



Talons of the Sun
by

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I wish—well, I wish plenty, but the good Gods don't smile at wishes now do they? They want honest prayer and sacrifice and you can't do that when you're marching to your death. But anyway I wish I could tell you all the ways I'd figured to rescue Terrell and that sonofabitch Hendry, but there ain't no such story to tell. All I'd have to say was how I'd thrown down my rifle, and the man I loved was blindfolded and disarmed as well. That was no kind of story. Tell the truth, as Karoom Aziel marched us to the top of the bluff where his necromantic scribes had waited a year for the Talons of the Sun, storytelling was far down on my list of priorities.

Most I knew, I finally had the true identity of these Talons of the Sun. We'd made it almost all the way through the Harvil Desert. Terrell, Hendran, and myself were a lot less friendly than when we started out, but if I was going to die knowing the truth, that would be a lot better off than where I'd been.

"His name's Karoom Aziel," Terrell said the night before, sitting by the fire between me and Hendry. If I'm unfolding this here story, you can guess I wasn't really asleep as they thought. Hendry paced all over and cursed and kicked his canteen and railed about how he deserved to know. If we was just coming to have me cured, he said, Terrell didn't need him. Terrell for sure maintained he did, but Hendry was so untrusting he'd nearly twisted off the leather thong full of claws and teeth around his neck.

"He's out of the Westcarl," Terrell continued. "Or so he says. I don't truly care. He wants something I got and now he's got something I want." Terrell put away his revolver and reached into his saddlebags and pulled out two arrowheads, each with a curled stripe of quartz down the ridge in the middle. "These are the Talons of the Sun," he said. "Two of 'em anyway. He's got the other three and he needs 'em to finish a job for his gods. Then he can heal Jessie."

"Shit," said Hendry. "You sold our asses to Elmoreth for that?"

"Don't you love nobody? He don't worship Elmoreth, anyway," said Terrell. "And we been everywhere to try to get Jessie well. We know'd for months she'd need more than a regular physik."

"Shit nevertheless," Hendry said. "I still ain't gonna sleep. Not after ridin' four days through this armadillo ass-licking desert."

Actually it was five. His father'd raised him right to worship our gods, but from his mother he was still superstitious about their number. And he slept just fine for his own reasons. Sad to say I knew and hadn't told Terrell. There was a lot I hadn't told him and I regretted it then more than I regret it now.



My name's Jessamin Renner, though in those days it was Jessamin Hardy. I'd lived on the far frontier of the Western Empire my whole life, and like every child, heard of the long-gone days of the Four Kingdoms. But they were extinct before the Western Empire and the Empire of Al Donem. Those two dominated everything outside the sacred lands where our Five Gods were still properly worshipped. The Westcarl was a constant threat: we wouldn't have a way to defend or feed ourselves without the guns made in their factories. We'd be prey to those hideous cannibal Donnies.

I'd been around cowboys and hustlers my whole life, so little about our situation surprised me. Very few, rather none except Terrell, of the men in Petrax Junction were any surprise. All of them cowboys, all of them, to a man, undisciplined, rude and hoping a few head and a cabin would make up for it. Terrell was different. My Pa wasn't impressed—a man *should* be humble, he said—but I was. I could see it in his eyes. He was honest, and if I didn't step in that honesty would get him killed.

Especially since he ran with Hendry Markson. As soon as Terrell asked for my hand Hendry went behind his back and spoke to Pa, and he learned what a fool thing that was before he got the words out. A father of any other girl woulda got outta town with her, but my Pa knew any man dumb enough to mess with me wouldn't live to try again. Not after all the hours we'd spent practicing the blade. And the pistol. And the rifle for that matter.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy the mending, washing, cooking, and everything else with "ing," even the cleaning. I did. It was that despite all the time girls spent practicing what men needed, they talked of nothing but needing a man, as if a woman who could sew a shirt couldn't raise a fence. I needed a man for one thing, and it wasn't something I could hold in my hand. The gods saw it; and I didn't know why other girls in town didn't. Both gods, Glarada made love to Elmoreth (before he was cursed) because of that place in her heart that every woman's got and every man pretends he don't. Terrell and I'd take up their poses and be wed; it was all set by the middle of winter and everyone in town was expecting a wedding. They'd expect babies too, but that was none of their business.

