

# With the Dawn

By Jon Hansen

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They brought me to a dark place beneath the Temple of the Lady. They strapped me down on a rough wooden board and left me there, naked with fear. From out of the shadows stepped Balcruin, Right Hand of the Lady. He looked down at me, his expression almost gentle.

"Do you know why you are here?" he said. His face held a quiet intensity that dug its way into my soul.

I closed my eyes. "I do, your Grace."

"Good." Balcruin nodded slowly. "As I said, we do believe you. But it is my duty to ensure that all blasphemy be scourged from the people, by any means necessary." His fingers touched my face, cold worms tracing my cheekbone, and I fought back a shiver.

At the sound of boot scraping on stone I opened my eyes. Beside me stood a man, his face hidden by a black hood. His chest was bare, and on it the Lady's Name had been carved into his flesh in a twisting red scar. Without a word he placed a long knife against my chest. I heard Balcruin's voice, distant: "Recite the tale of the Lady's Ascension to divinity."

Closing my eyes, I began.

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My name is Stovon Alzrin, born in the city of Lasone. Before this I lived a simple life. My past had been clouded from me by wounds I suffered as a youth in the service of the Lady. I had accepted the shrouding of my past and remained content to see each day. But with the coming of Jan Taldos, a kernel of doubt was planted deep inside my heart.

It started simply enough: the first day of the Festival of Spring Rejoicing. Last night's storm clouds had moved on, and the morning sunshine was slowly drying the fairgrounds. Soon they would be filled with brightly dressed crowds, celebrating the Lady's Ascension.

As I waited for my first customers I tended the cooking fire. The rich scent of toasting mellonhusks filled my nostrils as I turned them to keep them from

overheating. Gillan, my alleged assistant, had disappeared again; doubtless the boy had snuck away to watch the musicians setting up. A good lad, but mad for music.

Satisfied for the moment, I looked up to see a man standing not far from the fire. At first glance there was nothing to draw the eye to him. He wore the clothing of a tradesman, perhaps a carter. At his throat an amulet winked silver.

What held me was his face. While his clothes were respectable enough, his face was as gaunt as if he had recently recovered from some terrible illness. More disconcerting, he wore an ugly sneer, as if everything displeased him. It seemed unnatural for a man to feel so ill-tempered on such a glorious and holy day. Perhaps some recent personal tragedy had brought him sorrow. His apparent plight touched me. Surely I could cheer him, I thought, so I raised a hand and called out to him.

"The Lady's blessings upon you, sir." Addressing a stranger above his station was risky, but might also result in a purchase.

The man's eyes jerked to focus on me, filled with sudden surprise. I smiled. "Would you care to purchase a mellonhusk? Hot and bubbling from the flames, I assure you," I said, gesturing to the cooking fire.

He walked over, the sneer relaxing but his face still marked with lines of anger. He pointed at a mellonhusk. "These things," he said in a curious accent, "are you cooking them? What are they?"

"Mellonhusks, sir. They are delicious, the juice like nectar and the meat manna! Only two copper *ortras*, cheapest and finest at the Lady's fair." I was surprised for a moment that he would not recognize a common delicacy.

He nodded, then began slapping hands at hips, a rhythmic search ending at his money pouch. He poured the contents into his hand, then held it out to me.

In his hand glittered a dozen assorted coins and a small comb made from argassian turtle shell. I looked at his face and he looked back, eyes uninterested. Again his ignorance puzzled me. Did he not know the value of his own purse?

Unworthy temptation clamored within me for a moment before I thrust it away. I picked out a silver *octrim*, then dug in my own purse for change. While I did so he held up the comb, turning it back and forth in the sunshine, watching the light reflecting off its glittering patterns as though he'd never seen it before.

"Forgot you had that, eh?" I said as I dropped the change into his hand.

He shrugged and smiled for a moment. "How can a man forget what he never knew?"

"Ha, a philosopher!" I said, chuckling. I picked up the long metal tongs and pointed at the cooking mellonhusks. "Choose your victim," I said, and flourished the tongs.

"Select for me, if you please."

