

The image is a collage. The top half shows a man and a woman in a close embrace, about to kiss. The man has dark hair and is wearing a dark shirt. The woman has blonde hair and is wearing a dark, patterned top. Two other women are visible in the background, looking on with concerned expressions. The bottom half of the image shows a person lying on a sandy beach, looking up at the sky. The person is wearing a dark shirt and a light-colored skirt. The background of the bottom half is a bright, hazy sky.

A FRIEND IN NEED PART III

BY KODI WOLF

A Friend In Need Part III

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Wolf Moon Rising Productions

A Friend In Need, Part III

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Cover design by Kodi Wolf.

First online edition: June 2001

First PDF edition: December 2004

Author's Notes

This story was posted at 11pm, Saturday the 23rd of June 2001.

This story picks up immediately where A Friend In Need, Part II left off. In order to cope with what TPTB decided to do with the show, I've decided that they only aired the first two hours of a three-hour episode and they cut it off at a really bad spot. So I've tried to provide a fairly adequate telling of that last hour of the story to finish what they started.

This story has two endings and it's up to you to decide which one you prefer, that is, if you like either of them at all (I'm betting there will be plenty of "alternative" endings offered by other bards, so feel free to read other people's versions). Since I think we've all had enough "surprises" for the time being, regardless of whether they "entertained" or not, I'm going to tell you what those two endings are.

The first is being called "The Series Ender." Gabrielle is unable to bring Xena back from the dead, so she decides to join her and they move on to their next lives, i.e., no more adventures. Read an uber story after this ending, or watch The

Xena Scrolls or Soul Possession, to visit one of their many reincarnations.

The second is what I'm calling "The Series Finale." Gabrielle manages to bring Xena back from the dead and they continue on their merry way to have an infinite number of adventures until their ultimate demise some time in the distant future.

The closure I'm trying to create with both of these endings is that they end up *together*. No ifs, ands, or buts. Whether in death or in life, there will be no pining away for their other half. That shit happens enough in real life, I don't need to deal with it in fiction. That's why all my stories have happy endings (maybe not deliriously happy endings, but at least my main characters always eventually end up together; and that's a promise).

Minor disclaimers for both endings include the fact that there is no sex. I tried to write this the way I believe the episode might have been shown on TV, though they do get a kiss in both endings, brief as it may be.

There are also numerous references to shows throughout the series, so if you haven't seen these episodes, it's quite possible that you'll run into a spoiler. The referenced episodes in ascending order (beginning to last) are:

King of Assassins
Sacrifice, Part II
Between the Lines
Fallen Angel
Them Bones, Them Bones
Lifeblood
Kindred Spirits
Antony & Cleopatra
Looking Death in the Eye
Livia
To Helicon and Back
A Friend In Need, Part I and II

Other than that, simply remember that this is an angst-filled ride and there was no way around that in my opinion. I hope that this helps people through the emotional betrayal and/or grief that I believe a lot of people are feeling right now (I don't care if it is

just a TV show, these characters have had a profound effect on millions of lives, my own included, and I can't abandon them or the fans in their hour of need; this is just my way of coping and trying to give something back to the community).

I've also read one post in which a fan said they intended to consider the episodes aired out of order and will watch A Friend In Need (I and II), When Fates Collide, and then Many Happy Returns will be the series finale (I think Soul Possession should be moved to right after Adventures in the Sin Trade II to fill in the time before A Family Affair takes place, since that's when the events occurred).

Well, on with the show. Let me know if you liked it, or if it helped.

OPENING TEASER

Gabrielle's smile faded as she felt Xena's presence dissolve around her and she was once again left alone on the boat. She had wanted to put up a strong front for Xena, but even as she'd watched the sun set on Mt. Fuji, she'd known she couldn't just give up on the idea of getting her friend back. That was asking too much of her. And she knew that if their positions had been reversed, Xena would have never stopped looking for a way to bring her back, so she had to try, even if Xena didn't want her to.

The breeze that had been warm a few moments before with Xena's nearness now felt chilly. Gabrielle fought back the tears that wanted to come every time she realized Xena was gone.

Xena had explained to her one time about people who had an arm or a leg amputated. Sometimes they felt as though the limb was still there, even though it wasn't, and that was exactly how Gabrielle was feeling. She was a warrior now and could take care of herself, but she'd relied on Xena for far more than just her physical well-being, especially in the last few years as her own fighting skills had grown. There was a gaping hole in her life where Xena had been and Gabrielle knew there was nothing that would ever be able to fill it, except the Warrior Princess herself.

Gabrielle looked down at the black urn she held between her hands and it seemed heavier now that Xena was no longer there to help shoulder some of its weight. She had a sudden urge to fling it out into the cold sea, but the impulse passed as quickly as it had come. Instead, she gripped the urn even tighter and turned to head back to her cabin.

Every time Xena disappeared to wherever it was she went, it was like Gabrielle was losing her all over again. A stab of pain went through her chest as she remembered seeing Xena's body for the first time, decapitated and strung up naked in the rain.

