

AUTO DA FE

By

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an original story

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EXT. PATH IN WOODS - DAY

Early morning, just before sun-up in a small European duchy, circa 1350. The DUKE a world-weary man in his mid 30s, rides ahead of a FARMER driving a hay wagon. (This Farmer is fairly well off and in his 50s.) Wind whistles through the trees.

They pass an outcropping of rock, festooned with vines and lichen. The path, already faded, disappears. The draught horse drawing the wagon comes to a stop. The Duke's horse likewise stops.

The Duke looks back at the Farmer, who registers an uncertain look.

DUKE

What?... It is this direction, is it not?

The Farmer hesitantly nods. They stare at each other. The Farmer snaps his reins. His horse and the cart go a few steps backward. The Duke's horse makes up its own mind to turn around join the side of the Farmer's horse.

FARMER

My lord, I think we're here.

DUKE

You don't know precisely?

FARMER

Hard to explain, my lord, but it never looks the same, each time. Now, there's supposed to be a bowl...

DUKE

Bowl?

The Farmer catches sight of something.

FARMER

(points it out to the Duke)
Ah. There.

There is a plain, wooden bowl, of a size that could hold about two servings of stew.

FARMER

(cont.)
That's where you place your tribute.

(CONTINUED)

DUKE

Very well.

The Duke dismounts, goes to the bowl and deposits into it a finely-wrought gold ring, graced with a large emerald.

He steps back and looks around.

DUKE

(cont.)

And now...?

FARMER

There's this hut...

He jumps a little when he spots something else, as do the horses.

FARMER

(cont.)

There!

What was nowhere in evidence before the disappearing path is now plainly before the men and their horses: a patchwork hut, measuring about ten feet around and six feet high, with a smoke hole at the top.

The Duke jumps a little when he sees it, too.

The Farmer steps off the wagon and goes to the back, where, wrapped in thick blankets, the DUCHESS lies sick and out of it. The Farmer takes her in his arms and goes to the Duke.

DUKE

This physic will cure my wife?

FARMER

I'm sure of it.

They proceed toward the hut.

INT. PHYSIC'S HUT - DAY

The Duchess is laid out on a hide, her skin is clammy and sickly pale. There are small dark spots showing on her forearms. Her breathing is labored and wheezing.

The PHYSIC inspects the ring he dropped in the bowl outside. She doesn't look older than 50. Her adornments are simple.

(CONTINUED)

PHYSIC

Excellent! This is perfect.

DUKE

It came from a mine in Persia...

The Physic dislodges the gem from its setting, drops it into a mortar and pestles it to a powder, as the Duke looks on, incredulously.

PHYSIC

And it's the right amount for the dosage, too!

DUKE

...I see...

The Physic sprinkles the emerald dust into a small cauldron of boiling liquid. Chanting an incantation in an ancient tongue, she adds a couple of other ingredients and then ladles it into a bowl.

She dips a cloth into the bowl, absorbing the liquid, and squeezes it into the Duchess' mouth.

DUKE

(cont.)

So will she be well?

The Physic places another cloth over the Duchess' forehead.

PHYSIC

If you treat the Black Death early enough, the recovery comes soon.

DUKE

I...I'm grateful to you, madam...

The Physic turns to a large bowl to wash her hands.

PHYSIC

It's not every day I receive nobility.

The Duke nervously looks around at the hut's adornments, not wanting to look at his wife. Small pouches and vials of this and that. There is an altar with various items laid out on it.

Surrounding it are deities of various types, early pagan, Roman, even a Madonna and Child icon and a statuette of the risen Christ.

(CONTINUED)

DUKE

So...You believe in the Blessed Mother?

PHYSIC

Among other things. She is a divine gift.

DUKE

And the Christ?

PHYSIC

He Who Overcomes Suffering is always good to have around.

DUKE

...Among these
(indicates a Pan figurine)
graven images??

PHYSIC

What troubles you?

DUKE

It's... I had no idea you were real until now. All this time, I thought you were some ancient legend.

PHYSIC

I am not some ancient legend?

DUKE

No. You are presently a dilemma.

PHYSIC

Explain.

DUKE

Well, you see, as of the morrow, I am receiving a very important visitor. A high representative of my church,...

PHYSIC

Ah, look!

