

Red Wine by Rachel Judd

"I thought she died an old woman, locked up in her room," said Kate, as Liz ran an expensively manicured fingernail up and down the young woman's bare spine.

Liz purred in her lightly accented voice, "Not the real countess, no. She could inspire great loyalty in those who served her, enough that a maidservant was willing to take her place before they walled up her chambers. They exchanged clothes, a simple plan which nevertheless worked. And so the countess went free, looking like a peasant; and the peasant was saved from a terrible marriage and given enough to eat every day. So it worked out rather well for all involved."

Kate shuddered, both at the story and Liz's attention to her back. The two of them lay wrapped in satin sheets, sprawled over Liz's expansive canopy bed, looking out over Los Angeles from thirty stories up. The city glittered and sparkled beneath them, and a fire burned low in the fireplace.

"But wasn't she evil?" asked Kate.

"Her husband murdered countless Turks and was called a hero for it," answered Liz. "Is that important? Kiss me, my love, then pour us another glass of wine and we shall raise a toast to ourselves and our beauty."

Kate unexpectedly blushed and turned her face away. "No... no, I should be getting home."

"Is she really that important?" Liz pouted; an expression her full, cherry-red lips were especially suited for.

"Don't be that way, Liz. You know I... I would do anything for you. But I can't just abandon Marissa. Not now, she needs me. You know that."

"Then kiss me," Liz commanded, "and pour me a glass of wine anyway. I shall find solace at the bottom of the bottle in lieu of your arms tonight, and toast only myself."

Kate sighed as she dressed. Liz was everything Marissa was not – gorgeous where Marissa was merely cute, voluptuous where Marissa was lanky, passionate where Marissa was shy. While Kate couldn't help but feel guilty about cheating, it seemed to her as though making love to Liz made life with the temperamental artist tolerable.

Kate slowly kissed her lover goodbye. She could taste the musky spice of their lovemaking mixed with sweet wine, and it was almost enough to make her forget Marissa and stay. Almost.

As it turned out, Kate needn't have bothered coming home. Halfway there, she received a text message from Marissa – she'd be spending the night with her mother. Kate groaned inwardly. Marissa always came back more depressed after a night with her termagant mother.

That night, Kate dreamed. In her dream, she was the peasant woman from Liz's story; a woman who had judged a life in prison worth more than one of penury and abuse. Instead of being walled up in a Countess' rooms, however, she found herself jailed in a dank and rotten dungeon. Filthy straw piled against a mildewed wall, and the earthenware chamber pot in the opposite corner reeked of moldering ordure as rats the size of terriers fought over chicken bones.

A horrific, gnarled old woman shuffled down the stone steps, carrying a bowl of thick gray gruel. Kate tried to explain to the woman that she was innocent, that the real countess had escaped long ago. She begged to be let out. But the old woman simply laughed and called dream-Kate a fool for striking the devil's bargain with a succubus.

Kate woke with a start in the middle of the night, desperately missing Marissa. As bad as her nightmares could sometimes get, being able to cuddle up to her girlfriend and take in the scent of her hair always helped Kate get back to sleep. Tonight, though, there was nothing to do except stare at the ceiling until sunrise.

Marissa came home the next evening. Kate felt relieved to see her giddy and relaxed. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but harbor a small resentment against her girlfriend for letting her suffer nightmares alone. Her resentment persisted throughout the day, and an argument broke out after dinner. The fight ended, as it always did, with Marissa sobbing in her studio and Kate pleading for her to come out.

Marissa emerged after only twenty minutes, but the make-up sex was mechanical and passionless. Kate was left feeling unsatisfied, and fantasized about Liz as Marissa fell asleep in her arms. Fortunately, her sleep was free of nightmares. She dreamed only of Liz: the taste of her wine-soaked kisses, the feel of her impossibly smooth skin beneath Kate's fingertips.