Gabrielle quickly returned to the edge of the ship and retched over the side. Her white-knuckled grip on the urn never loosened

and she finally emptied the contents of her stomach until she was just dry heaving.

She let the wind dry her tears as she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and looked up at the darkening sky.

I just need to hold on until Egypt.

Gabrielle went down into the bowels of the ship and found her cabin. She locked the door behind her and went to the metal box she'd purchased specifically to keep the urn safe during her travels. She placed the jar inside the padded box and then locked it. After sliding the key underneath her silver wrist guard, she carefully set the box in a corner of the room. She kissed the chakram and laid it on top of the box and backed away. Then she simply stood in the middle of the room.

Gabrielle felt as though she were paralyzed. She could see herself screaming, destroying the contents of the room, pummeling the walls with her sais until she couldn't move anymore. But she knew the noise would bring the captain or his crew and she didn't have enough dinars to explain that kind of behavior away.

So she stood there. Her mind tried to think of something to do. Her first thought was to talk to Xena, since that always made her feel better, but then she reminded herself that Xena was dead. With that image in her mind's eye, she finally moved, but it was downward as she sank to her knees.

Gabrielle wanted to cry. She knew it would make her feel better. It would let her release some of the pain she was feeling. But the tears wouldn't come. Something in her knew that if she started crying again, she wouldn't stop until Xena was there to hold her and soothe her and she didn't think that wasn't going to happen.

Then again, Xena had appeared to her quite often since she'd died, but Gabrielle didn't know how long that was going to last. For all she knew, Xena was never going to visit her again.

Gabrielle shook her head and stood up. She couldn't think about it anymore. She had a long voyage ahead of her and she was going to have to find some way to pass the time or she was going to go insane. Xena tended to use physical exertion as a way to escape her feelings. Maybe the same would work for Gabrielle.

Gabrielle headed back up to the deck and presented herself to the captain.

“You said you’d cut the fare in half for anyone who worked for their passage. Is that offer still open?” Gabrielle asked.

“Aye,” came the gruff response. “But this ain’t no cruise ship. You’re gonna have to work.”

“Just tell me what to do.”

THEME SONG/CAST LISTING COMMERCIAL BREAK

“Land ho!”

Gabrielle looked up at the call and stopped pulling on the rope she was holding. Her gaze quickly shifted to where the man in the crow’s nest was pointing. She squinted her eyes and just barely made out the brown line that indicated land.

Soon, the whole deck was full of people rushing around in preparation for their arrival at Adana, the ship’s final port of call before it would turn around and head back to the Land of the Rising Sun. The Arabian city was considered one of the great trade centers of the world due to its strategic location at the mouth of the Red Sea. It had previously been under Egyptian rule, but after Queen Cleopatra’s death, Rome had claimed Egypt as one of its provinces and a few years later, Adana had been made a Roman colony.

But Gabrielle was so busy that she barely even noticed when the ship was guided into the closest open dock and tied off. When she did look up, the gangplank had been deployed and many of the non-working passengers were already filing off the ship into the bustling metropolis.

Gabrielle finished tying off the rig she was working with and went to her cabin. She packed up her bags and double-checked to make sure she wasn’t leaving anything behind. A knock on her doorframe brought her head around.

“Captain,” Gabrielle said in greeting.

“Aye. So you’ll be leaving now.”

“Yes. I have a long way to go still.”

“You’re a good deckhand. You could stay.”

Gabrielle softened and gently shook her head.

“I-I can’t. There’s some things I need to do.”

The captain nodded in understanding.

“Aye. The sea’s not for everyone then. May the wind be at your back, Gabrielle.”

“You too.”

The captain held out a small pouch and Gabrielle took it. As soon as she felt its weight, she knew what it was.

“Captain...”

“You worked harder than even my own crew did. The money’s yours, so don’t argue.”

With that, the captain left to get back to overseeing the offloading of his cargo.

Gabrielle looked at where the captain had been standing only a moment before and then hefted the weight of the small bag. She could tell it contained the full amount of her fare, not just half, but the money would make her journey easier and it really didn’t make any sense to refuse it. So, she tucked the pouch into her belt and slung her bags over her shoulders.

She said a few farewells to the crew as she headed down the gangway and then she was on land again. It would probably be a few days before she got used to the ground not swaying beneath her anymore, but it was a welcome feeling.

Now, she just needed to find a room for the night, eat a decent meal, and buy a fast horse. And take a bath.

CUT TO NEW SCENE

Gabrielle let her body sink into the hot water and groaned at the sensation of complete and utter relief she felt. She’d spent a month on that ship and had only been able to take a real bath

once in all that time, since fresh water was too precious to waste on an actual bath while they were out at sea.

They'd ended up staying an extra day at one of the ports, while the captain worked out a new trade agreement with one of the locals, and Gabrielle had taken the opportunity to stay at an inn and give her stomach a rest. It had cost extra for the hot bath, but it had been worth it.