She summons the Duke over to view the Duchess' progress: Her breathing is now normal, the blemishes recede from her arms, color returns to her cheeks.

(CONTINUED)

PHYSIC

(cont.)

She'll awaken shortly.

The Duke crosses himself and takes his wife's hand to kiss it. He turns to the Physic.

DUKE

Thank you. (pause)
There is a convent, St. Brigid's,
twenty miles east of here. You will
find refuge within their walls.

PHYSIC

From what, pray?

DUKE

You don't understand. My visitor,
he doesn't go in for any of...
(indicates pagan ornamentation)
...these.

PHYSIC

What's wrong with them?

DUKE

Uhm... (chooses his words) The Holy
Father, the head of my church,
recently received word of a
sorceress inhabiting my woods and
has sent someone --.

PHYSIC

YOUR woods?

DUKE

Ah, I,... My visitor hunts your
kind! If his men find you here,
they will kill you!

PHYSIC

Find me? In MY woods? HA!

In a noiseless instant, the Physic, her hut and its contents are gone, and what remains are the Duke and the Duchess in open air. The Farmer catches sight of them and jumps.

FARMER

(in the distance)

My Lord!

The Duchess blinks awake and sits up, startling the Duke.

(CONTINUED)

DUCHESS
Husband?

DUKE
(hugs Duchess)
Dearest!

DUCHESS
I'm fine... Can we go home?

The Farmer hurries toward the couple.

EXT. DUCAL MANOR - NIGHT

We SEE flickering light from one of the oblong windows. We HEAR arguing voices. We MOVE IN to SEE inside.

DUCHESS
(OS)
I can't believe you let him come here!

INT. DUCAL BEDROOM/OFFICE

The Duke sits at a desk, piled with various petitions, stationery and ledgers.

DUKE
What am I supposed to do? Defy a pope? Your uncle - a king - couldn't refuse this pope's Inquisitor.

DUCHESS
Uncle has the backbone of a caterpillar.

DUKE
And we neither have his majesty's army nor his treasury. If the king seeks to keep Rome's favor, we must also. Get you to bed, I'll join you when I'm done with these.

He looks at a stack of documents requiring his signature and dips his quill in the requisite inkwell.

The Duchess gazes at him for a moment, then goes to leave the room.

(CONTINUED)

DUKE

(cont.)

Where are you going?

DUCHESS

To the chapel. To pray to the
Blessed Virgin.

DUKE

For how long?

DUCHESS

As long as necessary.

DUKE

That physic in the woods can take
care of herself, you know.

DUCHESS

My prayers are not for the
witch. They're for those who
cannot afford enchanted medicines
for their ailments and for those
whose loyalty to Rome is doubted,
for they will suffer the
Inquisitor's fires. And for our
sons, for they will surely be
pressed by the Inquisitor to fight
and die in endless crusades. Those
are for whom I'm praying. Don't
stay up for me.

The Duchess exits. The Duke rubs his brow and returns to
his documents.

CLOSEUP - VOTIVE CANDLE

being lit by the Duchess and put among the others.

INT. CHAPEL

Having lit a candle, the Duchess pads to a private pew
facing a statue of Virgin Mary, kneels and pulls out a set
of rosaries.

DUCHESS

(crosses herself)

In nómine Patris, et Fílii, et
Spíritus Sancti.

She takes hold of the crucifix at the end of the rosary and
stares reverently at the Virgin.

(CONTINUED)

DUCHESS
 (cont.)
 Credo in Deum Patrem
 omnipoténtem,...

We FADE to...

INT. PHYSIC'S HUT - NIGHT

In the wee small hours in the light of a single candle, the Physic contemplates the Virgin Mary icon.

PHYSIC
 (in a very ancient tongue)
 ...Blessed Mother, You above all
 others,...forgive your children.
 Show mercy to the wretched.

She is about to utter something further, when her eyes suddenly widen. She stiffens and then puts an ear to the ground. Distant hoof beats.

EXT. DUCHY - DAWN

Dawn breaks through the woods bringing the Physic's hut into view. We quickly PAN through the woods, past pastures, past the Ducal manor, past the town to the road leading into it, where we SEE a distant cavalcade approaching.

CHAPEL

The Duchess continues to recite the rosary. A YOUNG MONK approaches her.

DUCHESS
 Ave María, grátia plena, Dóminus
 tecum.