An attempt at goodwill was made the next night, when Kate took Marissa to a club on Hollywood Boulevard. The thick bass thrummed relentlessly, getting inside Kate's bones. Colored strobe lights flashed, silhouettes danced on platforms and made love to stainless steel poles, breasts and hips gyrating in time to the beat.

Kate forgot herself in the rhythm, gave herself over to the music. She soon lost track of Marissa as a gorgeous redhead danced up to her. For a moment, Kate thought it was Liz.

It wasn't. Too tall, too skinny, and not nearly as graceful. Her disappointment didn't keep Kate from staring unashamedly at her new dance partner. Kate felt overwhelmed by a desire to grab the redhead and start kissing her, to run her hands all over the girl's body and make passionate love right there on the dance floor. The urge felt so strong that Kate had to flee to the smoking patio and get some air.

Marissa followed a few minutes later. “Hi, sweetheart. I brought you an appletini.” As Marissa held the glass out to her, Kate’s lust transformed into anger. She looked at her girlfriend, with her huge mooncalf eyes and frizzy brown hair and scrawny frame, offering up to Kate the appletini like a pathetic supplicant.

“Goddammit Marissa,” Kate swore as she knocked the expensive drink from Marissa's hand. “I told you I switched to wine *three months ago!* Are you *trying* to piss me off, or are you really that stupid?” The glass shattered, spilling liquor and apple slices across the concrete patio. Kate stalked off, ignoring Marissa's rapidly tearing eyes and the horrified expressions of the other women on the patio.

Kate stormed out of the club with no new destination in mind. She strolled up and down Hollywood Boulevard for awhile, glaring at the Hollywood glitterati in their candle-lit cafes.

Somehow, she ended up in Liz's penthouse again. Their lovemaking was raw and intense to the point of pain, as it always was. Kate was left with a dozen bite and nail marks all over in addition to aching thighs, and had given as good as she got.

Basking in the afterglow, she took a drag on a long cigarette before passing it back to Liz.

“I just feel so trapped,” she confided. “You know? She's such a child at times. She never stands up for herself. It's like I'm her second mom.” Liz only nodded sympathetically, urging Kate to continue as she re-tied the canopy curtains to the bedposts.

“I mean... I don't know what I mean, Liz. I feel old next to her. I think that's it. She's only 22, I'm almost 30. When I was her age... it just seems like she's wasting her life with me, Liz. But I can't let her go.”

“Do you need her?” Liz asked poignantly.

“Fuck, Liz, I don't know. I need you, I know that much,” Kate answered.

Liz could only smile enigmatically. “Is the age your main concern?”

Kate shrugged. “I wish I was twenty-two again. So many things I would do over, and Marissa's making the same mistakes.”

“So you wish to save her from herself,” Liz said as she poured fresh wine for the both of them. Kate drank, savoring the complex bouquet as Liz had taught her to do.

“I wish...” Kate trailed off, staring into the quietly burning fire.

Liz threw a handful of sweet-smelling potpourri herbs onto the logs, then brought out a silver-backed hairbrush and began running it through Kate's hair.

“You have such lovely hair,” said Liz. “Like sunlight shining through fresh honey. In the old days, a woman could sell hair like this and live comfortably for months.”

“It's not all that,” Kate demurred. “When I was younger, it was much fuller. I suppose this is

what I get after a decade of bleaching it.”

“Nonsense, darling. Women would kill for hair like yours, skin like yours, youth like yours.”

“Maybe that's why I'm so upset with Marissa,” Kate mused. “I mean, I've accomplished a lot, really. I've got a great career and solid finances. I'm in a really good place for someone my age. I just can't stand the thought of growing old... getting gray and wrinkled. No one respects an old woman.”

Liz agreed as she continued to brush Kate's hair. “No, no one respects an old woman. You're right, my love. What is life, but an eternal quest to retain a youth we wasted, grasping at straws to duck the reaper's scythe?”

“You know,” said Kate, “I can almost understand why she did it.”

“Marissa? Do what?”

