

*Diabolique Magazine presents*  
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**The Drowning**  
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They knew better than to be late to the drowning of the Countess. Far easier than usual, to feign such apathy, they made up the beginnings of a crowd with fragile china cups suspended in the air but never drinking, seated around their own finely erected tables. It was far harder to keep liquids down after watching such a thing regardless of the vintage of the tea, they knew. The string quartet ordered played a sweet ecossaise to liven up the occasion.

The Baronet commented on the talent of the cellist. The others frowned, as it was certainly not the time for that.

Enemy of the state or not, it was law not to spill the blood of royalty within the walls of the City and rarer still was the execution of such a prominent figure. There was talk of crushing, but the aristocracy knew better. Crushing risked far too much. Drowning was the safest. It kept Them the happiest while retaining the purity of the law. It kept her pristine, at least up until the last.

There she stood with powdered wig, every color in nature embroidered into her dress save one. Even now they would not deny her beloved finery. They allowed her to paint her face

with that ridiculous white make up, the Duchess had sneered to the Duke of how ridiculous she always thought it looked. It did not matter, if that was what They liked on her.

She would not look at the guests, and they would not ask her to.

*I couldn't watch.*

*"They said she hid the refugees in her wine cellar," he said as he placed a kiss on each palm. His lips left fiery imprints; a brand. "Give me a penny and I'll tell you more."*

*He wore a forbidden shade of red that called to mind appetites that I had always been spared from, a rough homespun shirt nevertheless looking sumptuous hanging on his frame. A rebel, he had been refusing his feeding and I could see his collar bones poking out through smooth bronze skin. Hidden treasures. It was only a matter of time for him.*

*The bazaar was curiously crowded on such a day. It burned like jewels cast to flame. All colors drowned in orange and red. The frenzied dance caused my eyes to tear. Water against fire. There was an entire forest in his eyes. I closed my own against the wave of color. I did not want to tell him that I was afraid.*

*"Then I would be penniless," I replied. My voice trembled in forced levity. He drew me to him, his laugh as musical as bells.*

They with their eyes glassy, their movements quick as birds they could not fully understand her inability to look the other way. So what if They desired blood every now and then? It was not her blood, and was not her blood that spilled even now. She had always been the decadent onlooker with her white throat bared laughing. What a scandal the revelation had been. The trial even worse.

Or better.

Such things they would say, at the ball celebrating her life tonight. Which ones would They pick, when the moon rose and it became time? Would they be given their own moments to mourn her, although none of them felt any need to?

The Baroness wondered out loud if They would prefer them all in black tonight.

*There's a certain decadence in making love in the day. And a certain wrongness in the making of love on this day. Sticky and warm I could not even feel safe in his arms, watching the light stream in through the windows. I whispered to him that he was the first of his kind to have me in this way.*

*There was a certain virginal purity to that.*

*"Tell me what They did to you." His voice sotto voce, tender.*

*It did not hurt, telling him of what They required.*

*But there were times, when it wasn't so unpleasant. There were times when He would take me and it did not feel like burning. It did not feel like stabbing. There were times when I would gasp and it was not in pain. I would press my forehead against the pillows and feel the tears press against my eyes.*

*I did not tell him that.*

*Those times, they made it worse.*

Her face was as blank as a sheet of paper; for They had only allowed her the barest of paint, the simple white and black for her lips but it covered enough. There were no crowd save them and the Executioner, one of Them of course. The lesser peasants could not be trusted, and the aristocracy scoffed at the very notion of dirtying their hands.

The Countess herself did not quaver, it was to her credit. The youngest one there, a Lady of the age of thirteen, lightly tugged on the Duchess' sleeve.

“Why do they not strangle her, your grace?” She whispered her large eyes wide with confusion. “They are so well equipped for it.” The Duchess scowled at such impertinence.

“That’s not what those are for, girl,” she hissed back. “You’ll know well enough, now that you’re grown.” A searching look at the budding breasts swelling beneath the young girl’s bodice told her enough.

The young Lady did not speak again.

