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Violence: There is violence in this story.

Subtext: Any subtext becomes main text here.

Summary: The story opens up just after the fifth season finale, and Xena realizes she needs to heal her relationship with Gabrielle. She decides on a trip to an island where they can escape the demands of the Greater Good and spend needed time alone.

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Series 6: **Thick as Blood**, Story #1

The Loudest Silence

by Red Hope

Chapter 1

The ship crashed deep into the rich, blue sea and shot back up. The sharp red sunset streamed through the clouds and highlighted the boat's sails. On the bow of the ship stood a small warrior, who enjoyed the cool wind that swept past her and fluttered her golden, short locks.

Gabrielle took a long breath until her chest was full then she slowly let it go. Her arms were against her chest, but she tugged her cloak closer against her body to stop the coldness from the wind. She wasn't told why her and Xena were on the ship. Xena only explained they were headed to a town across the Mediterranean. Gabrielle really didn't bother to probe her partner further because she was too mentally worn.

Gabrielle was drained from a long, hard year. Not that it was an utterly terrible year, yet it was chaotic at best. Gabrielle had thought Eve's birth would mean a change to their traveling lifestyles. But she nor Xena expected to sleep away twenty-five years and wake up to find Olivia. And despite new friends, Gabrielle and Xena lost old friends like Joxer, who died under Olivia's sword. Yet it couldn't stop there, and Gabrielle was driven to madness by the Furies. She almost killed Eve and died herself if it hadn't been for Ares's sacrifice.

The warrior huffed at the thought of the god she couldn't stand had saved her and Eve's lives. She had to admit though that she was growing respect for him. Ares did make a generous sacrifice to save her and Eve, but Gabrielle suspected it was just to win favor with Xena. Regardless, they all owed Ares if he came upon hard times during his life as a mortal.

What had been the hardest about the year was Gabrielle's relationship with Xena. The moment after

Xena fell to her knees in the Roman prison at Mount Amaro, everything changed for Gabrielle including her Way. It also changed Xena and Gabrielle's dynamics in their relationship, and Gabrielle swore her life for their relationship. Gabrielle believed her Way of Love was not far away from following her path with Xena as a warrior, but it required her to give up her innocent outlook on life. What Gabrielle didn't expect was Xena's pregnancy, the birth of God's Messenger, the Twilight of the Gods, and her madness to kill Eve. But Gabrielle was most secretly bitter about Xena's chakram to the back of her head. She didn't recall doing anything as drastic when Xena was driven mad by the Furies.

For a moment, Gabrielle had debated whether to separate from Xena after Ares gave her life again. She'd taken two steps away from Xena on the beach after they returned from Mount Olympus, yet Gabrielle came back to Xena's side. She stood next to Xena and watched Eve toy with a spider in the tall grass. In that defining but quiet moment, Gabrielle realized one thing hadn't changed since she met Xena, she still would follow Xena anywhere. Gabrielle had fought far too hard over the years for the relationship she held with Xena to give up now.

But the warrior decided to take a mental backseat after the incident with the Twilight of the Gods. She decided to let Xena guide their destiny without any of her questions or comments. When Xena had mentioned the boat ride, she simply asked where and why, and Xena asked her to trust her. Gabrielle couldn't help but just do that so she climbed up the gangplank behind her partner.

"Are you warm enough?" a low timbered voice drifted up to the bard.

Gabrielle twisted her head to the right and caught a partial glimpse of her best friend. She could just make out Xena's open concern. "A little," she softly confessed.

The Warrior Princess wore her cloak, and she came up behind her partner. She slipped her arms around Gabrielle's waist and let the cloak cover them both.

Gabrielle quickly warmed up from Xena's body and the two cloaks' protection. "Thank you," she murmured.

"Mmmm," Xena replied in normal habit. She then echoed back, "Thank you too."

"For what?"

The tall, dark warrior tilted her head, and she had warm blue eyes. "For trusting me."

Gabrielle turned her head away just to hide her broken smile. "Always," she quietly swore.

Xena lowered her head down close to Gabrielle's and watched the blue waters pass them.

"Where are we headed, Xena?" Gabrielle's hands curled around the larger ones.

"You'll see... tomorrow." The tall woman pressed her lips against her lover's cheek. "It's special."