“No, not her. The Countess. You brought her up the other day, remember? I was thinking about her. She was a monstrous woman,” said Kate, wincing as Liz yanked at a tangle in the hairbrush. “But I can understand why she would have looked so hard for youth. And I guess it was different in those days...” she trailed off, not sure how to complete her thought.

Though Kate couldn't see it, Liz nodded. “They were just common peasant girls, doomed to die anyway. Starvation, plague, Turks. Most women died birthing children. Life back then was a constant choice between the frustration of abstinence and the threat of death in childbed. The Countess gave them a chance at their own immortality, as part of her.”

“That's kind of morbid,” Kate said.

“Life is morbid, a struggle against death and decay. The weak are preyed upon by the strong. I find no fault in what the Countess did. She had the knowledge, the power and the will. Why shouldn't she have used it?”

For that, Kate had no answer. Liz finished brushing her hair, then sent Kate back to Marissa.

After the scene in the club, Kate dreaded facing Marissa again. When Kate got home, though, Marissa was already asleep. On the kitchen table sat a dozen red roses and a new bottle of merlot with a bow around the neck. Kate fell asleep that night with her face buried in Marissa's soft curls, silently sobbing though she didn't know why.

That night, even with Marissa sleeping next to her, Kate dreamed terrible dreams.

She dreamed she was on a dirty city bus, trundling slowly through downtown. It passed City Hall, the courthouse, a forest of tall skyscrapers, entering the dingy and chaotic garment district. Seven large and boisterous women boarded on 7th Street, wearing what Kate thought of as typical gang attire. Kate lowered her eyes, trying to make herself as unobtrusive as possible. When she looked down, however, she was horrified to see her hands were wrinkled and liver-spotted.

The seven gangster women all took seats next to Kate. Almost immediately, the women began to harass her. They called her grandma, called her a hag, threatened to steal her knitting and poison her cats. Kate tried to stand up, but the women quickly surrounded her, calling her old and ugly and weak. She tried to fight them off, but they were right – she was too old and weak, and all she could do was flail ineffectually at her tormentors. This only amused them more, encouraged them to become crueler. As the driver stared on, continuing to drive the bus in silence, the seven women began to beat Kate.

Kate screamed, and the dream changed.

Kate swam in a luxurious pool, next to an expansive Malibu mansion. She looked down and was relieved to see she was young again. Her body, wearing a couture bikini, was toned and fit in a way it hadn't been since high school. The water felt warm and pleasant, with a full moon hanging huge and yellow just above the horizon. On a table sat two glasses full of rich red wine.

Kate blinked, and Liz was there, drinking one of them. Another blink, and Marissa sat opposite Liz, a pale and tortured corpse slumped in the chair.

The consistency of the water changed subtly, and Kate looked down, realizing with horror she now swam in a pool of blood. She looked back up, and bloodless, drained bodies were stacked like cordwood at the poolside.

Kate screamed again, and the dream changed.

She dreamed she was in a castle, a chilly fortress made from imposing black granite. Torches burned in sconces on the wall, casting long shadows up and down the hallway. She began walking towards a solid oak door at the end of the hallway. Spiders in their webs watched from the vaulted ceiling, and she could feel their eyes on her.

Pushing open the door, Kate saw Liz had suspended Marissa above a polished stone basin. Instead of her expensive haircut, though, Liz's hair now fell to her waist in loose red curls. A scarlet and gold gown had been pushed down, freeing Liz's perfect, round breasts. Marissa wore the tattered homespun of a peasant. Blood soaked her rough wool clothes, but more trickled down into the basin below.

Kate tried to make Liz stop, but it was as if Kate was watching a movie – she could do nothing to affect what unfolded before her. As Marissa slowly bled out, Liz continued to undress. When she was completely naked, Liz stepped into the basin. Kate screamed, and the dream ended.

Kate woke in an aching sweat, tangled in her cotton sheets, the bed cold and Marissa gone.

