

Synopsis

TIME: Several generations after the many extinctions of the Great Catastrophe

PLACE: A dilapidated estate on forested land east of Ottawa, surrounded by a high fence of iron and wood. All scenes take place in the main hall of a large manor.

Scene One. The Sisters, with the help of their two “cats,” perform funeral rites for The Autumn Dog, a human servant who had been hired to reside in perpetuity within their home, portraying-- in costume and behavior-- the spiritual role of the domesticated “dog.” The Autumn Dog has lived with the sisters since they were very young and has, like other Exalted Family Dogs in other affluent households, been considered a semidivine figure responsible for facilitating various religious rituals. Vassa delivers a sermon connecting the death of The Autumn Dog to the mass extinction of the majority of non-human animals following the events of the Great Catastrophe. She tells this fable from perspective of Lia, a foundational figure in their religion. Vassa’s sisters, Mortha and Burguntha, become very disturbed when she reminds them that they are, in the absence of a herald dog, all the more vulnerable now to shadowy figures Lia referred to as “The Strangers.” The exhausted musicians, however, seem relatively unconcerned and struggle to stay awake throughout the sermon-- much to Vassa’s chagrin.

Scene Two: Servants Jonna and Theila clean up after the funeral service. Realizing that they are alone, the long-time lovers steal a moment to relax together on the sofa. Jonna feels wounded when Theila, still mourning The Autumn Dog, rebuffs her sexual advances. Theila then expresses sympathy for Vassa, and Jonna criticizes Theila for her persistently forgiving attitude towards their abusive employer. Meanwhile, the newly-hired dog arrives and begins to acquaint herself with the musicians, giving each of them an apple as a present. Noticed at last by the servants, The Winter Dog makes a strong impression on both of them, piously refusing to converse with Jonna and then presenting them with an astoundingly rare and valuable gift-- a genuine bone from an extinct species of poultry. The servants celebrate, conspiring to sell the bone to fund a fresh start together, far away from the manor and the Sisters. As Theila’s resolve waivers, however, Jonna becomes exasperated with her lover once again.

Scene Three: Vassa open the door suddenly, performing a ritual of reentry with Mortha and Burguntha. Theila, horrified, stuffs the bone in a sack and hides it among the cushions of the sofa. Vassa attempts to deliver another sermon, but finds that she is too weak to continue. She collapses on the sofa, beckoning a reluctant “cat” (a lesser religious servant living in feline garb) to join her there. As the cook prepares Vassa’s drink order, Burguntha and Mortha discover The Winter Dog and find her to be immensely favorable. Vassa seems quite pleased by their reaction, but tempers her sister’s euphoria by breaking the news that Strangers have been reported outside the gates of the manor, preparing to raid. The mood in the room shifts quickly as musicians and Sisters begin to panic. Vassa urges the assembled company to place their faith in her leadership as they prepare for an imminent attack by The Strangers. The Winter Dog, however, displays an impressive ability to calm everyone. Showing signs of intoxication,

Vassa leads the company in the Hymn of Protection to ensure that they will be able to rest in safety that night.

Interlude One: The Winter Dog, now alone in the room, removes the poultry bone from the cushions of the sofa and carries it off. The Officiant enters and begins to speak, relating the deteriorating conditions inside the manor as several weeks pass under constant threat of an attack. Meanwhile, we see Jonna and The Winter Dog, sans bone, engaged in flirtatious play. We learn that The Winter Dog has gradually gained an enormous amount of influence within the household, and, in spite of her silence, has begun to give the distinct impression that she does not approve of Vassa's leadership. The Officiant closes out with a bit of gossip, describing a clandestine interaction he witnessed between Jonna and The Winter Dog.