"You are so spoiled, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's eyes shot open as she quickly stood up from the water before she realized who had spoken. Then she saw the woman leaning against the wall in the shadows, her arms crossed smugly over her armored chest. With a sigh of frustration and embarrassment, Gabrielle lowered herself back into the water.

"Yeah, well, I'm not the one that had to stop at every hot spring and oasis we found, now was I?" Gabrielle retorted.

"You never objected," Xena mildly defended herself, as she pushed off from the wall and walked over to take a seat on the edge of the tub.

"Who, me? Argue with the Warrior Princess? Never," Gabrielle replied innocently as Xena raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Oh really. You might want to rewrite some of those scrolls then," Xena commented.

"Maybe, but I already left out the parts about receiving regular scrubblings from the Warrior Princess. I can just see what would happen if I put *that* in my scrolls," Gabrielle smirked and watched Xena frown.

"You wouldn't do that." Xena looked into Gabrielle's sparkling eyes. "Would you?"

"Those are separate scrolls," Gabrielle teased.

Gabrielle picked up a bar of soap to begin a thorough cleansing of her body. She'd only been able to wipe herself down while on the ship and that just hadn't been enough to make her feel clean.

"So, where have you been?" Gabrielle asked.

She hadn't seen Xena since that first night on the ship, though she'd thought she'd felt her presence several times.

Xena frowned again.

“I don’t know if I can explain it. It’s not like any of the other places I’ve been to before. It feels like I’m waiting for something, but I don’t know what.”

“Maybe you’re waiting to be born again,” Gabrielle suggested. “What?”

“The Karmic Cycle. You’re a part of it. Sooner or later you have to be born again.”

Gabrielle couldn’t quite hide the pain and fear that saying those words made her feel. The thought of Xena moving on to a new life without her tore at her insides and made her throat close up.

Xena eased closer and brushed her fingers against Gabrielle’s cheek. Gabrielle closed her eyes and leaned into the touch, not caring that it wasn’t real.

“Gabrielle, I told you. I’ll always be here.”

Gabrielle opened her eyes, now brimming with unshed tears, and looked up at Xena.

“You won’t be able to stop it. Just like we couldn’t keep Alti from remaining in the Cycle. We’re all a part of it. If a new life calls you, you’ll have to go.”

Gabrielle’s voice broke on the last words and the tears were squeezed out of her eyes as she closed them in a vain attempt to block out the pain. Xena didn’t waste a second as she climbed over the side of the tub and wrapped her arms around Gabrielle’s wet sobbing form.

Gabrielle cried and rocked in Xena’s ethereal embrace. It was nowhere near enough for all the pain she felt. The loneliness was unbearable and she couldn’t even think about spending the rest of her life without Xena. Just the thought sent her into sobs that racked her entire body.

Xena’s own tears of heartache mingled with Gabrielle’s. She couldn’t count the number of times she’d wished she’d let Gabrielle bring her back on Mt. Fuji. But she’d refused to put her own happiness before the souls of the forty thousand she had murdered. Her personal code of ethics wouldn’t allow her to be that selfish. However, seeing Gabrielle so emotionally devastated made her realize that it had been just as selfish to put her honor before Gabrielle.

Finally, Gabrielle cried herself out until she felt as though there was nothing left and became aware of the cold water she was sitting in. Alone. It brought fresh tears to her eyes, but there was no emotion behind them. She was simply drained of any feeling and it took a great deal of effort just to stand up and get out of the tub, so that she could dry herself off and climb into bed. Exhaustion dragged at her swollen eyelids and she didn't fight it.

She whispered the words she'd said almost every night for what seemed like her whole life before sleep finally claimed her.

"I love you, Xena."

COMMERCIAL BREAK

Gabrielle shaded her eyes and looked up at the huge white stone palace. She could see the great pyramids standing majestically in the distance, almost white against the pale blue sky.

The palace seemed to have been well taken care of in the quarter century since Gabrielle had last visited it. She hoped this trip would see less bloodshed than that one had.

Gabrielle made her way up the steep steps to the entrance of the palace and nodded to the two men standing guard. A young woman wearing the traditional garb of a servant greeted her.

"Gabrielle of Poteidaia?" she asked.

"Yes."

"We didn't expect you for several more days."

"I took a shortcut," Gabrielle explained.

There had been several nights when she'd been unable to sleep, so she'd gotten back up on her horse and continued to ride through the night. She was glad her message had arrived before she had, though. Hopefully, it would make things go more smoothly.

"Cleopatra is anxious to meet you."

The girl gestured for Gabrielle to follow her and they walked through the halls of the palace as they spoke.

“Cleopatra? But she died almost thirty years ago,” Gabrielle said confused.

“Yes. Cleopatra Selene is her daughter. She recently arrived from Rome and has been allowed to take up residence here in the palace. She’s read all of your scrolls and is especially taken with your stories about Egypt. I believe they make her feel closer to the mother she never knew.”