All those dreams, mine and theirs, were put to rest by spring. That's when the bleeding started. I ain't talking about the usual sort women moan about and men manage not to hear about. This was ten times that, no leavin' my room, cold chills to bring on snow and a fever like the pools of Tethrax Peak. Two of those passed with Pa just turning Terrell away. Then he and I picnicked by the river and

it came on just as we bit into his mama's peach pie. That meal ended up on his finest trousers, and by the time he got me home, I was drenched in scarlet down to my ankles. Barely awake, I heard him tell Pa it was Pankora's curse, with a hefty dose of skepticism.

It went on and on, not just at the time of the month. My girdle became unnecessary. My ribs poked out and after another month I could feel my backbone without sucking in any. Terrell and Pa took me to three physiks in town and one in Phoenix Ridge, and all they could offer were concerned looks and quicksilver.

But then just before Summersday a huge train came down the road and a gold inlaid coach passed Terrell with guards dressed in red and silver coats and white breeches. Each one carried a nickel-plated, pearl-handled revolver and a saber with a seven-jeweled hilt. The door of the coach opened and a grey-haired man looked out, right into his heart.

"I can heal her," he said. "There is a man in town who wears a necklace of teeth and claws, two set with Jade he inherited from his mother, who got them from Elmoreth himself. These are the Talons of the Sun, and he will not give them up. You have no hope of buying them. Bring him to me, and I will heal her."

Terrell wasn't going to give Aziel a chance to renege on his end of the bargain, so against my better judgment I went with them across the desert, with Terrell giving me food that mostly just wet the sand and attracted flies. At least Terrell thought me coming along was his idea.

The real reason was I didn't trust Hendry and I thought Terrell was a fool to trust him. Now of course, no woman would stay with any man, I mean none, and the babes would stop comin' and the Great plan of the Five Gods in heaven would come to a complete halt if every woman left a man she thought a fool. Despite all my hopin' and prayin' my fears were borne out the second night. I took a walk for no good reason and Hendry came up while I hid by a cactus. A man came out of the darkness in the rocks, his skin painted like the night's sky, and they set the place to sell "his righteous ass and his whore to your people." I hated to be right, and I shook like a shiverin' spadefoot tryin' to get under the sand for winter.



The morning Aziel marched us to death I slept almost till the sun was quarter-high, but Hendry was still snoring when Terrell and I saddled up.

"Should we piss on 'im?" Terrell asked me.

“We?” I asked, and I giggled until it hurt. Terrell reached around me, just about crushed me in a hug, and kissed my forehead. “Whyn’t we just take the necklace and leave him, Terrell?”

“Leave him, darlin’? He’d come after us, meaner than a cat in a pickle barrel.”

The way he avoided my eyes, that was the first time I knew he’d lied to me. “By your tellin,” I said, “this Aziel’s got more firepower than all of us outside the Republic. We just got to get there faster.”

“You can’t ride that fast,” he said. “And Aziel wants more than them beads, Jessie. Hendry’s mama had quite a few secrets and it seems Aziel knows ‘em all.”

I grabbed him by the arm. “Tell me the truth, Terrell, or by the Gods—”

“Them beads ain’t the Talons of the Sun, Jessie,” he said, and finally he looked me in the eyes, and pointed at Hendran. “He is.”



We was about half a mile from the rendez-vous when Hendry got itchy, and I mean itchy. He was lookin’ all over the hills and through the chollas and Heramar trees. We was out of the desert and approaching a huge bluff at the top of a deep canyon. Terrell didn’t pay him no mind, but I did. I knew it. He was expecting someone.

“Terrell,” I said, real low. “Terrell honey, is your rifle loaded?”

He laughed. “Of all things! You need to ask, darlin’?”

“Gimme it,” I said.

“What the hell for?”

Hendry did a dead halt, turned and looked right at me. I put on a sick face and lowered my eyes out of the sun, my hair the only bonnet I had. “I’ll ride up,” he said. “Have a look.”