When Kate finally stopped crying, she checked the clock – 7 am. Far too early to be up on a Sunday morning, but Kate knew trying to go back to sleep was futile. Briefly, she wondered where Marissa might be before deciding she was most likely out jogging. There was no reason to be upset, no

reason to worry.

When noon rolled around, Marissa still wasn't home. She wasn't responding to calls or text messages. It wasn't till three that Kate finally got a response, *Home at 7*. The terseness frustrated her, but Kate could do nothing about that.

Kate decided to make dinner as a peace offering. Something nice, something Marissa liked. Poached salmon, rosemary potatoes and green beans. Their third date, when Marissa had finally spent the night, Kate had cooked that. They had watched romantic movies by candlelight and gotten giggly drunk on homemade margaritas. Kate had expected things to go slow with the inexperienced Marissa, but the girl had surprised her by pouncing on Kate. They had barely made it to the bedroom that night, and Marissa moved in two months later.

Kate smiled at the memory. Maybe they could share the wine Marissa had bought. While at the grocery store, Kate even bought a few scented candles and some massage oil, hoping for the best. The cashier could obviously tell what was going on, for she smiled conspiratorially while ringing Kate up and wished her a great evening. Kate enthusiastically returned the sentiment, enjoying the first truly good mood she'd had in weeks.

Kate barely thought about Liz as she cooked for Marissa. The only time Liz entered her mind was when Kate accidentally cut herself. She cried out, even though there was no one to hear, and immediately put her finger to her mouth. The bitter tang reminded her of the wine she'd so often drunk at Liz's penthouse.

Kate found herself caught up in imagining what her lover's blood might taste like. Liz had such pale, smooth skin – Kate was instantly aroused by the fantasy of cutting into it, watching the blood well up, licking her perfect skin. It overwhelmed her, the way dancing with the redhead at the club had. Kate needed to go outside and smoke three cigarettes before she could calm down enough to continue cooking.

Marissa didn't come home till eight, but at least had the grace enough to apologize and express sufficient gratitude at the dinner Kate had prepared. Though Kate had perhaps overly optimistic expectations regarding the warmth salmon and potatoes could evoke, even when combined with romantic candles, they nevertheless managed a civil meal.

Kate made a point of asking after Marissa's mother, who had apparently started taking ballroom dancing classes. In turn, Marissa made sure to ask how Kate was doing at work, and acted appropriately pleased when Kate relayed that she was up for a promotion soon.

Kate's attempt at seduction over chocolate and strawberry sorbet was successful, and they soon ended up in bed. However, lifting Marissa's shirt, Kate was immediately disturbed by what she saw.

Sets of four parallel welts on each of Marissa's shoulders, some so deep they had even broken the skin.

"Marissa? What's this?" she asked, tracing one of the lines with her fingernail.

Marissa froze, and Kate could sense her heartbeat racing. "Umm...." was all she could say.

But Kate knew what they were. Hadn't she left similar marks on Liz's back? Ignoring her own hypocrisy, Kate exploded with fury.

"Oh, my god, I can't believe you! You've been cheating on me! Haven't you? Some other woman left these, didn't she?" she accused.

Marissa rolled over to face Kate, pulling her shirt back down. "Look, Kate -" she began, but Kate cut her off.

"Don't 'Look, Kate,' me!" Kate yelled. "How could you?"

She slapped Marissa, as hard as she could. Marissa began to cry as Kate's palm print raised another welt on her cheek, a match to the scratches on her shoulders. The sight only inspired Kate to further anger.

"You ungrateful little *bitch!* After all I've done for you, this is what I get?" Kate continued her diatribe against Marissa, who could only wilt under Kate's verbal assault, cradling her cheek and trying to hide her tears from Kate by veiling them with her hair. It wasn't until Kate insulted Marissa's anonymous lover that Marissa finally snapped and retorted.