Gabrielle didn’t have a chance to respond as they entered a large bathing chamber and she saw a beautiful young woman being tended to in a sunken pool filled with milk. Gabrielle’s guide knelt down to whisper in the woman’s ear and then watched Gabrielle as Cleopatra spoke.

“I would be pleased if you would join me, Gabrielle, Battling Bard of Poteidaia.”

Gabrielle felt a jolt of *déjà vu* as she remembered a time when Xena had been the one in the milk bath and Marc Antony had been invited to bathe with her.

“Um, no thank you. I’d just like to browse the scrolls in your library like my message explained, if that’s all right with you. Maybe we can talk when you’re through?”

Cleopatra paused at the rejection and then nodded her acceptance.

Gabrielle’s guide returned and led her through another maze of hallways. They soon came to another large room with walls that were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling. It was just as Gabrielle had remembered it.

“If you need anything, just ask,” the girl told her and then turned to go.

“Wait. I never caught your name,” Gabrielle said.

“Nuru.”

“Thank you, Nuru.”

The girl nodded.

“I will come back for you when Cleopatra is ready to speak with you.”

Gabrielle nodded and Nuru disappeared through the doorway. Gabrielle turned back around to look at all the scrolls. She tried

to remember which section the priest had pulled that one scroll from.

The last time she'd been here, things had been busy, but she'd managed to find several hours in which to look through the palace library. She'd been lucky enough to meet a priest who shared her love of the written word and had recommended several scrolls to her. He'd gone to the very back of the room and climbed up to the topmost shelf and pulled down the "The Book of the Dead," as he'd called the scrolls. Having recently spent a month studying the Amazons' rituals and traditions, she had been very curious about what other peoples' customs were.

Gabrielle followed in the priest's footsteps and pulled over a nearby ladder, so that she could get to the top shelf, which was several meters above her head. She looked through the scrolls, one by one, until she found the ones she was looking for. She quickly climbed down the ladder and spread the scrolls out on one of the long tables in the middle of the room. The second to last scroll had the text she'd been looking for.

"Yes! This is it," Gabrielle exclaimed under her breath.

"What's it?" came a voice over her shoulder.

Gabrielle jumped and banged the back of her head against a solid brass breastplate.

"Would you stop doing that?!" Gabrielle almost yelled.

"What?" Xena replied.

She straightened from where she'd been leaning over Gabrielle's shoulder to try to read the scroll.

"Make a noise or something," Gabrielle complained as she rubbed the back of her head.

"Sorry. So whatcha got there?" Xena said and pointed at the parchment.

Gabrielle rolled the scroll back up.

"It's just a ritual I read about when we were here last time."

"Sooo? What's it for?" Xena persisted.

Gabrielle tried to think of something that might sidetrack Xena's curiosity, but she knew Xena would eventually figure out her plans anyway. And the truth was, as a ghost, there wasn't much Xena could do to stop her, even if she did seem to be rather solid at times.

“It’s for absolving a person of their sins. It’s called the Judgment of the Dead and if it works... Xena, you could come back,” Gabrielle replied seriously.

Xena stood stock-still. She’d thought Gabrielle had accepted the situation. There was too much at risk to even attempt a resurrection. She didn’t even have a body anymore.

“Gabrielle... You can’t...”

A jolt of anger went through Gabrielle. Xena had no idea what she was going through. Things had looked bleak for them plenty of times, but there had never been a restriction on either of them trying to save the other. The absolute helplessness she felt was unbearable. She had to *do* something.

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do! If I can find a way to bring you back...”

“You’ll condemn forty thousand souls to wander the other side for eternity!” Xena reminded her vehemently.

“There has to be another way!” Gabrielle yelled right back.

Tears streamed down Gabrielle’s face and she angrily wiped them away.

“I can’t just give up on you, Xena. We were meant to be together. In every life, in every time. Naiyima told me that and I believed her.”

Xena lowered her voice at the pain she heard in Gabrielle’s.

“But you also knew the time would come when this life would be over. When *my* life would be over,” Xena said quietly.

Gabrielle looked straight into Xena’s eyes.

“No. No, I didn’t.”

Xena felt her heart break at the admission. She knew it was coming from a much younger Gabrielle, the one who still saw her as the invincible warrior who would always triumph over evil, including her own monstrous past. Xena barely noticed as tears streamed down her own cheeks.

Gabrielle pulled out a chair at the table and sat down heavily as the weight of her grief bore down on her.

“I feel like I’m in Tartarus,” Gabrielle whispered.

“Excuse me?”

Gabrielle wasn’t expecting the higher pitched voice and looked up. She met soft brown eyes and stood up in respect for the royal woman’s heritage.

“Cleopatra. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I apologize for interrupting your studies. Have you found everything you were looking for?”

Gabrielle held up the scroll and nodded.

“Yes. Thank you for letting me look for it.”