Gabrielle couldn't resist the warmth stirring in her. "Now I am interested."

The Warrior Princess softly chuckled but replied, "Good. You'll like this."

Gabrielle had a lopsided smile. After a beat, she shut her eyes and rested the back of her head into the crook of Xena's neck. "I'm exhausted."

"I am too," Xena admitted.

Gabrielle nibbled on her lower lip and debated whether to say more. She gave in. "After this year... it just seems like too much."

"I know," the older warrior whispered. She studied her partner's profile. "I am sorry, Gabrielle."

The bard lifted her head and looked at her lover. She slightly shook her head. "I'd repeat it all again, just for Eve and you."

"But what about yourself?" Xena argued.

Gabrielle shrugged at the question.

Xena was clearly distraught by the response but explained, "You sacrificed a lot for her... for me."

The bard lowered her eyes and thought out her next words carefully. She looked back up at Xena. "Maybe I did, but I don't regret it. I will do whatever I have to for my family."

Xena knew it was true, and she'd seen Gabrielle's dedication over and over this past year. She then honestly stated, "Including sacrificing your happiness."

"Xena, I'm not-" the bard tried to argue.

"Don't lie," Xena sharply cut off. "I know you're not happy, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle shrugged again and rationalized, "We can't be happy all the time, Xena. I'll get back there."

"I need you to get back there," Xena painfully confessed. She felt how unhappy her soul mate had become in the passing moons, and it hurt her, deeply. She knew she was the cause of it.

Gabrielle slipped her hand out from the cloak and brushed her fingertips across Xena's cheek. "I will... promise."

Xena pulled her lover in closer and leaned her chin into Gabrielle's temple. She and Gabrielle went back to studying the beautiful seas and allowed the cool breeze to make them closer. Gabrielle may have not regretted the year, but Xena regretted it. She felt she owed so much to Gabrielle, and Xena planned to make up for it, starting now. Xena had quickly deduced how unhappy Gabrielle was because Gabrielle had gone so silent.

Gabrielle stopped repeating her and Xena's conversation in her head. She was thankful that her lover had grown so perceptive about her over time. She unexpectedly turned to Xena and grasped the warrior's leather hips.

Xena questioningly peered down at her partner.

Gabrielle didn't both to explain. She slipped her hand behind Xena's neck then brought Xena down for a long, warm kiss. She felt fragments of their connection come back during the kiss. Gabrielle decided perhaps all was not lost.

Chapter 2

Xena's right hand shot out, grasped the rail of the bed, and kept her and Gabrielle from tumbling out of bed. The ship's roll was harder than last time, and Xena wasn't opt to falling out of bed.

Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked at her lover. "I hate this."

The warrior quietly laughed. "I agree." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes again. "It'll slow down once we get around this point."

"How you figure it's a point?" The bard closed her eyes too and snuggled her head under her soul mate's chin.

"The waves picked up and only half a candlemark ago. I felt the ship begin to turn so that means we're rounding a point." Xena had a faint grin because of the bard's dubious look. "There's wind coming around the point from the sea."

Gabrielle was still suspicious, but Xena was the pirate.

"Too many years on the seas," the former pirate mentioned as if reading the bard's mind.

Gabrielle chuckled then lowered her head down into the pillow. "I'm glad I wasn't there... you'd probably have hung me off the side of your ship for barfing too much."

Xena couldn't stop her laugh at the mild joke. She tugged the furs back over them. "Go back to sleep... we'll probably be there in two candlemarks or so."

The bard hoped she could fall back to sleep, but the rolling had subdued already. She let out a small yawn then closed her eyes. She unknowingly kissed Xena's chest in an affectionate manner.

Xena smiled at the old habit that she'd missed over the past months. She and Gabrielle drifted to sleep rather soon. But a few candlemarks later, several loud pounds to their quarter's door made them get up and get ready. The captain had ordered them to come up on deck.

Gabrielle had shot out of bed and quickly got ready after Xena told they needed to pack their things. The warrior needed to get her armor, boots, and weapons back on and secured.

"So want to tell me about this... town?" Gabrielle teased after coming out of the small head.