"Yes, Kate!" Marissa screamed. "Yes, I cheated on you! Yes, I fucked another woman today! Do you want to know *why?* Because you've been so god-awful cruel to me! You're never home, and when you are, you're insulting me or humiliating me. And then you do something nice, like make dinner, but that doesn't make anything *better!* It just makes it hurt more the next time you're mean to me!"

Kate could only splutter in anger as Marissa continued on her tirade, explaining in detail all of Kate's failings as a lover and a human being.

"Well, fine then!" Kate finally broke in. "If I'm such a horrible person, then why the fuck are you even *with* me?"

To that, Marissa had no ready response. She just stared at Kate for awhile, before saying in a quiet, tear-choked voice, "Because I loved you, Kate. But you're right. You are a terrible person, and I'm leaving you."

With that simple, heartbreaking statement, Marissa left the room. Kate stayed where she was, stunned and in agony. She heard the apartment door slam, and began to sob.

The next two days were an exquisite blend of suffering and martyrdom for Kate. She slept too much, ate too much, drank too much, and cried far too much, wallowing in self-pity and abject misery.

Licking her wounds to near distraction, Kate tortured herself by replaying in her head every cruel and petty thing she had ever done to Marissa. She tried calling, hoping to apologize.

“Marissa, I’m sorry,” slurred Kate, drunkenly pouring out her soul to Marissa’s mother’s answering machine. “You’re right, I am a terrible person. I’ve always been a terrible person. But you... you are what made me a *good* person. Because you’re so damn good yourself, I can’t -”

The phone picked up.

“Mar?” Kate asked, hopefully.

“This is Marissa’s mother, Kate. I don’t know where Marissa is, she hasn’t been by in over a week. You’re going to have to stop calling.” A click, then a dial tone. Kate left message after message on Marissa’s cell phone, but none of her calls were ever answered. A long, impassioned e-mail went ignored.

On the third day, Kate came home from work to discover all of Marissa’s possessions gone. Only a few small items remained, things Marissa obviously no longer cared for. Kate finally broke down and called Liz.

Liz sounded wholly unsurprised. She cooed and comforted as appropriate, finally instructing Kate to bring over every photo, every memento she had of Marissa.

Kate spent the better part of an afternoon gathering together all the photographs of the two of them together in happier days – at dance clubs, on their vacation to Hawai’i, even the picture they’d taken of the charred turkey their first Thanksgiving together. Old love letters and Valentine’s Day cards were dug out of desk drawers and put with the photographs. A few of Marissa’s ridiculous scrunchies and a belt Kate had never liked joined them.

Liz answered her door in a silk bathrobe, the omnipresent glass of wine in her hands.

“You poor, poor girl,” she sympathized, “I can’t imagine how awful things must be for you right now. Come in, come right in.”

The box was set on a table as Liz poured Kate a glass of wine and prattled on, her velvety voice filling the entire penthouse. “You know, my sweetest Kate, I think you probably don’t want to hear this, but I truly believe it was for the best. After all, Marissa was holding you back. You never seemed happy. And besides,” she said as she handed Kate her wine, “now we can *really* be together, once you let her go.”

“I know, Liz. I know all this. It’s just... it’s still hard. What if... what if I really am a terrible person?”

“Nonsense. Marissa just couldn’t understand you. A beautiful, complex woman like you – well, darling, you said it yourself. She was just too young. And now you’re both free. Bring that box into the

bedroom.”

Kate struggled a bit with juggling the unwieldy carton and a nearly-full glass of wine. She spared a moment to glare after Liz, who obliviously walked into the bedroom. Finally managing to balance the box on her hip, Kate followed.

Liz had closed the canopy on her bed and built up the fire. “Now, my love,” she instructed, “we’re going to burn all that trash with you. Every single thing that reminds you of Marissa, or ties you to her. Into the fire it goes.”

“What?” Kate asked, shocked.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised. You must have known I had something like this in mind. Why else would I want you to bring reminders of the other woman in your life?”

Liz reached into the box, and pulled out a photograph. “What’s this?” she demanded.