“Of course. I’ll have one of the palace scribes make a copy for you to take with you.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

“Enough to have lunch with me? And maybe dinner? I have many questions about my mother and I was hoping we could discuss them while you’re here.”

“Oh. Well, I only met Queen Cleopatra once and it was rather brief. By the time Xena and I received her message regarding the threat to Egypt, she was already dead. Her companion, Shiana, would probably be able to tell you everything you want to know, if she’s still alive.”

“She isn’t. She was executed, along with the rest of the palace staff, after Rome openly took over control of Egypt. You’re the only one left from those times and I’m guessing that is a story all its own. I would be greatly pleased if you would share it with me,” Cleopatra entreated.

Gabrielle nodded and the young woman smiled happily.

“Wonderful,” Cleopatra beamed.

Gabrielle followed Cleopatra to her dining chamber and was surprised at the amount of food laid out on the low table in the center of the room. She took a seat opposite Cleopatra on the pillow couches that were spread out for them to lie on while they ate. Cleopatra didn’t waste a moment in pressing the bard for her stories as she picked a grape from a bunch on the table.

“So, how is it that you’re still so young when so much time has passed?”

Gabrielle easily launched into the story of how Ares had believed she and Xena were dead and had entombed them in ice coffins inside Mt. Etna as a kind of memorial to the Warrior Princess. The storytelling helped her forget for a little while that this time Xena really was dead, rather than just pretending.

It didn’t take much prodding on Cleopatra’s part to get Gabrielle to tell more and more stories. It was a much needed diversion and Gabrielle didn’t fight it. Telling the stories of her

adventures with Xena made her feel as though Xena were still with her, if only for a little while.

But finally, neither Cleopatra nor Gabrielle seemed to be able to keep their eyes open any longer.

“You are welcome to stay here, Gabrielle. My servants will show you to one of the guest rooms. Anything you need shall be brought to you.”

Gabrielle nodded sleepily.

“Thank you. I just have a few things in my room at the inn, but I can pick them up in the morning.”

“Nonsense. Tell Hamadi the name of the establishment and he’ll retrieve your belongings for you tonight.”

A young man stepped forward from his position as one of Cleopatra’s guards and bowed. Gabrielle thought about arguing, but she was too tired. As soon as she gave Hamadi the information he needed, he bowed again and hurried off.

“Goodnight, Gabrielle. I will see you in the morning for breakfast?” Cleopatra urged.

Gabrielle nodded her assent and was guided by a servant to her guest quarters.

CUT TO NEW SCENE

“Ah, here it is. Just as I promised,” Cleopatra announced.

Gabrielle looked up from the fruit she was eating and smiled. Nuru walked over to her and placed a new scroll in her waiting hands. Gabrielle unrolled it and skimmed it once before rolling it back up again. The text from the scroll she’d found in the library had been meticulously copied to the newer scroll so that she could take it with her.

“Thank you, Cleopatra. You have no idea how much this means to me. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“Gabrielle, it is I who should be thanking you. Though I have read your scrolls dozens of times, hearing them spoken by you brings so much more to the tales. If I were allowed only one

request of you, it would be to ask you to write of your latest adventures. If you send them to me, I will make sure they are kept safe in the library here.”

Gabrielle felt her heart clench and lowered her head.

“I...” She cleared her throat. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to write again for a while. I need a little time to adjust.”

Cleopatra nodded solemnly.

“Of course. When you’re ready. The parchment will always wait for your quill.”

Gabrielle nodded again and Cleopatra leaned over to reach her hand out to the warrior bard.

“Gabrielle, it is all right to grieve.”

Gabrielle shook her head.

“No. Not yet.”

Cleopatra studied Gabrielle for a moment and then shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“As you wish.”

Gabrielle cleared her throat again.

“Well, I have another long journey ahead of me. I should probably get started while it’s still early.”

“Oh, stay. Stay another day and rest,” Cleopatra requested.

“No. I really have to get back on the road. I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to apologize for. You simply must promise to come back and visit again someday,” Cleopatra smiled.

“I’ll do my best,” Gabrielle hedged.

Within the hour, Gabrielle had her horse packed up and ready to go. Waves and farewells started her off on the next leg of her journey. She would first have to ride to Alexandria and then book passage on another ship that would take her to Athens across the Mediterranean Sea. From there, she would be able to head inland to the Amazon territories.

It was time to go home.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

“I don’t care that Xena wasn’t an Amazon. She wasn’t Egyptian either, but this Book of the Dead doesn’t say anything about her having to be. Now I know there are Amazon rituals to bring the dead back to life,” Gabrielle insisted.

Varia shook her head.

Shortly before Gabrielle’s arrival, she’d learned of Xena’s demise at the hands of a distant foreign enemy. Though she’d been shocked by the news, she’d been just as proud to know that Xena had died a warrior’s death in true Amazon fashion. She’d expected Gabrielle to turn up soon and possibly try to reclaim her place as Queen.