Xena grinned at her partner and stood up from the chair that was bolted to the floor. She had her boots on, which was the last thing. "You'll see shortly." She could tell the bard already suspected her.

Gabrielle shook her head, yet she had a soft grin. She collected their packs and made her way out of the quarters. She sensed Xena right behind her.

Once on deck they were greeted by the captain and his warm smile. Captain Alexander went by plain old Captain Alex and was a rather jolly man.

"Yes, the dinghy is ready for you." The captain led the warriors to the rail of the starboard side of the ship. He pointed over the rail.

Xena and Gabrielle glanced over the rail and spotted the small, wood rowboat bobbing up and down in

the water.

Gabrielle straightened up but kept her hand on the railing. She now had a chance to study the island that she'd spied once they were up on deck. She suspiciously eyed her partner.

The older warrior developed a smirk, yet she went serious and turned to the captain, an old friend. "Thank you, Alex."

"Anytime, my friend." The captain inhaled the salty air then explained, "The rowboat is stock for three days worth of food. I believe the island contains fruit. You'll both be fine 'til we return."

"Great. I owe you."

The captain instantly shook his head. "For old time's sake, Xena." He held out his arm.

Xena smiled warmly and took the large arm in a brisk shake. "Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow or the next day."

Alex grinned. "Enjoy the vacation." He released arms then went back towards the helm.

The tall warrior gazed over to her partner. "Come on."

The bard simply nodded and followed her lover while checking that the packs wouldn't fall off her shoulders. She came to a rope ladder that was slung against the haul of the ship.

Xena told Gabrielle to wait a moment while she boarded the rowboat. She hurried down the ladder, which slightly rolled from Xena's weight. She'd seen the supplies earlier, but Xena now realized how much the captain stocked her and Gabrielle. There were six, big packs filled to the brim.

Xena shook her head in disbelief, but she looked up and called, "Toss me the packs."

Gabrielle nodded and tossed down each pack one by one. Once they were gone, she climbed down the ladder and got into the rowboat.

"Grab the painter, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "The who?"

Xena quietly laughed and sat down in the middle seat of the boat. "The bowline." She pointed at the sailor back on the ship who was holding it out.

The bard slightly flushed. "Right." She yelled up, "Throw it!"

The sailor nodded and tossed the painter.

Gabrielle easily caught it and turned back around but sat down in the bow seat. She quickly coiled up the rope and watched her partner, who was arranging the oars into the oarlocks.

Xena turned the boat so that the stern faced the island despite her back faced it.

The bard had put the coiled line down on the floor, at her feet. She leaned back into her seat a bit, propped her arms up on the rowboat's rail, and enjoyed her lover's rowing. She crossed her right leg

and grinned at Xena's muscular, hot form. Gabrielle's butterflies returned in her stomach that she hadn't felt in a long time.

"What?" the Warrior Princess inquired. She had a smug look because she knew what Gabrielle was thinking and feeling.

The bard lifted her right hand and mentioned, "I feel like a queen." She pointed to the island behind Xena and teased. "That way."

Xena rolled her eyes but stayed focused on her rowing, and she could feel a sweat breaking out over her skin.

Gabrielle lightly swayed her foot in the midair that was crossed over her other one. She tilted her head and remarked, "You look good for a woman pushing her sixties."

Xena chuckled and shot back, "You're not bad yourself for being in your forties."

The bard smirked for a beat, but she looked back at the beautiful island not far from them. "So... how long are we staying on the island?"

"Until Alex makes it back... maybe a day or two. It'll depend on how quickly he makes his trade."

Gabrielle bobbed her head. She studied the island and tried to imagine what her and Xena were going to do until then. She didn't expect such plans from Xena because they both could go stir crazy just sitting around. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad, actually. "So what made you think of this idea?"

Xena grinned at the bard's question. "I think it was when I thought to myself that I'd like to disappear on an island with you for a day."

Gabrielle quietly laughed and shook her head. "I agree." She sighed contently. "It'll do us some good."

That was Xena's thought too. She stole a glance over her shoulder and noted they were close to the island.

Within a few moments, the rowboat ran onto the shoreline, and Xena hopped out with her soul mate. They pulled the boat onto the beach and unpacked all the supplies onto the beach.