Kate stammered, “It’s the turkey from our first Thanksgiving together. Neither of us had ever cooked a turkey before. We got the temperature wrong, the time wrong, we completely forgot to baste it and it caught fire in the oven. We took a picture of it, then threw it out and went to the Hilton buffet.”

Liz casually tossed the picture into the fire. “I don’t even pretend to know why you would bother to make a record of such incompetence. What’s this?”

“That’s from Valentine’s Day, two years ago. Marissa made that for me in art class.”

“It must have been kindergarten art class, judging from the amount of paint she splashed on. People only *make* gifts when they’re too poor or lazy to buy something of value.”

“It’s supposed to be modern art,” Kate protested weakly as the card joined the photograph on the fire. Liz withdrew another memento, a framed picture, and demanded to know its story.

“Another gift she made for me, Christmas last year. The picture inside is... you don’t really care, do you?”

“Of course I care, beloved. That’s why I’m doing this, so you can stop wallowing in misery and realize how free you are. Tell me something awful about it, then throw it on the fire.”

Kate sighed, contemplating. “Nearly every holiday, she’d make me something as a present, like the card or this picture frame. I used to think it was sweet, but now I see she was just fishing for compliments. She wanted me to approve her work, and I had to, if she gave it to me as a gift.” Kate tossed the frame onto the fire, watching the wood char and the paint bubble.

“Good. Now something else,” Liz ordered.

Kate reached into the box, and drew out a belt. “I always hated this. It’s some stupid thing she bought in San Francisco for sixty dollars. I think it describes her perfectly. She’s this hipster who’s trying to live a rebellious, freewheeling artist lifestyle. But she’ll never get there, because she’s too shy,

too worried with what people think of her. She'd rather buy some stupid sixty dollar beaded belt from a boutique and think it makes her cool, when the guy on the Venice boardwalk sells this stuff for five bucks each.”

Onto the fire it went.

“And these scrunchies,” she continued, drawing a handful out of the box. “Who wears a scrunchie who isn't twelve years old? Sure, maybe she needs them to hold her hair back when she works in her studio. But she wears them all the goddamn time, even when we go out to the movies or dinner or somewhere *nice*. She'd be so much prettier if she did something halfway decent with her hair, instead of the fucking scrunchies.”

The cotton fabric caught fire quickly, and the elastic began to melt over the logs.

She drew out a small white card, and paused. “I remember this. It's an invitation to my cousin's wedding, three years ago. It's where we first met. She wasn't a guest, but her aunt was the wedding planner and Marissa was helping out. I thought she was the most beautiful person in the room. She wore blue jeans and a button-down shirt in a room full of people wearing evening gowns, and she didn't seem the slightest bit self-conscious. I think that's what first attracted me to her, how she could be so perfectly comfortable in her own skin.”

Kate coughed softly, wiped away a tear, and threw the card onto the fire. “Of course, I learned later on that she was fine wearing blue jeans at a wedding because she was so goddamn oblivious all the time. Like the damn scrunchies. Or the fucking belt. She's so goddamn needy all the time, whining for approval and begging not to be left alone.”

Kate had to pause to wipe away even more tears as Liz silently encouraged her to continue with a hand laid gently on her shoulder.

“She's really pathetic. I can see that now. She's got crap self-esteem, she reacts to life like a fucking teenager, and she has the gall to walk out on me when I call her on it. I'm glad she left. I'll be so much happier with you, Liz.” There was a sound, almost like a squeak, from the covered canopy bed behind Kate. Looking up from the fire, Kate asked Liz what she'd heard.

“Why, darling, that's something of a surprise. Hold still.”

Liz slipped a satin blindfold over Kate's eyes, and repeated her command to stand perfectly still. Kate could hear her rustling through the room, tying back the canopy and pouring more wine.

After a few moments of silence, Liz whipped the blindfold from Kate's eyes.