*“What is your name?” He asked me.*

*“I don’t have one,” I replied. “We are called many things, but none of them are names as you understand them.”*

*I still turned my back so he could not see me in the light as I dressed. The roughspun so different from silks and satins, they still felt as gentle as any kiss upon my skin.*

*“We aren’t given names either,” he countered. “We take them.”*

*I smiled.*

*“Your caste has always been stronger than us.”*

*“Not stronger,” he said. “Only meatier. Though I cannot say whether we are tastier. Tell me, what is her name?”*

*My mouth went dry. His eyes glittered.*

*“The one who now calls herself the Countess?”*

Her head was held high, so haughty was she that even in death she refused fear. Rumors flew that she was well used by Them the night before this execution. Perhaps there was many a broken heart in the City this night.

If indeed hearts were something that they possessed.

Unfortunately, none of the members of the lower class had decided to show themselves, perhaps that was for the best, as most were likely preparing for the post-drowning feast. Luckily for them many of the refugees that the Countess had hid were kept for this very celebration, so no lottery needed to be had on this day. However They could not be expected to prepare their own meals. Someone had to do this highest honor.

The Executioner did not possess the faculties that leant towards proper speech as anyone understood, with his mouth full of writhing tentacles that many a woman there knew intimately. It was to his credit that He skirted around this particular language barrier by inserting some of the longer tentacles into the frontal lobes of a lesser member of the gentry. The Baronet recognized him as a Lord.

“Barely fifteen,” he muttered as he took a sip of his tea that was by now much too cold.

Pressed against the Executioner like a lover, the boy’s eyes glazed with terrified understanding as he spoke in guttural words that did not belong to him.

“On this day the stars are right,” he said. “For we are to destroy the Countess of the West Hall by the act of drowning until dead.”

“Her sins,” he said with somber understanding. “Are well known.”

*I never knew her name, the girl who offered her life for mine. It was only when They were coming for me had she taken my arm and explained what she meant to do. I was too afraid to tell her anything but yes. He took my silence to mean just that, and grabbed my hand to drag me back out into the fire of the bazaar.*

*“You said we weren’t leaving the City until she was dead.” Was I protesting? I wasn’t sure. Could I protest, when it was no longer my life that was forfeit?*

*He said nothing, and only dragged me forward.*

The tank was grotesque in its beauty, thick glass that almost looked crystal trimmed in what seemed to be a stand of ornate carved brass. The aristocracy had assumed she would be drowned in a pond of some sort, or thrown in the ocean. It was not filled to the top; allowed for displacement, and a quiet settled over the watchers as they realized what was truly happening.

A small, tasteful staircase led to the top. The ladies muttered to each other that this was a good touch, who would want to do any lifting?

The Countess stared forward, her painted lips set into a straight line as the Executioner wobbled his way behind her. She only shuddered once as his many jointed fingers cut open the back of her dress, allowing it to pool on the floor. She wore nothing but a simple white shift beneath. He nudged her.

She began the climb.

“Oh,” breathed the Baroness. “But her dress would have made her so heavy.”

“Who is that?” The Duchess pointed to a man clutching a woman at the back of the spectacle. “I thought they were all preparing.”

*His hands remained firmly on my shoulders as we watched her go. She looked so brave, braver than I have ever been. It's strange how much she looked like me in the paint. It's strange how much we all look like each other with it on.*

*Her eyes caught mine at the top of the tank, the creature below her, some Lord boy wrapped in his robes and tentacles urging her on, and for a second I saw the panic in her eyes. “Run.” They told me. “I did not do this so they could catch you now.”*

*His lips were at my ear, whispering to me. They told me about loss as though I did not already know. As though none of us know. So I clutched his hand and I looked into her eyes as she plunged into the tank and the lid snapped shut. I watched her dance.*

“I don’t know who that is,” The Baroness said, her eyes sliding off of the woman in the back. The spectators turn to watch as the paint dissolved into the water, turning it into a sickly gray.

She sipped her tea and glanced over at the peasant couple once more. The woman’s eyes were dry. Good on her, there was a long journey ahead from the City. The woman nodded at the Baroness, her name stripped from her. The man at her back took her arm, and they began to run.

The long journey they were about to go on no longer belonged to her.

The Baroness’ face held no expression as she motioned for the quartet to begin a waltz.

### **The End**