

La Malcontenta

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The coldest night of the year in Winterstrike is always the night on which the festival of Ombre is held, or Wintervale if you are young and disdain the older dialects. The Matriarchy knows how to predict these things, how to read the subtle signatures in snowdrifts and the length of icicles, the messages formed by the freezing of the breath upon the air, the crackling of the icy skin of the great canals.

In the centre of Winterstrike, Mars' first city, in the middle of the meteorite crater that gave the city its name, stands the fortress: a mass of vitrified stone as white as a bone and as red as a still-beating heart. And at the top of the fortress, at the summit of a tower so high that from it one can see out across the basalt walls to the dim, shimmering slopes of Olympus, stands a woman. She is surrounded by four glass windows. She stands before a brazier and beneath a bell. She wears triple gloves: a thin membrane of weedworm silk, then the tanned leather of vulpen skin, then a pair of woollen mittens knitted by a grandmother. In spite of this, and the spitting coals of the brazier, her hands are still cold.

When the day freezes below a certain point, and the signs are relayed to her, she turns, nearly overthrowing the brazier in her haste, and rushes to the windows. She throws them open, letting in a great gust of cold air which makes the coals crackle, then strikes the bell three times. It rings out, fracturing the cold. The woman, Essegui Harn, runs down the stairs to the warm depths of the tower before the echo has even died. One by one, the coals hiss into silence as the bell notes fade.

This takes place shortly before dawn, in the blue light before the sun rises. All Winterstrike can hear the bell, except for one woman, and except for one woman, all Winterstrike answers. Women throw aside their counterpanes, rush to the basins to wash, and then, still dressed in their nightclothes, run upstairs to the attics of mansions, or downstairs to the cellars of community shacks, to retrieve costumes forgotten over the course of the previous year, all six hundred and sixty-eight days of it. From chests and boxes, they pull masks depicting the creatures of the Age of Children and the Lost Epoch, the long muzzles of cenulae, or the narrow, lovely faces of demotheas and gaezelles. They try them on, laughing at one another, then falling silent as they stand, their masked faces suddenly foolish above the thick nightdresses.

By Second Hour the robes, too, have been retrieved: confections of lace and metal, leather and stiffened velvet, scarlet and ochre and amethyst, sea-green and indigo and pearl. Above these, the masks no longer appear silly or sinister, but natural and full of grace. Then the women of Winterstrike set them aside and, frantic throughout the short day, they make sweet dumplings and fire-cakes for the night ahead, impatient for the fall of twilight.

Essegui Harn is in equal haste, rushing back to the mansion of Calmaretto, which lies not far from the fortress. Essegui hurries through the streets, pounding snow into ice under her boots and churning it into powder against the swing of the hem of her heavy coat. She is thinking of the festival, of her friend Vanity, whom she is planning to seduce tonight (or be seduced by, even more hopefully). She is trying not to think about her sister.

When she reaches Calmaretto, she does not hesitate but puts her eye to the haunt-lock. The scanner glows with blacklight, an eldritch sparkle, as the lock reads her soul-engrams through the hollow of her eye. The door opens. Essegui steps through into a maelstrom of festivity.

Both her mothers are shouting at one another, at the servants, and then, without even a pause for breath, at Essegui.

"—There's not enough sugar and only a little haemomon? Why didn't you order more?"

"—Canteley's best dress has a stain, she refuses to wear it even under her robes—"

"And I cannot find the tracing-spoon anywhere!"

Essegui ignores all this. She says, "What about Shorn?"

The silence is immediate and tense. Her mothers stare at Essegui, then at one another. "What about her?"

"You know very well," Essegui says. "You have to let her out. Tonight."

Upstairs, in the windowless heart of Calmaretto, Shorn Harn sits. Her birth name is Leretui, but she has been told that this is no longer her name: she has been shorn of it, and this is the only name she can take from now on. She does not know that it is the day of Ombre, because the sound of the bell rung by her sister has not penetrated the inner walls of Calmaretto. Nor can she witness the haste and bustle outside in the street, the skaters skimming up and down Canal-the-Less, because she has not been permitted to set foot in a room with windows. She is allowed books, but not writing materials or an antiscibe, in case she finds a way to send a message.