The warrior went back to the boat and reached inside to pull out a long line. "I want to leave the boat out in the water."

Gabrielle glanced up. "Why is that?"

"Well right now it's high tide and if we leave it on shore it'll be stuck on land at low tide." Xena grew smug at her partner. "Now if you want to spend two candlemarks shoving the heavy rowboat into the water we can."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, that's alright."

"I agree." Xena turned to the main area of the island, which contained a tiny forest. "Come on, I wanna show you something."

The younger warrior followed behind, and they came to a tree.

Xena uncoiled the rope and dropped it to the ground. "Okay, we're going to tie this rope to this tree and tie the other end to the bow of the boat."

The bard crossed her arms against her chest. "So, then we can leave the rowboat floating out in deeper water."

"Exactly." The warrior wrapped the one end of the rope around the tree's trunk. "You're going to help me with this knot."

Gabrielle was skeptic but offered, "I'll try." She stepped up beside her companion and gazed at the end of the rope in Xena's right hand and the other in her right hand. "So, what knot are we doing?"

"We're going to do the bowline."

Gabrielle nodded and confirmed the name. "Bowline... sounds good."

"It's a perfect knot to use for anything." The warrior took the main part of the rope and made an eye and still held the tail in her left hand. "Okay, here's how you do this knot... there's a story with it."

The small warrior grinned. "Perfect for me."

Xena only grinned in response then seriously explained the knot. "First, with the eye here." Xena pointed. "Make sure that the main part of the line leads under the tail half."

"Okay."

Xena tilted her head at her partner. "Now the story is about a rabbit..." She wiggled the rope's tail in the air as an indicator to the rabbit. "A hole." She pointed the tail at the eye, which was the rabbit's hole. "A tree." She pointed the tail at the main line for the tree. "And a fox."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip yet her grin couldn't be stopped. She patiently listened to her lover's instructions.

"So," Xena continued, "the rabbit comes out of the hole." She brought the end through the hole. "He sees the fox and runs around the tree." Xena now wrapped the end around the main line. "Then runs back in the hole." She put the end back through the hole. "That's all to it." Finally, she tugged on the main line and tightened up the knot. "Honestly, this will hold a warship." She yanked on the main line one last time, and the knot only tightened. "And easy to undo." She quickly demonstrated it then held out the rope to her partner. "Your turn."

Gabrielle found it easy to demonstrate the knot simply because of her lover's story. She easily did it then jerked on the main line to tighten the knot. She grinned up at her partner.

"Nice job," the older warrior complimented. She then asked, "Can you do another in the metal eye on the bow of the rowboat?" She pointed to the eye that protruded from the rowboat.

Gabrielle nodded and took the rope's other end down to the rowboat.

Xena had followed but went into the rowboat. She dug around until she had a mushroom anchor, which Gabrielle curiously studied.

"It's a mushroom anchor," Xena explained, "for putting a boat on mooring." She grabbed the painter,

hastily did a bowline knot through the anchor's eye, and got her boots off next.

"Xena, I can take it out there," the bard offered.

The Warrior Princess devilishly smirked and teased, "But not too far out."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes at the height joke.

"Be back." Xena waded into the water and drew the rowboat out into the water until it was just over her chest. She then dropped the mushroom anchor to the sandy bottom. Once she arrived back on the beach, she said, "Let's set up a camp." But she asked, "On the beach?"

Gabrielle had her hands on her hips yet dropped them and agreed to the question. She knew it'd be chilly at night but that's what a campfire and Xena were for in times of cold.

Chapter 3

After the soul mates setup the camp, they went swimming in the blue water. To follow that, Xena suggested they just lay out under the sun. But it wasn't like either of them needed a tan considering all they did was be outside. However it was nice to relax and stay warm under the sun's touch. They then dressed into their bare minimal leathers and started dinner before sunset. Once Gabrielle had dinner ready, the sun was kissing the western horizon so they ate dinner in front of the sunset.

Xena finished her last gyro and set her wood plate off to the side. She had her ankles crossed, and she leaned back on her hands behind her.

Gabrielle was seated on the large, thin blanket beside her partner. She was crossed legged, hunched over her plate in her lap, and eating the last morsel of her gyro. She had to admit it was far better than she expected it to turn out. She grabbed her linen napkin after some of the last juices got onto her fingertips.