Terrell nodded. As much as I wanted him to look over and see my admonition, he didn’t bother, and I wasn’t about to yell it out. He wasn’t expecting Aziel, but horn-headed, blue-painted savages who’d take us both for slaves. Not that they were truly savages. Their cities in Al Donem rivaled anything in the Western Republic, even in the Old States. But they took men for work, women for you-know-what, and children for who-knows-what.

So Hendry went over the ridge, into the shadow of the sandstone bluff, and I rode up besides Terrell. “Gimme the rifle, damn it. I’m a better shot than you.”

Terrell had the audacity to shake his head. “Ain’t nothin’ you need to—”

BANG! A shot echoed off the bluff and Hendry screamed. A cloud of dust came up from where his horse fell down, and he screamed again. “They’re up on the bluff!”

My horse reared, but everywhere I looked there wasn’t nobody. Terrell just said “shit” and galloped into Hendry’s trap.

I went after him, but I wasn’t no jockey, and had to slow to keep from catapulting my breakfast. I came over the little ridge and Terrell had his feet out the stirrups, and was creeping toward Hendry and Skydancer, whose brains were all over the canyon floor. Damn fool. It was obvious what Hendry’d done. Nor was I convinced by his crucifixion pose in the dirt. Even in the shade of the bluff I could see his hand under that cholla and the glint of metal he thought he was hiding.

So I rode alongside Terrell’s saddle, grabbed the damn rifle and cocked it. I thought I’d ride closer, so I kept it hip level where Hendry wouldn’t see, but just as Terrell got there, Hendry’s hand raised up, his hammer went back, and I aimed and fired at the little turd.

“Shit!” he screamed. “Oh son of a bitch woman! You fuckin’ shot me!”

“That’s right,” I said. I got down but kept the muzzle trained on him. His revolver was in three pieces twelve feet away, but he had another. “And if you so much as reach for that other pistol, you’ll have no other cock.” It was a sick kind of fun I was having, but he had to know I was honest. “It’ll be your time of the month, you bastard. How dare you even think of selling—”

“Halt!” boomed a voice down the sides of the canyon. “Put the weapon down, woman, or my men will kill you and take the Talons of the Sun.”

I looked up and they were there, all over. Atop the bluff, across the gulch, even in the grass we just rode from. Aziel’s men, even more spectacular than I’d imagined. And up the canyon, a cloud of smoke where the voice come from.

Hendry clutched his necklace. “Terrell you son of a low-life whoreshit—”

“Shut up Hendry,” I snapped. “Just give them up. I can be healed and we can go home.”

That’s when I saw Karoom Aziel myself come out of a cloud of incense. White hair, a short beard, a robe of gold and red even more gaudy than Terrell had related. His staff clicked against the sandstone, and his deep-throated laugh was too big for his frame. “You will be healed, woman,” he said. “As soon as the sacrifice is complete.”

“Sacrifice?” I asked. I must have sounded far too dumb to him.

He held up a hand and spread his fingers. “There are five Talons of the Sun,” he said. He waved over his shoulder and his servants emerged from the incense smoke and shoved three bound-and-gagged Donnies onto the stone in front of me.

“Drop the gun,” he said. “for me to gain their power, they must stay alive.”



And so they marched us up the bluff to the Circle of Death, where the scribes had spent a year fasting and waiting for The Talons of the Sun. They hadn't bound me; no one laid a finger on me, but no one said I would live to tell this story. The captives were shoved into a chalked out circle, and Aziel's scribes traced around them chanting and shaking smoke from tortoise shell rattles bigger than my head. I looked for anyone off his guard, but even if I grabbed two of those pretty pistols, I'd have to take out two men with each bullet. Three to be a real hero.

“He never showed you his family tree, did he?” Aziel was at my right shoulder. I felt sick all over, but sickest there. “He and your other friend are distant cousins.”

“He ain't my friend,” I said. “And you're a damn liar and don't you accuse Terrell of hiding nothing from me.”