At this thought, Shorn's mouth gives a derisory twist. There would be little point in composing a message, since the one for whom it would be intended cannot read, cannot be taught to read, and is unlikely ever to communicate with someone who can. But Shorn's mothers will not countenance even the slightest possibility that a message might be sent, and thus Shorn is no longer allowed to see her little sister Canteley, as Canteley is young enough to view the scenario as romantic, no matter how many times her mothers have impressed upon her that Shorn is both transgressor and pervert. She is occasionally permitted to see Essegui, since Essegui is of a similar mind to the mothers.

Essegui usually only puts her head around the door once a week, though Shorn finds it difficult to estimate the days. Even so, she is surprised when the door hisses open and Essegui strides through, snow falling in flakes from her outdoor coat.

"Essegui?" Shorn turns her head away and does not rise. "What is it?"

"Ombre falls today. I've told our mothers that you are to be allowed out, when the gongs ring for dusk."

Shorn's mouth falls open and she stares at her sister.

"Out? And they agreed?"

"They hate it. I hate it. But it is your last remaining legal right, ancient custom, and we have no choice."

Shorn says, slow and disbelieving, "I am to be allowed out? In the mask-and-gown?"

Essegui leans forward, hands on either arm of the chair, and speaks clearly. "Understand this. If you use the mask-and-gown as a cover to flee the city, our mothers will go to the Matriarchy and ask for a squadron of scissor-women to hunt you down. The city will, of course, be closed from dusk onward, and they will know if anyone tries to leave. Or if anything tries to get in."

"I will not try to leave," Shorn whispers. "Where would I go?"

"To that which brought you to this plight?"

Shorn gives a small, hard laugh like a bark.

"To the mountains, in winter?" Essegui goes on. "You would die of cold before you got halfway across the Demnotian Plain. And the mountains, what then? Men-remnants would tear you to pieces and devour you before you had a chance to find it." Essegui grimaces. "Perhaps it would even be one of them. I've heard that all women look alike to them."

Shorn lowers her gaze. There is a moment's silence. "I have told you that I will not try."

"There is a mask waiting for you," Essegui says. She turns on her heel and is gone through the door, leaving it open behind her.

Shorn does not leave the chamber immediately, but stares at the open door. She has been dreaming about this day ever since the evening of her imprisonment, six hundred and sixty-eight days ago. Ombre then was like every other festival, a chance for fun and celebration, supposedly. She had thought no further than a possible assignation with Celvani Morel, an old college friend, recently detached. She wonders now whether she hoped that it would fill the emptiness within. She did not expect to meet what stepped from under the bridge of the Curve.

The open door seems as dark, but Shorn, once more, hesitates for only a moment before stepping through.

The mask is one that she remembers from her childhood: the round, bland face of a crater cat. It is a child's mask; for the last few years, Canteley has been wearing it. Now, however, it is the only one left in the box. Shorn pulls the gown—a muted red-and-black brocade—over her head and then, slowly, puts the mask on. The cat beams at her from the mirror; she looks like a too-tall child, no longer the woman they call the Malcontent. She twitches aside the fold of a sash, but the box is empty. There is no sign of the other mask: the long, narrow head, the colour of polished bone, mosaicked with cracks and fractures. She searches through the draperies, but there is no sign of it. She tells herself that she feels nothing.

As she turns to go downstairs, a gaezelle dances in through the door. "Tui, is that you? Is it?" The gaezelle flings her arms around Shorn and holds on tight.

"It's me. But don't call me Tui." It sounds as though she's spitting. "That's not my name any more." Canteley has grown over the last months; she is almost as tall as her sister now. Shorn has nearly forgotten the piercing quality of her voice, shrill as a water-whistle. She feels as though an icy mass has lodged deep in her own throat.