Xena noticed her friend was done. She took the wood plate and stacked it on hers off to the side. "That was very good, Gabrielle."

The bard just finished with her napkin and folded it up. She set it on her bare knee. "It was, wasn't it? I think the tomatoes were just at that ripe period."

"The curry really made it different," the warrior mentioned.

"Did you like that?" Gabrielle checked. She'd picked up the curry when her and Xena were last in Chin. She'd decided it would be a new spice for them to try, and she hadn't had a chance until now.

"I did," Xena answered, "it was a good idea to buy some."

The bard smiled at the compliment because it wasn't often that Xena brought up the meals she made so she appreciated it. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Xena had a soft smile too yet mentioned, "You always make good meals."

"Except that one meal when we saw Najara again," Gabrielle mentioned.

The older warrior pondered the statement then it came to her when Joxer mentioned he 'hated this' during dinner. Gabrielle agreed she'd made better meals then Xena smartly muttered that she agreed with Gabrielle. "I think Najara was just distracting you that night."

Gabrielle laughed but quickly grabbed her napkin and threw it at her soul mate. "Thanks," she deadpanned.

Xena tossed the napkin onto the plates. "Trust me... nothing is worse than Joxer's soup."

The bard shook her head over and over at the thought of Joxer's soup that could stop an army. "I think I'd eat your cooking over his soup any day." She saw Xena's glare so she whispered, "Gotcha." She and Xena went quiet, but the bard was thinking about something.

Xena waited to see what was on Gabrielle's mind and enjoyed the beautiful sunset. She hadn't done this in a long time.

"What you think Najara is doing now?"

The Warrior Princess continued to watch the sunset but casually remarked, "She's probably onto preaching Buddhism."

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. "She does seem to play musical religions."

The dark warrior softly grunted in agreement. "Whatever serves her purpose," she muttered.

Gabrielle nodded once then she stretched out her legs from their achy position. "I wonder what she'd think to see us still young as ever after twenty-five years."

Xena had a smug expression. "She really couldn't keep up with you then, Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled and patted her lover's knee. "I'm glad you can." She tilted her head and went quiet for awhile. She then mentioned, "It was a nice day, Xena."

"It was." Xena warmly smiled at her soul mate now then went back to the sunset.

Gabrielle had a lasting smile while she watched the last of the sun's top sink below the horizon. She slowly lost her smile though when something strange in her shifted. Her eyes fluttered a few times at the old, eerie sensation in the pit of her stomach that made her heart pound. She forced herself to ignore it because it was just impossible.

"Are you alright?" the warrior murmured. She could tell something was out of place.

The bard shook her head and peered up at her friend. "Yes... just a little worn out, I think." She brushed back her short hair that was dry now.

Xena was concerned but decided not to press it. She straightened up and placed her palm against the bard's nearest cheek. "How worn out?"

Gabrielle instantly let her eyebrows climb up her brow. She could feel the smoky hunger held in Xena's sharp blue eyes. She hadn't seen that look or Xena's sexy smile in a long time. "N-n-not that... worn out."

"Good," Xena huskily purred. She leaned down and captured her lover's lips for a passionate, heated kiss.

Gabrielle moaned and turned her body towards Xena, but she was stopped quickly. Instead, she found herself pushed onto her back, and her lover was over top of her. She had no time to ask anything because Xena took her lips in a searing kiss again. She then lost her thoughts when Xena's warm hands started to travel over her bare stomach.

Soon enough, Xena had her leathers off along with Gabrielle's, and her bare, hot skin melted into Gabrielle's soft body. For a few beats, she just remained still on top of Gabrielle and remembered how amazing it felt to be this close to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle slowly propped up her left leg, which brushed against Xena's outer thigh. "I forgot how good this feels." She combed her fingers through long, midnight tresses. She moaned at the warm kiss against her throat.

Xena had also forgotten how wonderful it felt to be skin against skin with her soul mate. For a moment, she felt like she was making love with Gabrielle for the first time simply because it'd be so long. But she already knew what Gabrielle enjoyed and what drove Gabrielle sexually mad, and Xena grinned at those thoughts. She traveled her lips back up and claimed another kiss.