I plucked a fat one from the coals and set it on a nearby rock. Two swift blows with my pick opened the shell, and I presented it to him. He nodded and took a deep drink. After a moment he brought the shell down, eyes wide, then drank again, longer this time. A single red drop trickled down his cheek.

Finally he lowered it and smiled wide. "Exquisite. Truly marvellous."

I nodded. "Thank you, sir."

He threw his head back and drained the husk, wiping his juice-stained mouth on his sleeves afterwards. "What is your name, good sir?"

As he had drunk I had seen his amulet clearly: it bore an aspect of the Lady, the Beautiful Damsel. Was he one of the Lady's Bonded in disguise, seeking out the proud and sinful? I bowed my head hastily. "I am no sir, only Stovon Alzrin."

"Honored to meet you, good Alzrin. I am Jan Taldos, a stranger here." I gave the formal bow of greeting, politely taking no notice of his lack of response. "Tell me, Alzrin," he said, "what festival is this?" He gestured with the empty mellonhusk about the grounds.

Such a question was outrageous on the face of it. I glanced around, but saw no watchers. "Why, the Festival of the Lady's Ascension, sir." His face remained blank. I pointed at the amulet at his neck. "You wear Her likeness, I presumed--"

Taldos wrapped a hand around the chain at his neck and tugged hard. The thin silver links dug deep into the flesh of his neck, but did not break. He sneered. "Let me assure you, sir, I wear this not by choice. It was a woman's gift to me, a woman I would now gladly throw into the fires of hell if given the chance."

The morning breeze turned cold then, and a prickle of fear ran down my back, an icy feather brushing my spine. For a moment a nameless dread gripped me. If he truly was a Lady's Bonded, he could be testing me, my worthiness. Such things were rumored to happen: the exaltation of the low found worthy, and the

terrible fate of those tested and found wanting. My life could change according to what words I said next. I steeled myself, then looked him in the eye. "Jan Taldos, are you an unbeliever?" I said, my voice trying not to falter over the last words.

He smiled then, a broad smile that lifted up the corners of his mouth but did not reach his eyes. "I assure you, it is all too likely I will believe."

"Then come with me, sir, and I will show you. Her likeness can be seen not far from here. I will bring you to it, so that you may look and realize the truth."

At that moment Gillan appeared, out of breath, his second-best tunic coated in mud. "What's this?" I said. "What happened to you?"

My nervousness gave my voice a harsh edge. Gillan gulped in fear and surprise, eyes popped wide. "Pl-please, master, I fell--"

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "Makes no difference. You must keep up appearances, my boy, do you hear me?" He nodded, his head bobbing up and down like a branch in a windstorm. "Good. Sit. Watch the fire. Sell to those who have the coin. No gifts to your friends, hear?" Gillan mumbled obedient noises. I nodded. "Good. I'll be back shortly." Taldos fell in beside me, and we headed off.

We passed more and more people as we walked: local craftsmen hoping to sell their goods, farmers from the surrounding land taking a day of rest from the soil. All come together for the reverence of the Lady. From elsewhere on the fairgrounds laughter and delighted chatter could be heard mixed with the cry of the fife and gitar.

As we walked, I told the story of the Lady: Her semi-divine birth, the miracles She performed in childhood, Her Ascension to divinity over us, and Her continuing struggle against the Enemy Outside. It was the story we all learned in childhood, and my only childhood memory. It fell from my lips with no stumbling or hesitation, and I found myself moved by its beauty.

When I finished, however, Taldos only grunted. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

We finally reached our destination, a low hill situated across from the sprawling Temple of the Lady. On the temple's eastern wall, a vast bas-relief depicted the Lady in her most common form, the Savior Empress. My heart surged as I looked upon it. Around us stood others of the faithful, some chanting paeans to Her, others whispering prayers, but most simply gazing with worshipful adoration.

"Look upon the Lady's Face, Jan Taldos, and know the truth!" I said, and pointed.

He stood staring for some time. As I watched him, his face seemed to change from within, as though some realization had come over him. Finally he spoke.

"Oh, I know her," he said, face contorted with rage. "That miserable witch, who cursed me to this miserable life!" He held up his fist and shook it. "Deceiver! Whore!"