But Gabrielle had immediately launched into describing her plans to bring Xena back from the dead. If Gabrielle had been anyone else, Varia would have had her confined to a hut while she underwent the ritual of purification. But considering the duo’s history, Varia knew that Gabrielle had every reason to believe she could succeed.

Unfortunately, there were several problems with Gabrielle’s plan.

“It’s not just that Xena wasn’t an Amazon. All our shamanesses are young and barely trained. None of them know the rituals you’re talking about,” Varia impatiently informed her.

Gabrielle remained unaffected.

“You still have the scrolls the rituals came from. And Xena and I performed a ceremony with the whole tribe to trick Alti into giving Xena’s baby’s soul back. Alti believed that she could be brought back to life if the whole tribe worked together and pooled their energy, but we turned that power against her. I know there aren’t a lot of us left, but I believe there’s enough to do it right this time. We have to at least try.”

Varia rolled her eyes and sighed. The bond between Xena and Gabrielle was stronger than anything she’d ever seen before or thought she ever would again. She’d known that Gabrielle wouldn’t take it very well when Xena was finally defeated in battle. She just hadn’t realized how persistent Gabrielle could be when it came to Xena.

“But what about this curse you told me about?” Varia questioned.

“It’s not a curse.”

Varia rolled her eyes again.

“Whatever. If Xena is brought back to life, forty thousand souls will be lost and will never enter their land of the dead. Is Xena worth that kind of price?”

Gabrielle remained silent and Varia knew she had her answer. As Gabrielle had said when she’d told the story of their last days together, the only thing that had stopped Gabrielle from restoring Xena to life was Xena herself. But now that Gabrielle had spent nearly the past two months without the woman, her resolve to abide by Xena’s wishes had basically crumbled.

Varia continued and used the only argument she thought might make Gabrielle see reason.

“You also said Xena doesn’t want you to bring her back.”

“No. She wants to come back, she just won’t betray all those souls.”

“But you would.”

Gabrielle felt the coldness of the remark, but she shook it off.

“That’s not what I’m suggesting. The Judgment of the Dead is a ritual of absolution. If all those souls agreed to forgive Xena, then she might be absolved of her crimes against them and she could return to the land of the living.”

“You want to persuade forty thousand people whom Xena murdered to forgive her for killing them?” Varia asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“And if even one refuses, it won’t work?”

“Yes. It’s a tribunal. But it’s not by majority vote. They each have a chance to condemn her, but it takes all of them to pardon her.”

“So, if she’s condemned, you’ll give up? You’ll let this fantasy go? You’ll let Xena rest in peace?”

“I don’t think Xena will ever rest in peace, but yes, I’ll stop trying to bring her back to life,” Gabrielle promised.

Varia considered her options and then nodded. They really wouldn’t lose anything by trying and once Xena was officially condemned, she’d make sure that Gabrielle honored her promise and wasn’t allowed to talk them into any more crazy ideas.

“All right. You’re insane, but I’ll help. You and Xena saved my Amazons. And me. We owe you our lives.”

CUT TO NEW SCENE

After the battle at Helicon, it had been easy to convince the far-flung tribes of the queens who had died to rally behind Varia as their new leader. And the queens that had survived had decided that after Gabrielle left, Varia was indeed their queen again. So all in all, there were dozens of Amazons ready to lend their spirits to Gabrielle's efforts.

They formed a circle around Gabrielle and chanted to build their energy around their greatest Queen. It was all up to her now.

"Xena," Gabrielle called out.

Nothing happened and Gabrielle worried that Xena might not show up. After their conversation in Egypt, Gabrielle hadn't felt Xena's presence at all and she wondered if Xena had already moved on. The thought sent a trickle of panic through her.

"Xena!" Gabrielle yelled.

"I'm here, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle whirled and her heart skipped a beat at the sight of Xena's solid-looking ghost. In just three steps, she was in her arms. The Amazons looked at each other as Gabrielle hugged the air, but they could feel the presence of Xena's strong spirit and Gabrielle seemed supported by the air around her, so they knew she wasn't crazy.

Xena gently disengaged from the bard's embrace and held her at arm's length.

"Gabrielle, we can't do this. I know it hurts, but someday you'll be able to move on with your life..."

Gabrielle shrugged off Xena's consoling touch from her arms and stepped back.

"No! Don't try to make me feel better about you being dead!"

Xena looked away. There was no disguising the hurt in her eyes. Gabrielle took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. She stepped forward again and reached a hand up to cup Xena's

cheek. She turned Xena's head so that Xena was forced to look her in the eyes.

"I'm sorry, Xena," Gabrielle whispered.

Xena nodded into the soft palm against the side of her face and her eyes told Gabrielle she was forgiven. Gabrielle used her thumb to brush a stray tear away.

"I know you don't think you're worth it, but you are to me."

"But maybe this is the way it's supposed to be. I've done so many things wrong in my life..."