"Are you coming? Essegui said our mothers are letting you out for the Wintervale. Is it true? You should run away, Tui. You should try to find it."

"I won't be going away, Canteley," Shorn says, but as she says this she feels as though the walls are

falling in on her and she knows that she lies.

"Is it true what they say, that the vulpen steal your soul? That they entrance you so that you can't think of anything else?"

"No, that isn't true," Shorn says, but she is not really sure any more. She takes her sister's hand and leads her through the door.

I won't be going away. But better the devouring mountains than the windowless room. Better the quick, clean cold. She should never have let them shut her in, but she had been too dazed, with grief and bewilderment and incomprehension. Now, she has had time to think, to become as clear as ice.

"Canteley, I'll talk to you later." She gives her sister a swift hug. "Go downstairs. I'll join you in a minute." Once her sister has gone, she takes a pair of skates from the wall and stands looking down at the long, curved blades. Then, holding the skates by their laces, she follows her sister down the stairs.

They are all standing in the doorway, staring upward: Essegui, Canteley, and her mothers. It is a moment before Shorn is able to differentiate between the three adults. Essegui stands a little apart, legs braced beneath the intricate folds of the gown. Of the mothers, Thera is the shorter, and so it must be Alleghetta behind the demothea's mask. Shorn looks from one to the other before coming down the stairs. No one speaks. As Shorn reaches the last step, her mothers turn and push open the double doors that lead out onto the steps to the street. Winter fills the hallway. The gongs ring out in the twilight, filling the street and the house with sound. It seems very loud to Shorn, used as she is to the silence of the windowless room.

The mothers grasp Canteley firmly by each hand and pull her through the doors, so decisively that Essegui is the only one who has time to turn back, a flickering twitch of her head in the direction of Shorn. She is wearing a cenulae's mask: a pointed, fragile countenance, painted in green. She will, Shorn thinks, see only the bland cat face smiling back at her. Then Shorn herself runs across the black-and-white mosaic of the hall floor, through the scents of snow and fire-cake and polish, out through the doors and into the street. Then she is standing uncertainly in the snow.

Canal-the-Less, on which Calmaretto stands, is frozen solid and filled with skaters bearing snow-lamps. They weave in and out of one another's paths with insect-skill. Shorn, breath coming in short gasps in the unaccustomed cold, is tempted to take the round cat's face from her own and fling it into the drifts, but she does not. She ties on the skates with trembling hands and lowers herself over the bank of the canal onto the ice. Then she is off, winging down Canal-the-Less toward the culvert that leads to the Grand Channel.

The Channel itself is thronged with skaters, milling about before the start of the procession. Shorn twists this way and that, keeping to the side of the Channel at first, then moving out to where the light is less certain. The great houses that line the Channel are blazing with snow-lamps and torches, mirrored in the ice so that Shorn glides across a glassy, shimmering expanse. She is heading for the Curve and the labyrinth of canals that lead to the Great North Gate.

Behind her, the crowds of skaters fall away. Ahead, she can see a mass of red gowns, the start of the procession, led by the Matriarchs. Her mothers, not quite so elevated, will be just behind, amid their peers. A pair of scissor-women speed by, the raw mouths of holographic wounds displayed across the surface of their armour. They are unmasked. Their faces are as sharp as their blades and Shorn flinches behind the cat-face, until she realises that to them, she is nothing more than a tall child, and not the Malcontent of Calmaretto. But she watches them go all the same, then slinks from the Grand Channel and into the maze.

It is much quieter here. The houses along the waterways have already emptied and there are only a few

stray women lingering beneath the lamps or the bridges, waiting no doubt for assignments. Shorn keeps her masked head down, speeding toward the Great North Gate.