Attracted by his cries, a crowd began to gather, murmuring. I drew back from him, horrified. "J-Jan, you are mad, mad, to insult the Lady, the goddess who protects and shelters us--"

"*Goddess?* No! She is nothing more than a betraying, vengeful witch!" he roared, whirling about. A gasp of horror rose up from the crowd, and a thrown clump of mud splattered against Taldos's tunic. Before more could happen, the festival guard appeared, a dozen strong men wearing the Lady's emblem.

The sight of them drove him mad. He became a wild man, and charged them, howling. In the end it took all of their strength to capture him. They hauled him away in chains, heels dragging trenches in the muddy ground.

Someone in the crowd told the guard captain I had been speaking with Taldos. As a result, they brought me along. They treated me with the respect due my years, but the guards' flinty eyes regarded me with contempt. Did I ever look so, when I served in the Army of the Faithful?

The guards dragged us through the curious crowds, until we reached the ivory and gold splendor of the Temple of the Lady, to stand before Her Hands for judgement. I trembled as we entered, but Taldos only spit and howled until a guard silenced him.

The air in the temple smelled of burnt offerings, rose petals and sandalwood. Through long corridors we walked, until we reached the main hall.

Our feet clattered over the floor's intricate mosaic of the Lady's Ascension. At the far end of the hall, on thrones of gold and rubies, sat the Hands of the Lady, the instruments of Her will upon the land, waiting. They stood frozen, like twin statues dressed in silk, distinguished only by their faces: Balcruin the Right Hand, with his agate eyes set above a permanent scowl, and Holkress the Left Hand, her thin ivory face a still mask. Behind them hung the Lady's Icons, Her Nine Aspects. Each one seemed to look into my soul.

We came to a stop before the thrones, the guards and I hurrying to kneel. Only Taldos remained standing.

Balcruin's face twisted into a lopsided smile. "Obviously this man is committing the sin of pride," he said. "Has he committed any other crimes?"

The captain raised his head. His voice echoed in the stillness. "Blasphemy, your holiness. Before several witnesses this man heaped abuse upon the name of the Lady, and denied her divinity. This man--" he gestured to me "--has been identified as his companion, but he has committed no crimes--" he threw me a sharp glance "--to our knowledge."

The two Hands nodded. "You there," said Holkress, pointing at Taldos, "what have you to say?"

"To say?" said Taldos. The ugly sneer from before returned. He looked at them. "I say that the woman you worship as a savior and goddess is nothing of the sort. She is a harlot and a witch, a foul, deceitful harpy!" The guards stirred, but neither of the Hands moved.

"Know, your holinesses," he said, the scorn in his voice twisting the title, "that in my land I am a powerful man, with vast obligations and responsibilities. I tarried with this woman you call a goddess for some time. When circumstances of duty forced me to set her aside to take a bride of suitable position, she betrayed me and my land." He opened his tunic to reveal the amulet gleaming on his chest. "This bauble she sent to me on my wedding feast-day, claiming it was a present. When I put it on, its foulness claimed me. I found myself in a strange world, deposited like a sack of ashes. A vile trick, from a vile woman!"

One of the guards yanked on Taldos's chains to silence him, but Balcruin held up a hand. "Let him speak. To know best his fate we must first hear his words, so that we may judge him."

"When the dawn comes I disappear to a new world. And each world this cursed thing sends me to--" Taldos pulled on the amulet "--is a world that flatters her, and mocks me. I have seen a painting of her, a little smile on her face, hanging in a palace, gawking fools drawn up for miles to view it. I have walked through a ruined city in perpetual twilight, lit only by a full moon resembling her face. I have seen a world where she is held up as a paragon of beauty and virtue, and all women who dwell there alter their faces by the knife and worse, until they are her shadows." He drew himself up, chains clinking as he straightened. "Such a thing cannot be, that the universe could so honor this spiteful witch. And so, your holinesses, I have concluded it is all false, a delusion of my mind, created and maintained by the curse she has placed me under."

Holkress arched one thin eyebrow. "If this woman you speak of is so well regarded on these other worlds," she said, "I find it a wonder that you have not already been put to death."