Scene Four: Jonna, believing she is alone, sings a hymn tenderly. Theila overhears this and, imagining that at Jonna must be singing this love song for her, expresses appreciation. This awkward exchange, however, is soon interrupted by Theila's discovery that their bone has been stolen from the hiding place among the couch cushions. Jonna, assuming that Vassa is the culprit, flies into a rage and loudly denounces Vassa in spite of Theila's best efforts to quiet her. Jonna's unhinged tirade soon draws the attention of the musicians and the cats, who Theila unsuccessfully attempts to lure out of earshot using a strip of ribbon. Jonna continues to build momentum, laying out a compelling argument for why Vassa should no longer be trusted with their collective safety. The musicians and the cats listen, rapt. However, when Jonna begins to discuss her self-deprecating suspicion that their savior, The Winter Dog, looks upon the household-- Jonna, included-- with contempt, she loses her thread and breaks off, realizing that she has exposed too much of her own desperate insecurity in regards to whether or not The Winter Dog reciprocates the powerful feelings she holds for her.

Scene Five: Mortha and Burguntha, stirred by Jonna's outburst, re-enter the room to admonish the servants for the disordered state of the room. Jonna becomes angry and insubordinate again, insisting that Vassa is a drunk who cannot be trusted to lead them in defense against The Strangers. A very hungover Vassa enters the room and everyone acts, for a moment, as if Jonna's speech had never happened. The Winter Dog enters, as well, and begins leading the cats in conspicuously rambunctious play. When Vassa orders Jonna to fetch her a drink, Mortha and Burguntha intervene. Vassa brushes her sisters off and orders Jonna to deliver her drink just the same. However, the Winter Dog has discreetly engineered a collision course between the cats and Jonna, who drops the drink. The glass smashes on the floor and Vassa loses control of herself, violently attacking one of the cats and demanding that someone immediately lick up the spill. In response, Jonna curses Vassa, and the two glare at one another while Theila kneels down to lick up the spill herself. The Winter Dog is able to draw Vassa out of the room. Mortha and Burguntha follow close behind, wailing.

Scene Six: Wheeling around and returning to the main chamber without the Sisters, The Winter Dog immediately directs the cats to begin ransacking the main chamber, wrenching valuable objects loose and piling them in the center of the room. Then, to everyone's further amazement,

The Winter Dog approaches Jonna and indicates that Jonna's feelings for her are fully reciprocated; indeed she selects Jonna to be her mate. Still very much in shock, Theila and Jonna tenderly reflect on their relationship by recounting the story of two intertwined ferns in Lia's veiled garden, burned up after stretching together towards Lia's candle, the bare flame mistaken for the sun. Meanwhile, The Winter Dog blesses the musicians, one by one, who begin to gather up the loot and depart the manor with the spoils of their robbery. Theila opts to release Jonna to be mated to The Winter Dog. When Jonna protests, Theila reveals that she, too, has long been in love with The Winter Dog, and would have left Jonna in favor of The Winter Dog had their two fortunes been reversed. Jonna, in a haze, leaves along with The Winter Dog, the cats, and the musicians. Hurrying on her way out, The Cook drops a unwanted pan atop the organ, causing the organ to drone. Theila lays herself facedown on the cushionless sofa and, quietly, begins to sob.

Second Interlude: As Theila lies on the sofa, The Officiant reflects on the events of the day and plans his next move. As he speaks, he removes a poultry bone that had been hidden under his chair and slips it into his pocket. Before The Officiant leaves, he cleans up the broken glass on the floor.

Scene Seven: The sisters reenter the room and learn what has just happened. Burguntha and Mortha are overwhelmed by feelings of fear and anger. Vassa, drunk, cannot bring herself to look at them. She finds a bottle of alcohol in the cook's area and begins to drink. Theila takes it upon herself to seize control of an increasingly desperate situation, directing the Sisters in a sequence of movements, employing them as props in her retelling of a story that they all learned as children. Her story is set many years before Lia, many years before the Great Catastrophe. It is the story of the taming of the Wolfess by the Grandmother-of-Old: the story of the first dog. The Sisters quickly become engaged, taking direction from Theila without protest. Theila pauses in her storytelling to wonder aloud about the events of the day before moving on to tell the story of the death of the Grandmother-of-Old, and the subsequent mourning of Grandmother by the Wolfess. Under Theila's watch, the sisters comfort one another atop the funeral pallet. After finishing the story, Theila leaves.