

The Hymn of Lady Tso  
By Julie McMillin

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It was not that Talia wanted to write the song. She didn't, in fact. But the song needed to be written. It had formed within her head and rattled for days, clamoring to be released, before Talia set quill to parchment... and regretted it. She hummed the tune to Dan the Bard who instantly recognized the melody. And just before dusk the two practiced the song in the corner of the Public House. For the rest of the night, the words haunted those that heard them.

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“When we see her 'gain we must die or kill  
In the bleak, dark wood on the stone ringed hill  
When the year wears down and the trees are bare  
She will conjure lies with her raven hair  
For where she appears death is on the air  
And someone in sight must die”

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Canis dropped the cord of wood he carried as an errant bramble pierced his finger. He popped his finger in his mouth and looked at Isabella accusingly.

“What're you singin that for?” he mumbled.

Isabella continued to brush leaves away from the base of a tree, hoping to find mushrooms. She shrugged.

“Tis awful,” Canis continued as he wiped his hand on his jerkin.

“It is NOT awful. Dan sings it.”

“But 'tis about US dying!”

Isabella leveled her brown-eyed gaze at Canis. “Tis just a song, dear brother.”

Canis hoisted the wood on his shoulder. “Next you'll tell me that Talia's stories are just stories.”

Isabella sighed. There were no mushrooms at this tree, either.

Canis watched the sky turn a deeper shade of orange. “We have to get back inside the walls. 'is almost dark.”

“I have only half a basket of mushrooms,” she stood up and shook the leaves off her skirts. “Not enough to trade for supper. Help me look.”

Canis gazed longingly at the walls. It was cold and he hated the tiny mushrooms. He had an idea, “If Argyle was here, he'd be able...”

Isabella stamped her foot, “Argyle is NOT here. YOU are. And I wish you'd stop dreaming about other things and help me find food!”

Canis wasn't sure what he said, but he put the wood back down and helped his sister find food in

the remaining half-light. They made it back to Bristol moments before the gates closed for the night.

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“You will see her 'gain in the dark and cold  
The Lady Tso is the Reaver of Souls  
With her gemstone foul and a soul-filled globe  
She will end our dreams with her death-filled robe  
With her red black eyes that no light can probe  
And more than a few shall die”

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Vashta hummed the song's melody to herself as she sewed a patch on her old chemise. The far corner of the Dirty Duck Inn caught the dying sunlight and her needle glowed with an orange hue as she finished the final whip stitches to keep the fabric together. She looked up briefly as the door to the Inn creaked open. Canis and Isabella crept in together to trade their firewood and mushrooms for dinner. Vashta smiled and returned to her sewing. Let the denizens of Bristol say what they will; the Band of the Twisted Claw valued honest living.

As Canis and Isabella slipped out the door, Gaia entered. As the door was closing a gust of wind caught her cloak and it blew high around her. The fireplace flared and all the lamps guttered as if answering her unspoken spell. The door slammed closed and all returned as it was. Vashta snorted her disapproval at the overly dramatic entrance.

Gaia sat upon the low bench opposite Vashta and spoke softly, “The young ones... they have not realized?”

“Nay,” Vashta set down her sewing. “They have not seen the bottom of the stew pot, yet. But mark my words, our stores will not last this winter.”

“Yet we sit safely in Bristol,” Gaia argued. “Surely there be a way to trade for food.”

“You did not see us last year, Gaia. We were a small band and could help the town rebuild after Bloodtharken's wrath. There is no rebuilding year this. There be no work for us.”

Gaia's gaze grew distant, “There be evil if we leave Bristol...”

“I be not saying we should move the camp. But there be more of us than ever. If we sent some out to hunt...”

Gaia raised her hand to forestall the conversation, “I like not this talk of leaving.”

“And I like less the thought of the young ones going hungry.”

“We have food now.”

“But 'twill not last all winter!”

“We shall find more when our need be great.”

“Our need IS great, Gaia. And I not be wanting to sit idly by when we could be helping ourselves.”

“Tis not so great, Vashta. There be time. If we leave then Felix has said there be great evil.”

“Felix?!” Vashta couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You endanger us because of a cat’s skull?”

“There be little danger now,” Gaia replied coolly.

“Now, certes! But in a month from now? We need food, Gaia. Your Felix is dead. I be trying to keep us alive.”

Gaia’s bench toppled over with a solid thud in her haste to rise. “You see not what I see, herbalist.”

“Nor you, soothsayer.”

The wind howled and the door slammed as Gaia stalked off into the fading light. Vashta found she had little patience left to complete her sewing.

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We shall see her 'gain and the Earth shall cry  
When the hills fall down and the seas run high  
She will strike a blow to our pride and fault  
'Till we raise a cry to the heavens' vault  
Then she'll dance in flame 'till the stars cry, "Halt!"  
And all but a few shall die

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Gaia angrily paced down High Street where no one was about to see her fret. She could not shake Vashta’s words... nor that blasted evil melody that she heard Talia and Dan practicing earlier. Ill omens, all of these... Yet now it seemed Vashta doubted her ability.

Gaia froze on the street. What if it was not just Vashta? What if the rest of the camp did not believe her? After all, the future is cloudy at best – what more could they hope from her except... hope? She could not repair things like Adria the camp tinker. Nor could she heal with herbs like Vashta. What, then, did she truly offer to the camp?

Gaia continued to trudge down the road toward Lake Elizabeth. Lost in thought as she was she nearly missed the wondrous sight on the corner of Tuscany Tavern and Farnham Way. There sat the great stone dragon, with the small stick of incense that Talia lovingly kindled each morning, but behind the dragon grew a single pale pink winter rose. The bloom did not seem to mind the cold or the rain and gaily hung from the small bush.

Gaia, convinced that she was imagining things, rubbed her eyes. The flower remained. She took a few steps toward the bloom and was overcome with a vision from the past (which is much easier to understand than visions from the future).

*Gaia gathered her basket to return back to the camp as Talia settled under the nest to take her turn guarding the egg. Gaia noted that she brought nothing with her save her book and her recorder. Gaia briefly envied Talia’s ability to travel so lightly. Before Gaia could leave to find food, Talia asked a simple question:*

*'Gaia? Will we win?'*

*Gaia was surprised by the innocence in the voice, almost a child's wondering question. 'Aye,' she replied. 'So long as we love.'*

*Gaia left the shady boughs of the oak tree but noticed in the nest a red rose...*

Gaia gasped as she left the vision. A rose by the egg... and a rose by the dragon... The two places where their hope for the future was greatest. Gaia smiled and turned back to the camp. She did not bring tangible things to the Band of the Twisted Claw – but she brought signs of hope in these dark times.