Taldos nodded. "Oh, but I have been, dear woman. Her foul believers have burned, crushed, and torn me to pieces time and again as screaming hordes cheer. It matters not. Illusions cannot harm me. With each new day I awake, restored, to experience another fresh hell of her making."

Balcruin's dark eyes narrowed. "I do not think you are an unbeliever, Jan Taldos. No, you are a madman."

Taldos smiled thinly. "It hardly matters what you believe, as you are only a delusion."

Holkress leaned forward in a rustle of silk. In a flat voice she said, "In any case, you shall not see another day here. When the sun rises you shall be thrown from the Lady's Face, cast from Her grace, to die in the dust beneath her."

Her hand twitched once. The guards stepped forward to drag Taldos away, but, suddenly calm, Taldos turned and walked before them, the clatter of his chains echoing in the stillness as the guards escorted him away.

I stared after him. On the surface of it his story was madness. And yet, I did not think Jan Taldos mad.

"And what of you?" said Balcruin, those dark eyes now focused on me. The Hand's words awakened me, freeing me from the horror of Taldos's story. The danger of my position sank into my heart.

I fell prone to the floor, only my hands upraised as I begged for mercy. "Your holiness, I beg you. I only met this man this morning, and attempted to show him the error of his ways. Please know I am the Lady's most humble and faithful servant." My voice broke a little at the end.

Holkress rested her chin on one hand and regarded me. "I believe you," she said finally.

"As do I," said Balcruin. He turned to regard Holkress. "But we must be certain. It is our duty to ensure the unbeliever's words have not taken root in this loyal subject. He must be tested."

Holkress's pale face looked solemn. "I agree," she said. They nodded together in

unison, and I prayed to the Lady for strength as the guards took me away.

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By the end of the ordeals they were satisfied of my innocence. I had remained true. Two monks bound my wounds and offered me water laced with *mophr* root to ease the pain. As I limped from the temple, they announced the sentence of Jan Taldos: at dawn he would be thrown to his death from the Lady's Face. The traditional punishment of the heretic and blasphemer.

My heart felt strangely heavy as I trudged back to Gillan and our cookfire. I took no notice of the crowds, although that morning they would have given me joy.

When I returned I found Gillan crying and the ripe odor of burned mellonhusk rind. Bored and inattentive during my long absence, he had let the mellonhusks overcook. Their juices overheated, cracking the shells and spoiling them. No one would buy them now.

I looked down at his tear-streaked face. In the past such negligence would have earned him a beating. Instead I knelt down and hugged him until he stopped weeping. I dug into my purse for the silver *octrim* Taldos had given me and pressed it into Gillan's hand. He stared at it, trembling. I smiled and nodded. "Go on, boy. Get something to eat, then go watch the singers." I made my voice gruff. "Go, go, before I change my mind." He dashed away and vanished into the crowds.

I sat down beside the fire to watch as it burned itself out. The valuable fruit lost and a day's earnings frittered away by the carelessness of a boy. Once such waste would have angered me and consumed my thoughts. Now I scarcely cared; it seemed trivial.

I put out the coals and buried the smoking mixture. Then I walked back to the low hill across from the temple, alone in the crowds. At the top of the hill I sat down and looked east, my back to the Lady's Face. Overhead the cold stars wheeled, turning inexorably in the sky as the dawn approached. If Taldos was a liar or a madman, then when the dawn came, he would die, screaming as he fell to earth. But if he spoke the truth. . . .

I could not remember the sound of my father's voice, the color of my mother's eyes, the smell and feel of the sheets of my bed as a child. The battles I had fought, the men who had served with me -- when I closed my eyes, their faces eluded me. Only recent days, each one much like the last: cooking and selling the mellonhusks with the boy. A simple life, yes, and perhaps false.

If what Taldos said was true, then perhaps I could not remember my past because it never happened. I, Gillan, the smiling crowds, perhaps we had all been created by this curse Taldos claimed he suffered.



I looked at the faces of the passersby, all smiling, happy, laughing. What lay beneath each one of them? What of their memories, their pasts, their selves? If you tore away the coverings and peered inside, would they prove to be hollow shells?

How do you know a thing is true? Because you remember it?

I shivered and sat back, waiting for the dawn.

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