As she reaches the turning into the stretch of water known as the Curve, she hears a shout go up from the direction of the Grand Channel; the procession has begun. Shorn skates on, though the long months of forced inactivity have taken their toll. Her calves and thighs are burning. She does not want to think of what will befall her if she makes it past the North Gate: the vast expanse of snow-covered plain, the mountains beyond. She hopes only that it will be a swift death and that she makes it out of Winterstrike. It will be her revenge on the city and on Calmaretto, to die beyond its walls. She knows that this is not rational, but she left reason by a canal bank, a year ago.

In summer, the Curve is lined with cafes and weedwood trees, black-branched, with the yellow flower balls spilling pollen into the water until it lies there as heavy as oil, perfuming the air with a subtle musk. Now, the cafes are cold and closed—all the trade will have moved down the Channel for the night.

Shorn's heart pounds with exertion and memory. It was here, a year ago, on this stretch of the Curve just beyond the thin-arched bridge, that something—*someone*, Shorn corrects herself, angry at her use of Essegui's term—drifted from the darkness to stand as still as snow.

Shorn glides to an involuntary halt. She has replayed this scene over and over in her mind: the figure outlined against the black wall and pale ice, the head swivelling to meet her gaze, the frame shifting under the layers of robes. The sudden realisation that this was not just another reveller, but real: the mild dark eyes set deep in the hollow of the skull, the ivory barbs of its teeth. What she had taken for the curve of skate blades beneath the hem of the robe was its feet. One of the Changed, a vulpen, from the mountains: the genetically altered remnant of a man.

They are said to tear women limb from limb in vengeance for old woes: the phasing out of the male by Matriarchal geneticists. But this one merely looked at her, and held out its hand. She should have fled; instead, she took its two long fingers in her own. It led her along the Curve, skating alongside with human skill. Nothing else befell her. The vulpen gazed at her as they moved, blinking its mild eyes. It said: I have been waiting for one such as you.

And as it spoke, they turned the bend and ran into a squadron of scissor-women. Unlike Shorn, the warriors took only a moment to realise what was before them. They skated forward, scissors snicking. One of them seized Shorn, who cried "No!" and struggled in the warrior's grasp. The other three surrounded the vulpen, who suddenly was springing upward to land on the bank on all fours, blade-feet skidding, casting the disguising robes away to reveal a pale, narrow form, the vertebral tail whipping around. Its erection resembled a bone, and when they saw it, the scissor-women shrieked in fury. Then it was gone, into the snowy night.

They took Shorn back to Calmaretto, on a chain, and sat with her until her family returned, laughing and exhausted, at dawn.

Remembering this now, Shorn is moved to wonder if any of it was even real. It seems long ago and far away—and then it is as though she has stepped sideways into her own memory, for the figure of a vulpen once more skates from beneath the arch. It holds out its hands, but does not attempt to touch her. Shorn skates with it, back along the Curve in a haze and a dream, flying through the winter dark, until they are once more out onto the Grand Channel.

The procession has passed. Circling, whirling, Shorn and the vulpen dance out to the middle of the Grand Channel and now Shorn is beginning to understand that this is, after all, nothing more than a woman in a mask, just as she is. Thoughts of flight, of dying beyond Winterstrike, skate through her head and are

gone, leaving loss and yearning behind.

She lets the woman in the vulpen's mask lead her back to Calmaretto. As they step through the door, the woman pulls off the mask and Shorn sees that it is Essegui.

"I could not let you go," Essegui says, and Shorn, exhausted, merely nods. Essegui leads her up the stairs to the windowless room and closes the door behind her.

In the morning, Winterstrike is quiet. Mask ribbons litter the ice and the snow is trodden into filth. Essegui, waking late, head ringing with explanations that she will have to make to Vanity, goes to the heart of the house and opens the door of the windowless room.

Shorn sits where her sister left her, upright, the cat's face beaming. "Shorn?" her sister says. There is no reply. Essegui goes haltingly forward and touches her sister's shoulder, thinking that she sleeps. But the brocade gown is stiff and unyielding, moulded in the form of a woman's figure.

Essegui tugs at the cat's mask, but it will not budge. It remains fixed, staring sightlessly across the windowless room, and slowly Essegui steps away, and once more closes the door.