YOUNG MONK
 Your ladyship?

DUCHESS
 Benedícta tu in muliéribus, et
 benedíctus fructus ventris tui,
 Iesus.

Her gaze doesn't waver from the Virgin. At a loss for what else to do, the Monk leaves.

DUCAL BEDROOM/OFFICE

Dawn finds its way inside the room, illuminating the Duke, who is asleep at his desk. A young PAGE quietly approaches and whispers in his ear.

The Duke jolts awake.

CLOSEUP - HANDS

A pair of gentleman's hands fingers the onyx beads of an opulent rosary ending in a bejeweled crucifix. There is a large ruby ring on one of the fingers.

INT. COACH

The hands belong to the INQUISITOR, a clean-shaven, austere cardinal in his 60s. He barely mouths the rosary prayers as he rides.

EXT. PHYSIC'S HUT

The Physic exits her hut into the dawn's fog. She cradles a tennis ball sized gall in her hands. She gently kisses it, and a tiny, green wasp emerges from a hole and buzzes off. The Physic gazes off in the direction of the wasp's flight, the palace.

EXT. DUCAL MANOR/COURTYARD

The large, black coach of the Inquisitor pulls near heavy, wooden door, an entrance to the ducal residence.

The ducal door swings open, and then that of the Inquisitor's coach. The Inquisitor steps out of his vehicle, his finely wrought boots a contrast to the austere sandals and muddy shoes of his attendant brethren and guards.

INT. DUCAL THRONE ROOM/OFFICE

The Duke's throne room has a wood-beamed ceiling opens out to a balcony overlooking the courtyard. It is furnished with two simple thrones, one occupied by the Duke, the other empty. A great broadsword hangs between them. They face heavy wooden doors, several yards away.

The walls hang with fine tapestries for insulation. The

(CONTINUED)

only other significant furnishings are an oaken table bearing stacks of notes and ledgers and an inkstand with several quills next to the Duke's throne. His coronet encircles one of the throne's posts.

Quill in hand, the Duke scrutinizes a petition. He hastily scribbles some tiny words in the lining, along with his initials. He then blows on the page to dry the ink.

We HEAR the heavy doors open slightly. The Duke looks up from his paperwork.

The Page stands before him, the doors closing behind him. Saying nothing, the Page gives the Duke a knowing look. The Duke grimly nods in reply.

Standing as the Page departs, the Duke flings the petition out towards the table, where it rests atop some other papers. The Duke then removes the coronet from its resting spot and places it on his head.

The doors reopen to the Inquisitor, sitting upon a crimson cushioned, gilt framed throne, borne by four large men, the THRONE BEARERS.

They march resolutely to a corner of the room, positioning the throne so as to maximize the Inquisitor's field of vision around the room.

The Duke takes a step toward the Inquisitor, who puts up hand for him to hold a moment. The Bearers genuflect to the Inquisitor and exit.

The Inquisitor beckons the Duke to approach. He rises and extends his ruby for the Duke to bow and kiss, which the Duke duly does.

The Inquisitor returns to his seat. The Duke stays standing.

DUKE

I trust Your Eminence had a pleasant journey?

INQUISITOR

Uneventful. The way we like it. So... We could chat all day, but we both have work to do.

(gazes at table with papers)

You certainly keep yourself busy.

(CONTINUED)

DUKE

Begging Your Eminence's pardon, but I inherited a bloody mess. Father paid little attention to documents. My attention to them has pulled the duchy from the brink of ruin.

The Duke ambles toward the laden table.

DUKE

(cont.)

My father commissioned the finest weavers in Genoa to render the tapestries on these walls. This...

He stands before the table.

DUKE

(cont.)

...is my masterpiece.

INQUISITOR

Ah. It would be meet to sift through this "masterpiece."

DUKE

I doubt there is anything of interest to Your Eminence.

INQUISITOR

(eyes the papers)

Really? How does the Black Death in your lands?

DUKE

Praise God, it has subsided.

INQUISITOR

But there are still cases?

DUKE

...Sporadic.

INQUISITOR

And there would be record of them on your table?

DUKE

I suppose...

(CONTINUED)

INQUISITOR
Suppose? There are records.

DUKE
Yes.

INQUISITOR
Any gypsies?

