seen Xena do so many times in their life together. The warrior smiled her crooked smile and nodded in the affirmative.

"All's right with the universe, Gabrielle," she whispered into her lover's ear. "The souls have found a new haven, and I'm free to return to the land of the living, if Nessia can make good on her promise."

With hope in her heart, Gabrielle readied herself for their meeting with the high priestess. She made a silent plea as she picked up the urn that contained Xena's ashes, and the two left the palace on their way to the Temple of Isis.

The temple was a monumental building. At the top of the stairs and on either side of the doorway were hieroglyphic-paneled pillars. The symbols etched on the stone were of a mystical language, known only to a select few. Supposedly it was these pillars that guarded and protected the sanctuary behind the large wooden doors. Between the pillars, yet set back closer to the entrance, the two

women beheld a larger than life statue of the goddess Isis in her finest attire, her head adorned with cow horns arched around a solar disk.

Xena and Gabrielle both knew that the goddess Isis was known for her magical skills with both the living and the dead. The only question was whether or not this priestess truly had the favor of the goddess.

Nessia was waiting for them in the sacred chamber. "Isis has blessed me with words of power," the priestess began as she motioned for Gabrielle to come and stand beside her with the urn. "It is a sign from the Goddess herself that her star is in the heavens directly above this chamber on this auspicious night." She pointed to the opening in the ceiling where a single star shone brightly down on Gabrielle, and then she motioned for Xena, whom she could sense but could not see or touch, to stand facing her soulmate.

"Gabrielle, place the ashes on the altar before you, and open the lid."

With some trepidation the bard did as she was told, her eyes constantly fluctuating between the ashes, the priestess, and her beloved.

"You're my whole life, Xena," she whispered as she opened the urn.

"Whatever happens, Gabrielle, know that I will never leave you," the warrior promised.

The priestess blessed each of the participants and then picked up the urn. Gabrielle's entire body trembled in anticipation. If this didn't work there would be no going back, no second chance; Xena would remain a ghost until the time of her next reincarnation.

Words unfamiliar to the ears of the warrior and bard streamed from Nessia's mouth. From a sycamore plinth she retrieved an amulet, carved out of carnelian, which had been soaked in water upon which floated ankhami flowers. In a perfect rhyme and rhythm and spoken at the time when the moon was at her highest height in the early morning sky, the high priestess of Isis began to chant in a deep-throated tone.

Nessia spoke the magical words of her goddess, appealing to her to restore Xena to life and to allow her to once again walk the earth as a flesh, bone, and blood human, side by side with her soulmate from whom she had been untimely taken. "*Nehes, nehes, nehes, Nebet Aset.* Great Goddess Isis, in your position as queen of the Underworld and giver of life, may the essence of your blood blend with these ashes of Xena, the Warrior Princess, to restore this woman to her soulmate."

In one quick movement Nessia splashed droplets of red into the urn with Xena's remains and swirled the amulet over the container, continuing to murmur inaudibly. A flash of light that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time ignited the contents of the small jar and Gabrielle gasped, her heart leaping into her throat as she watched the urn explode. "By the gods," she whispered.

"No, Gabrielle," Nessia corrected, "by the goddess." With a smile of total satisfaction, the priestess reached over and did what she heretofore could not do; she touched Xena. "I do believe the goddess has granted your request, my friends. I no longer think the title, 'She who talks to the Air' will be attributed to you, Gabrielle." The priestess patted her friend on the shoulder and then turned to the warrior. "Xena, welcome back to the world of the living."

Gabrielle was beside herself. "How can I . . . we ever thank you, Nessia?" She moved closer to her lover, who immediately placed a strong arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and embraced her.

"Do you forget so soon, my friend?" The priestess answered the question with one of her own. "This ceremony was performed as a thank-you gesture for all the help you gave my people. You owe me nothing, and the debt Mauretania owes you is now paid. Go in peace, my friends." The priestess turned to allow the lovers time alone to realize that their prayers had been fulfilled.

As a final farewell, both Xena and Gabrielle were invited to attend another banquet that evening. Both the king and queen thanked the two women again for their intervention and spoke of their joy that Nessia, with Isis' blessing, had been able to satisfy the couple's desire to have Xena brought back into the world of the living

Looking out over the city shimmering in moonlight and stars, the lovers sought out one celestial body in particular and, as they simultaneously gazed upon it, watched it grow in intensity, almost in response to a silent double thank you.

Xena turned Gabrielle around, bringing them face to face. Slowly she lowered her head to kiss the lips she had been denied for far too long. "You're my whole world, Gabrielle." The kiss ignited the passion of their souls and it was minutes before they allowed their lips to separate.

Gabrielle looked up into sparkling sapphire eyes full of love and life. "So, where to now?"

"I think we should go north to visit Sappho," Xena answered, knowing the suggestion would make the bard happy. "I hear they need a girl who will put away her chakram for a little while and one who inks a pretty mean quill when she isn't wielding a pair of sais."

***The End***