Marissa lay on the bed, wearing a thin chemise which hid almost nothing. Scarlet silk cords kept her bound and gagged, and tears of abject humiliation ran down Marissa's face. Kate felt hollow to see them.

Marissa struggled to get free, but Liz had tied her knots too tightly. The woman was trapped, like a fly in a spider's web.

Liz laughed with delighted cruelty as the lovers beheld each other. She cuddled up to Marissa's bound body. "Despite your recent tirade of disgust, I can see why you found her so appealing once. I could live forever on her kisses."

Liz pressed her lips to Marissa's slightly shining brow, then licked gently at the tears running down her face. Marissa looked as shocked as Kate felt, their double betrayal revealed as Liz trailed kisses down Marissa's soft body.

Kate realized Liz had *meant* for Kate to see the marks she'd left on Marissa's skin. She'd seduced them both, only to drive them apart.

Running her fingers along Marissa's trembling arm, Liz looked up at Kate, a callous glint in her eyes. "Did you know, Kate my darling, that your Marissa has a penchant for blood sports?"

"Liz...why?" was all Kate could get out.

"Because deep down, we both know you want this. Watch, my beloved."

Liz reached over Marissa, opening a drawer in the nightstand. She withdrew a knife - a dagger. Razor-sharp and slightly curved, Liz grasped the gold hilt firmly and began to trace the curve of Marissa's hip. The skin parted easily, blood welling up out of the shallow cut as Marissa shuddered and moaned, pleading for forgiveness from Kate with her eyes. Liz bent over and licked the skin, lapping up the blood.

Kate felt rooted to the spot, unable to move. She watched as Liz shifted her attentions to Marissa's bound wrist. The dagger sliced through old scar tissue, making a deeper cut than than the one on Marissa's thigh, and blood came. Liz took a wine glass from the table and held it under Marissa's wrist, catching the blood. Not a trickle, but a gush. Marissa screamed in pain and shock, struggling harder against her ties.

"Liz, no," protested Kate. "What are you doing?"

"Hush, my love," Liz soothed as she opened a decanter and mixed its contents with Marissa's fresh blood. "Love means sacrifice."

Liz drank the entire glass in one draught before moving to Marissa's thigh. Kate was terrified by the utterly inhuman look on Liz's face. She tried to intervene, but her body failed her. Kate couldn't move. It was like a nightmare, only more vivid and horrifying. Kate prayed to wake up, knowing there would be no answer.

With the curved dagger, Liz savagely ripped open an artery. Marissa struggled harder, screaming through her gag. Tears ran freely down Marissa's face as she pled silently with Kate, "*Don't*

do this to me. Don't let me die."

But Kate knew it was already too late for Marissa. Marissa's skin began to grow pale, her struggles diminishing as blood soaked the bed beneath her. All Kate could do now would be trying to comfort Marissa as she died. But Kate felt helpless as she watched Liz collect her girlfriend's lifeblood in a wine glass. Liz, Kate knew, would react poorly to any gesture of compassion Kate tried to make.

Liz offered the glass to her lover. "You know who I am," she said. "And you know what I can offer you. I have endured centuries, and I will endure centuries more. Join me, my beloved Kate. Drink, and we shall be as one forever. Drink the life's blood of your beloved, and join me in eternity as my beloved."

Kate couldn't look at either Liz or Marissa, dropping her eyes to the wine glass and the reddish-black mixture swirling within. Revulsion slowly gave way to desire, to lust and longing and greed. She took the glass, warm and slightly slippery. She could smell the earthy tang of Marissa's blood mixed with a dark, unfamiliar spices. A few drops of blood ran down the stem of the glass and dripped onto the plush carpet.

Liz urged Kate on. "Come, my love. We have spoken of this, of being young and beautiful forever. You will never age, never be lonely, never grow wrinkled or grey."

Marissa was dying as Kate watched, held prisoner by Liz's gaze and Kate's own desires.

"Drink," Liz commanded.

Kate drank.

Thank you for reading "Red Wine"! I hope you enjoyed it!

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