DUKE
Not since my father...

INQUISITOR
Any Jews? Infidels?

DUKE
None.

INQUISITOR
And that would be corroborated by
the documents?

The Duke reluctantly nods. The tiny, green wasp flies through a crevice in the window. As the Duke and the Inquisitor continue to converse, the wasp alights on the table and ensconces itself in the folds of a document.

INQUISITOR
(cont.)
What about recent converts to our
Church?

DUKE
There are...

INQUISITOR
Jews?

DUKE
Your Eminence, they're good
Christians. They've never been
absent from a church service.

INQUISITOR
They're Jews. They steal
hosts. Where can we find them?

The Duke is dumbstruck.

INQUISITOR
(cont.)
The answer can be sought somewhere
on that table, no doubt. So, you
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

INQUISITOR (cont'd)
see, my son, your masterpiece is of
considerable interest to us. Faith,
it is a veritable Oracle of Delphi
for the answers it may yield.

We now HEAR the WHEELING of massive wagons and the POUNDING
of heavy hammers outside.

The Duke goes to the window and peers out.

DUKE
What are they doing?

INQUISITOR
Getting started. So what is this we
hear about here being a witch in
your woods?

The Duke turns with an incredulous look at the Inquisitor.

EXT. WOODS - SAME TIME

The Physic lays on her back on the forest floor, staring up
at the canopy of branches and leaves. She holds the gall
closely to her ear. We HEAR the conversation between the
Duke and the Inquisitor emanating from the gall.

DUKE'S VOICE
It's but an old legend from the
days of the Caesars.

INQUISITOR'S VOICE
So there wouldn't be any record of
a witch amongst your papers?

DUKE'S VOICE
That, I can assure Your Eminence.

INQUISITOR'S VOICE
Yet, it may interest you to know
that within the preceding eight
months, we've yielded forty-seven
such "legends" to the fires.

The Physic's eye's widen.

INT. CHAPEL - DAY

The Duchess continues with her rosaries before the Virgin. Concentration knits her brow.

DUCHESS

Domine Iesu, dimitte nobis debita
nostra, salva nos ab igne
inferiori,...

A couple of pews back, the Young Monk has joined the Duchess in prayer.

YOUNG MONK/DUCHESS

... perduc in cælum omnes animas,
præsertim eas, quæ misericordiæ tuæ
maxime indigent.

An OLDER NUN steps inside the chapel and notices the two of them, saying the rosary to the Virgin. She takes a glance outside, then back to those in prayer. The Nun pulls her rosaries from her belt, goes to the nearest pew, genuflects before the Virgin and takes a seat.

EXT. WOODS

The Physic listens intently at the conversation being transmitted from the wasp to the gall.

INQUISITOR'S VOICE

...The nearby forests will also
need to be purged with fire.

DUKE'S VOICE

What?!?

PHYSIC

What?!?

She stares incredulously at the gall.

CHAPEL

A small congregation of monks and nuns have joined the Duchess in prayer.

DUCHESS, ET AL

Glória Patri, et Fílio, et Spirítui
Sancto. Sicut erat in princípío, et
nunc, et semper, et in sæcula
sæculórum.

A YOUNG SERVING GIRL timidly steps inside and approaches the pews. She is followed by a MERCHANT. He nods at the Serving Girl to go ahead and take a seat. She does, and so does he.

WOODS

Glowing, the Physic peers into the small hole in the gall and VIEWS the scene in the castle from the wasp's POV.

THRONE ROOM/OFFICE

The Wasp spies the Inquisitor on his throne.

INQUISITOR

With time and God's providence you shall have additional farmland.

The Wasp turns to see the Duke walk away from the window and toward the Inquisitor.

DUKE

Your Eminence, I've hunted in those woods since I was a boy, and no unnatural evil has come unto me, or any in my party.

INQUISITOR

The Black Death?

DUKE

Came from merchant vessels along the river, bearing rats -- that you'll find in our records! You shall not burn down the forest!

The wasp's green color fades to red.

INQUISITOR

We would caution his lordship about his tone. No, we shall not burn down the forest. That is your task - else face excommunication.

DUKE

(controls himself)

I beg your Eminence's forgiveness. There is more evil to be found in any tavern...

As the Duke speaks, smoke rises from behind him. The Inquisitor catches sight of it and comes to his feet.