"Don't you remember Heaven?" Gabrielle interrupted her. "You went through the Fire of Purification to save me from Hell. And then you redeemed Callisto by forgiving her and taking on the weight of her guilt. I had to forgive Callisto in order to become purified the way you were. Xena, it's all about forgiveness. Those souls will be set free to attain a state of grace when they forgive you. And then you'll be set free to come back to me."

Xena tried to be as gentle as possible with her reply.

"I don't think it's going to work. They're never going to forgive me. I wiped out entire families, entire bloodlines."

"Xena, just let me try. I can be very persuasive sometimes."

Xena looked into Gabrielle's eyes and finally nodded. If anyone could convince those souls to forgive her, it would be Gabrielle.

"All right," Xena consented.

Xena kissed Gabrielle on the forehead and stepped back. Gabrielle chanted the words she'd memorized from the text. It took over an hour, but eventually the entire valley was filled with forty thousand swirling lights of the souls that Xena had both condemned and freed.

Gabrielle spoke to all of them and begged, pleaded, and coaxed them to absolve Xena of her crimes against them and their families. She began by reciting her first scroll, Sins of the Past, and didn't stop until she'd recounted their last adventure together in which Xena had given up her life to free their souls so that they could achieve a state of grace. Her voice was hoarse and there was nothing left of it but a croaking whisper, but she continued.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

SEASON ENDER

(Skip this part if you'd prefer to read the Season Finale...)

As Gabrielle progressed through the ritual of the Judgment of the Dead, each soul was compelled to come forward and pass judgment on their murderer. Hour after hour, soul after soul moved into the center of the circle. The first few offered their forgiveness to Xena. With each declaration of amnesty, Gabrielle felt her heart grow stronger and the ethereal quality of Xena's body, which Gabrielle hadn't even noticed before, began to change and solidify.

But then one of the souls came forward and condemned her. Gabrielle felt her breath leave her chest and Xena's head lowered in despair. Gabrielle begged and pleaded, but the soul refused to forgive Xena. And now that the ritual had been started, there was no stopping it. Many souls forgave Xena, but still many others condemned her for her actions against them and others.

With the last soul's verdict, the sun rose over the mountains and a bright ray of light filled the valley of the Amazons. In a flash, the souls vanished and Gabrielle was left with Xena's ghost and the chanting Amazons.

Varia solemnly closed the circle and the Amazons hesitantly stepped forward to offer their condolences to Gabrielle. Then they dispersed to leave Gabrielle alone with the ghost of Xena.

"You did your best, Gabrielle," Xena told her.

Gabrielle nodded.

"It's all right," Gabrielle said. "At least I tried."

Xena watched Gabrielle for a few moments, trying to understand why she was so calm. She'd expected Gabrielle to be absolutely hysterical.

"Xena, promise you'll stay right here. I'll be back with you in a few minutes."

Xena nodded.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Gabrielle went to the Queen's hut and knocked on the door. Varia called for her to come in.

"Gabrielle," Varia greeted her. "So you've said your goodbyes to Xena?"

"No. I came here to tell you goodbye. And to give you my Right of Caste. I'm trusting you to pass it on to someone who would make me and Xena proud."

"Wait, what? What are you saying, Gabrielle?" Varia asked in alarm.

"I've said all I need to. Tell the others I'll miss them. They will always be the sisters of my heart."

Gabrielle turned to leave.

"Wait, Gabrielle..."

Gabrielle stopped, but didn't turn around.

"Don't try to stop me, Varia. I belong with Xena. I was never meant to live without her. She's my soulmate."

"You're being a coward, Gabrielle," Varia said disgustedly.

Gabrielle finally turned around and faced Varia. The young brunette was totally unprepared for the complete desolation that was in Gabrielle's expression. The hope and determination she'd come to associate with Gabrielle was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was just a shell of a woman standing before her and she didn't know what to do about it.

"Maybe I am being a coward. But I think I've earned that right. We've put the "greater good" ahead of ourselves so many times that it's become a habit. Well, I'm tired. I'm tired of always doing the honorable thing, the noble thing, the right thing. Just this once, I want to get what I want. I want to be with Xena. Xena told me once that everybody has something that is more important to them than the greater good. Well, she's it for me. I couldn't save her from her fate the way she saved me from mine, so I'm going to join her. I'm not asking you to understand, just don't get in my way."

Gabrielle didn't wait for Varia's response and turned and left the hut. She walked back to the circle and Xena was still there, waiting for her. The look on Gabrielle's face told Xena all she needed to know.

"Gabrielle, no."

“Xena, I want you to disappear now. I’ll see you again in a few minutes,” Gabrielle said calmly.

“No. Gabrielle, I’m not leaving you alone right now,” Xena said as she began to panic.

Gabrielle shook her head.

“Xena, I can’t live like this. I can’t live with you half in my life and half not. I need you. All of you.”

Gabrielle pulled one of her sais from her boot.

“Gabrielle, please don’t do this,” Xena pleaded through her tears.