Aziel laughed like I was a silly girl. “These five men are the last living descendants of the Great Founder, the ancestor of the Four Kingdoms. When they are dead they will serve the design of men who have a great interest in your lands.” So the Western Republic and the Empire of Al Donem weren't so unfriendly as I thought.

“Well,” I said. “You'd better kill me after everything you've revealed.”

Aziel smiled real grandfatherly and shook his head. “No no,” he said. “I won't have to. You will be healed, as I promised, but you won't remember your home, your lands, or your family. You'll only know enough to warn people of their fate. There will be blood within that circle; the blood of the Founder.” He pointed with his staff and at this point I noticed two things.

One thing was just how clean the ground inside the circle was. The five men knelt in the center back-to-back with their heads down, hands behind their backs and the five scribes now stood at the edge, each with a curved knife. The ground inside was totally free of dust, without even the footprints of the necromancers. They talked to the dead, and when Terrell's blood touched that ground at high noon, them and Aziel would destroy all memory of the Four Kingdoms.

The other thing was how I felt downright horrible, ready to pitch up whatever my guts had to offer. Blood trickled down my thigh.

“The time has come,” Aziel announced. Indeed it had. The first necromancer scribe stepped forward, and I stepped behind him, one step away from the chalk

line. Not giving a care to who saw what, I hitched up my skirts and tore my knickers right down the middle.

“Jessie!” Terrell shouted. “Jessie don’t do nothin’!” Hendry just shook his head and tried to pray through his sobbing. I could see the tears below his blindfold.

Aziel called for silence, and I looked down. There was only a handprint of blood there, but I knew what was coming. All them scribes kept their eyes closed, and as much as I loved Terrell, it was not time to listen to him.

Aziel raised his hands high and chanted along with the scribes. One put his knife to Hendry’s throat, and I looked up at the sun. No one had more than an inch of shadow, and no one was looking at me, so I stepped right into the circle. The scribe raised the knife high to slash, but I planted my boots wide and gathered my hems up to my knees.

That’s when Aziel screamed. The few drops of blood between my heels were enough, and the chants and invocations had done their work. The ground shook. Whatever guns all those guards had were nothing compared to what was coming. They was already shakin’ in their boots, and them on the outside threw down their rifles and ran for their horses. The scribes were frozen. The other four opened their eyes, and the one dropped his knife and screamed.

Aziel thundered at them. “Fools! She is not cut! Only the blood of—”

His words cut off, and he croaked a little as the breath left his body. His head split like a rotten melon, and his body fell into a heap of bloody robes. The scribes survived long enough to see the smoke materialize into a face with eyes that stared down on all of us. Men dropped their weapons and pissed themselves (you’d be astonished how loud it can be). If the fright could have stopped me from bleeding, that would have been a blessin’, but I was ready to faint.

The face spoke in a voice that was part thunder, part the terror that wakes you when you dream you’re falling into a river. “My Four brothers and sisters are displeased. I, Ardaba, AM ANGRY! You will pay for your disrepect to the dead.”

A giant clap of thunder stopped the scribes’ hearts, and her face collapsed around me. It was then I must have fainted. For sure I was dead, at least for those moments when I felt her inside me. Ardaba, the Fierce One, Sow Bear, Wolf Bitch, who cut her own hand to distract the Serpent from her children, mother of the world. I knew it then, as I lay there with my last breath knocked out of me, that her spirit had been there all along, and in those dead moments I knew my purpose clearly. I needed to live. Terrell needed me. Our children, the ones I never knew I wanted before that moment, needed me to take up Ardaba’s purpose and see them into the world.



I'd stayed alive, somehow, long enough to get up, untie the captives and apologize for shooting Hendry. He said he deserved it. He'd meant absolutely to kill Terrell, and knowing he couldn't get a good price for me, he'd only planned to steal our horses and ride like hell. Nevertheless I wouldn't take it back.

We rode southward to Phoenix Ridge and stayed long enough to regain our strength. You know what happened after that, or you wouldn't be reading this here story. I see your uncle Hendry now and again, and we nod, say hello, and walk on by like regular folks. No need to say what don't need saying. And that's the last thing you need to know: if you think somebody don't need your help, or you can't provide it, just tell 'em this tale.