(CONTINUED)

DUKE
(cont.)
Your Eminence?

INQUISITOR
Sweet Mary Magdala!

The Duke turns to see what the Inquisitor sees, the papers on his table smoking and catching flame.

DUKE
MY PAPERS!!!

In a panic, the Duke rushes toward the table in a desperate attempt to beat out the flames with his coat. The Inquisitor stays near his throne.

INQUISITOR
And you say there's no evidence of sorcery in your papers? Verily, we witness evidence!

More smoke pours out of the papers, the Duke runs to one of the tapestries. He works to pull it down.

DUKE
(not listening)
You could help, old man!

Pulling down the tapestry, the Duke runs it over to the table to smother the smoking documents.

INQUISITOR
Old man. Oh, I'll help.

The Inquisitor goes to the large broadsword hanging between the thrones and unhooks it. Being that it is too unwieldy for the Inquisitor to handle, the sword clatters to the ground.

The room is now filled with smoke, and now the tapestry over the papers catches fire.

With considerable effort, the Inquisitor lifts the sword with both hands. Coughing, he lurches off in the direction of the Duke, dragging the sword's tip on the ground behind him.

Flames are now in full force, burning tapestry and table. They lick the wooden beams above.

Coughing heavily, the Duke runs to a window. Pushing it open and gasping for air, he shouts to the people below.

(CONTINUED)

DUKE

Fire within!!! Bring water!!!

He turns away from the window, only to catch the blade of the broadsword in his side.

DUKE

(cont.)

Aagh!!!

INQUISITOR

To Satan with you, vermin!

Wheezing and hacking, the Inquisitor clumsily prepares for another swing.

Clutching his wounded side, the Duke charges toward the door, blindly pushing the Inquisitor out of his way.

The Inquisitor falls back on the burning tapestry. His vestments catch fire, and so does he. The Inquisitor SHRIEKS with the searing of his flesh.

The doors of the throne room fly open. The Duke staggers into the arms of his Page.

The Throne Bearers and others, GUARDS, SERVANTS and INQUISITOR'S MEN arrive with buckets of water and barrows of dirt.

They HEAR the SCREAMS of the Inquisitor, but the smoke and flames are too much for them to reach him.

The ceiling beams are now aflame.

WOODS

The Physic pensively sits in a tree, smoking herbs from an exotic reed pipe and watching a large plume of smoke rise in the distance.

EXT. CHAPEL - ESTABLISHING

A very brief flurry of activity, more Inquisitor's Men, Servants and Guards running around, trying to deal with the fire in the throne room.

INT. CHAPEL

The congregation praying to Virgin Mary is close to capacity in the pews. It is a mixture of monks, nuns and laity.

DUCHESS, ET AL
 Salve Regína, Mater misericórdiæ;
 Vita dulcédo, et spes nostra,
 salve...

Three Inquisitor's Men (IM1, IM2 & IM3) breath-lessly enter, their red doublets grimed with smoke and soot. They take in the scene.

DUCHESS, ET AL
 (cont.)
 Ad te Clamámus éxsules fílii Evæ;
 Ad te Suspirámus, geméntes et
 flentes in hac lacrimárum valle...

IM3 throws up his hands and leaves immediately. IM1 clears his throat, as if to say something to the congregation. IM2 puts a hand on IM1's shoulder.

IM2
 (shakes head)
 Never mind them.

IM2 exits. IM1 turns to follow, but then turns back in hesitation, gazing at the Virgin and listening to the recitation by the faithful. Resolved, he strides toward the pews and pulls out his rosaries. Hastily genuflecting, he takes one of the last available slots in the pews and lends his voice to the proceedings.

DUCHESS, ET AL
 (now including IM1)
 Eia ergo, Advocáta nostra, Illos
 tuos misericórdes óculos ad nos
 convérte...

IM1's heart rate slows and his body relaxes.

WOODS

The Farmer charges through the woods in his hay wagon. The wounded and grimy Duke is in the back, this time.

PHYSIC'S HUT

The Physic prepares a salve for the Duke's wound. She makes eye contact with him.

PHYSIC
My woods?

DUKE
...Your woods.

The Physic applies the salve to the Duke's side, which brings quick relief.

The Physic places the Duke's hand on the salve to keep it in place and then turns to get a dressing from small chest.