“I just want to be with you. You’re all that matters to me. I love you, Xena,” Gabrielle whispered.

Xena watched, immobile, as Gabrielle let herself fall stiffly forward onto the point of the sai she held aimed at her stomach. The ground met the hilt of the weapon quickly and slammed it home.

“Nooo!” Xena screamed and was suddenly able to rush forward as Gabrielle felt her insides being ripped apart.

The pain was actually quite bearable in comparison to the agony her heart had been feeling since Xena’s death. There was also a sense of peace as she felt Xena’s arms cradling her body and she knew it wouldn’t be long before she would get to see Xena on the other side.

Xena rocked Gabrielle’s body until she felt the life force evaporate from it completely. Then she realized she was no longer in the valley of the Amazons and she looked up at an orange tinted sky.

“Oh brother, not this again,” Xena mumbled.

“At least Callisto isn’t here to cause trouble again,” Gabrielle told her.

Xena cut her eyes at her soulmate as she remembered how they’d gotten there this time.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Xena chastised.

“It was the only way to get things moving again,” Gabrielle defended her actions.

“Would it have been so bad to just wait for old age or something?”

“Put yourself in my place and ask yourself that question,” Gabrielle retorted.

Xena thought about it. When she'd believed she'd lost Gabrielle, she'd been willing to marry Ares just to get her back. At least until she'd realized Gabrielle wasn't dead. The two actions weren't all that different, though.

"All right. So now what?" Xena asked.

"We wait for the angels, then we'll get sent back to earth to start new lives. They'd just better put us in the same country," Gabrielle warned no one in particular.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle turned her head to look up at Xena.

"Yeah?"

"You *are* the best thing in my life."

Gabrielle smiled. She reached up and drew Xena's lips to her own. The touch was soft and lingered after they parted.

"I love you, Xena."

As the welcoming angels picked them up, they felt their spirits being pulled into new existences. They each caught glimpses of what their new lives would hold, but they only paid attention to one detail.

They would be together. That's all that mattered.

COMMERCIAL BREAK
END CREDITS

SEASON FINALE

As Gabrielle progressed through the ritual of the Judgment of the Dead, each soul was compelled to come forward and pass judgment on their murderer. Hour after hour, soul after soul moved into the center of the circle and offered their forgiveness to Xena. With each declaration of amnesty, Gabrielle felt her heart grow stronger and the ethereal quality of Xena's body, which Gabrielle hadn't even noticed before, began to change and solidify.

As time went on, though, the sense of elation was replaced with a feeling of dread. All it would take was one soul to condemn Xena and they would lose everything. A silent countdown was kept in everyone's minds and as the number of souls left became smaller and smaller, Gabrielle simply began to pray.

It wasn't until the last soul's pardon that there was a collective sigh of relief. The sun rose over the mountains and a bright ray of light filled the valley of the Amazons. In a flash, the souls vanished. Gabrielle nearly passed out with the feeling of pure joy that coursed through her veins. But the emotion was quickly supplanted by the need to finish what they'd started.

Gabrielle led the chanting Amazons into a new chant as she went to the urn and removed the lid. She sprinkled the ashes onto the sacred ground of the ritual circle and the chanting took on the rhythm of a heartbeat. With each beat, Gabrielle watched Xena's ghost form fade and the ashes began to reform and rebuild the body they had previously belonged to.

Time seemed to have no meaning. The chanting continued throughout the day and into the night. As morning came, Gabrielle's gaze was still fixed on the body that was slowly forming on the ground in front of her.

It wasn't until Xena gasped in her first breath of air in weeks that Gabrielle was able to move and the chanting stopped. Gabrielle fell to her knees by Xena's side and pulled Xena into

her arms. All of the Amazons watched as the soulmates were reunited, though the majority of them couldn't help noticing a certain Warrior Princess was without her usual warrior garb.

Varia closed the circle and the Amazons hesitantly stepped forward to greet Xena. Cyane was the first to bring a fur skin to cover the naked warrior and Gabrielle helped Xena to her feet. Xena was a little unsteady, but Gabrielle held on to her and refused to let go. There was no stopping the tears that were flowing from every eye there and no one even tried.

Gabrielle led Xena to her hut. She helped her lie down on the bed and pulled the covers over her, but Xena tried to sit up.

"Just rest, Xena. We can talk in the morning," Gabrielle tried to persuade her.

"Wait. Gabrielle. I just wanted to..."

Even as she started to say the words, Xena realized thanks were nowhere near enough for what Gabrielle had done for her. Instead, she pulled Gabrielle's head down to hers and gently kissed her lips. The contact seemed to last forever, but then Xena drew Gabrielle into a hug and managed to guide the exhausted woman down onto the bed to lie beside her.

"I think you need some rest too," Xena chided her friend.

They closed their eyes and went to sleep in each other's arms. They would need their strength for the adventures they had yet to go on.

COMMERCIAL BREAK
END CREDITS