The lovers spent most of the night remembering each other's bodies and desires. Eventually they found their way to the bedroll and furs for much needed warmth. They were both exhausted and faded away into each others arms after a beautiful day on the island. And today, Gabrielle had rediscovered her connection with Xena that she thought had been lost.

Chapter 4

By sunrise, Gabrielle groused to get out of the bedroll but surprisingly, Xena let her stay in the bedrolls and got her leathers. Instead, Xena spent time getting a breakfast prepared which was the one meal that Xena had quickly learned to make, just for Gabrielle. She found it very easy to do than dinner, and she discovered that it was most rewarding because Gabrielle's morning moods were far better than without breakfast.

The bard finally stirred a few candlemarks after sunrise, and she poked her head out from the furs. She swore she smelled a hot breakfast and that's what really woke her up. She focused past the furs and spied her lover finishing up eggs in a pan.

"Where'd you get those?" the bard asked in a deep voice.

Xena glanced over at her soul mate and smiled. "I found them floating around in the water."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, but she got up from the bedroll. She drug a fur with her to conceal her naked form. She then came over to the campfire and took a seat on the water worn log. She yawned and played with her messy hair.

The warrior slid the two eggs out from the pan and onto a wood plate, which already had a flatbread slice on it. She picked up the plate, napkin, and fork then delivered it to her lover.

Gabrielle graciously accepted it and hummed at the hot breakfast in her lap.

Xena picked up two mugs of Chin tea. She deposited the mugs in the sand near Gabrielle then she retrieved her plate of hot breakfast. She took a seat beside her lover on the log and enjoyed the quiet breakfast. She had to admit, she could fry up an egg better than anybody else.

After the couple were done, they sipped on their tea and quietly talked about their plans for once they returned to the mainland. Gabrielle had mentioned checking on the Amazons, who probably thought they were long dead. She also promised Xena they wouldn't stay too long.

Xena set her empty mug aside and took Gabrielle's from her hands. She'd been trying very hard during the conversation to ignore Gabrielle's bare shoulder that poked out from the furs. She couldn't take it anymore so she set the mugs down then leaned in to kiss the exposed flesh.

Gabrielle grinned at Xena's open affection, and she lifted Xena's head for a soft kiss. She and Xena soon found themselves back in the bedroll and affirming their love again. But by midday, they had to clean up the camp and pack the rowboat. Xena had spotted Alexander's ship not far off from the horizon, and she didn't want delay him.

Gabrielle was glad because she wasn't sure she could relax for another day. She was far too use to traveling, helping people, and seeing new or old places. But she was grateful for the nice break and alone time with her soul mate. She could sense that it'd help her, Xena, and their relationship after much of the year's turmoil.

In the late afternoon, Alexander's merchant ship dropped anchor not far from the island's shore. The sailors all waited on deck and watched the famous Warrior Princes and Battling Bard return to the ship. They quickly caught the rowboat's line that Gabrielle tossed up then they helped the warriors get back onboard.

Captain Alex warmly greeted the women back on the ship and asked about the vacation. Xena answered that it'd been well worth it. She again thanked him before he went back to helm. Xena then turned to her partner, who was leaning against the rail.

Gabrielle stared at the island and idly listened to the sailors running on the deck to fulfill the captain's orders. She felt a warm hand against her midback. She peered up at her lover. "Thank you for this, Xena."

Xena placed her freehand on the rail. "Thank you for coming." She knew that her partner could have refused. She'd also sensed that perhaps Gabrielle wanted to part ways the other day after Ares saved Gabrielle's life. She was very thankful that her soul mate was still at her side.

Gabrielle had her arms crossed over top of the rails. But she straightened up and let out a content sigh as if something felt right in her again.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle curiously gazed up at her lover because she heard the hint of need in Xena's tone.

"I love you," Xena whispered.

Gabrielle hadn't heard Xena say those words in some time. She reached over and covered her hand over

Xena's. She stepped in closer to her lover and softly promised, "I love you too, Xena... always." She then smiled, which Xena quickly returned to her. Gabrielle concluded that their love didn't need any work, but just the relationship had to be healed. She felt some happiness come back to her now that she and Xena had reconnected again.

The End.