While her back is turned, the Duke quietly draws a dagger from his boot with his free hand.

The Physic bends over to wrap the dressing around the Duke's thorax. When she's close to finishing...

DUKE
(cont.)
My papers.

PHYSIC
Hm?

...the Duke plunges his dagger into the Physic's chest and rolls atop her.

DUKE
Christ forgive us both.

With a gasp, the Physic rattles and goes still. As earlier, her hut and its contents disappear.

The Farmer helps the Duke to his feet, and it starts to rain. The Duke tries to remove the dagger from the body, but it is stuck fast and doesn't budge.

With sudden resolve, the Farmer goes to his wagon and gets an ax.

Upon seeing this, the Duke puts up a hand to halt the Farmer.

DUKE
Hold! Put that back.

He looks back down at the Physic's body, and a small, sly smile crosses his face.

(CONTINUED)

FARMER

What, my lord?

DUKE

Let us deliver this to the
Inquisitor's men in one piece.

Pause. A knowing look soon registers on the Farmer's face.

FARMER

Right, then.

The two men proceed to pick up the Physic's body, as the rain picks up intensity.

CHAPEL

The place is now filled to standing with people of all stations, continuing with the rosary before the Virgin Mary.

DUCHESS, ET AL

Et Iesum, benedictum fructum
ventris tui, Nobis post hoc
exsiliium ostende. O clemens, o pia,
o dulcis Virgo María...

The rapidly escalating storm outside competes in volume with the voices in prayer.

EXT. DUCAL MANOR

The heavy rains beat down and extinguish the fire in the throne room. Steam rises through the collapsed roof. The rains die down.

EXT. DUCAL MANOR/COURTYARD

The rains have let up. Everyone present is pretty soaked. The late Inquisitor's cavalcade prepares to leave. The Farmer transfers the Physic's body from his hay wagon to a wagon in the cavalcade. She is partially draped in a sheet, and the dagger still sticks from her chest.

IM2 hands the blackened broadsword to the Duke.

DUKE

Smoke and flame have been known to
drive men mad.

(CONTINUED)

IM2

True enough. I still can't fathom how His Eminence managed to remove it from the wall.

DUKE

Madness.

IM2

Sorcery.

DUKE

True enough.

The Duke beckons IM2 toward the Physic laying in the wagon.

DUKE

(cont.)

Well, there's your witch. We found her, by Divine Providence, without torturing anyone, though it took some guile and much faith to fell her. Do please burn her some great distance from here.

IM2

(nods)

That is certain. Thanks to Your Excellency. With God's help, may you recover from your losses. We have no further business in your lands.

DUKE

Godspeed to you, then. Convey my regards and prayers to the Holy Father.

IM2

Indeed, I shall.

The Duke heads off in the direction of the chapel.

EXT. CHAPEL

The weary Duke props the sword against the wall outside and enters.

INT. CHAPEL

The Duke enters to find the past-capacity congregation in the midst of rosary cycle's final prayer.

DUCHESS, ET AL
 ...Christi Filii tui incarnationem
 cognovimus per passionem eius et
 crucem,...

The Duke looks around, then at the Virgin Mary. He allows himself a tired sigh and then joins the rest in prayer.

DUCHESS, ET AL
 (plus Duke)
 ...ad resurrectionem gloriam
 perducamur, per eundem Christum
 Dominum nostrum.

The Duchess is already radiant, but sensing her husband in the room, she bucks up even more.

EXT. ROAD FROM DUCHY

The late Inquisitor's cavalcade rides away. The wagon bearing the Physic rides at the rear. She jostles about a little but is pretty much as the Farmer left her.

Suddenly yet seamlessly, one of her hands reanimates and pulls the dagger from her chest.

PHYSIC
 My woods... (pulls away sheet) My
 woods.

The Physic turns to view the cavalcade in front of her. She narrows her eyes and readies to pounce.

CHAPEL

The congregation, Duchess and all, conclude their prayers.

DUCHESS, ET AL
 (cross themselves)
 In nómine Patris, et Fílii, et
 Spíritus Sancti.

Slight silence.

(CONTINUED)

DUCHESS

(solo)

Amen.

A small, yet beatific smile crosses the Duchess' face. Serenity pervades the congregation.

FADE OUT

THE END