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THE TOWER OF THUNDER

by Jesse Alford

PART ONE

Arrival

CHAPTER ONE

When a man decides to join the Legion, he should make damn sure it's for the right reasons. For instance, it will be helpful to be deeply in love with long, dreary marches through heat and cold alike. He might be eager for a career in digging ditches and dragging gravel around. Better yet, he might just not want to make decisions anymore. Where to stand, where to sleep, what to carry, where to take it, what to wear, what to say, who to hate — these are decisions better made, for some, by the officers. Of course, one might also join up if he enjoys the prickle of sorcery on the back of his neck, or has a passion for that feeling a man gets when he knows there's to be lightning, but can't get off the mountaintop.

Me, I joined the Legion to get out of the city, see the world and get rich. No one told me, but that is not what the Legion is about. The Legion is about roads, and camps, and drudgery compelled by various maniacs who have nothing better to do. This high life is punctuated by opportunities to have an enterprising stranger stick some steel in you. Generally legion training will makes a legionnaire better at the unpleasant business of battlefield butchery than whatever distinguished gentleman-conscripts the latest rebel baron has made out of his peasantry. Still, combat is not without casualties, and no man is exempt.

Don't get me wrong; the First Legion of the Empire Of Eternity is a crack outfit. They march better, turn sharper and shine brighter than any rag-tag bunch of lowlifes and idealists out there. Imperial history is replete with instances of their mere appearance on a battlefield ending an uprising or dispute. This doesn't change the fact that their generals are maniacs, their emperor is worse, and in the absence

of an emperor, it's looking more and more like they'll end up crossing swords with some other Imperial Legion at some point. I don't envy any soldier on that field, I'll tell you that much. What will make it worse, of course, is that each imperator has been quietly courting sorcerers to give themselves an edge in the coming wars for the throne; those black old evils are — to a man — at least half-way crooked, spooky, dangerous and crazed. I myself spent my time as an imperial officer courting one such sorcerer, and the mark it left on me will never be obscured.

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In those days, I was in service to the First Legion out of Easton in Terruna. It was the summer of the 279th Year of Imperial Eternity. I'd signed up in Lasslen, to get out of a family of merchants who perhaps wanted even less to do with me than I did with them — I do not have a nose for business in that town. Maybe I don't have the morals for it. Any rate, I'd had plenty of time to regret my ten-year enlistment. I was on year six, and my literacy had just earned me a trip to field command school and a promotion to Lieutenant. I'd had some 22 years on this green earth, and I'd spent fully a quarter marching, digging, fighting, shoring up earthworks, smoothing bends in roads and generally making myself the ideal civil servant of the Empire. I'm sure I never did anything to deserve such a wretched profession, though I suppose the tax collectors have it worse. The year in Field Command Academy, I had assumed, was to be a break from the manual labor, but that terrible bitch Sessa would have arranged it so that the school was a traveling camp, working on civil engineering projects and humping all over the central Empire while learning our military histories and such. Mournia Sessa had been dead for over two centuries, and still her absolute hard-ass vision of the First Legion drove us to make an art form out of uncalled-for personal misery. We were supposed to be proud of it, and I guess we were. We certainly made a big show of sneering at less industrious soldiers, when we got the chance. What good's a soldier that can't build a fort, raise a crop and write reports about it? Butchery is only one part of the job.

Upon graduating from Field Command, I expected to be attached to some company much like the one I'd left, and maybe spend some time telling some other soldiers to dig; presumably they did something to deserve it, right? But it was not to be. Apparently, my unusually complete literacy had another turn to deal me — I would not be receiving a typical post. Oh no. I was going to be a regional militia coordinator in the Northern Territory, a frontier the Empire had all but abandoned. A lieutenant rates about twenty fighting men, maybe more, and a personal staff — they made us work at Field Command Academy, sure, but that was more a going

away present from a life of hard labor than anything else. Not me, though. No. I got five men, four mules, four supply carts and hundreds of square miles of quietly hostile wilderness. Oh yes, I'll not forget: I got a reading project as well. So that is how I, proud and freshly minted officer of the First Legion, came to be covered in road dust, without even a horse to make my ass sore, lugging a pack of books — of all damn things — just as heavy as any pack I'd ever hauled as an enlisted man. Except now, it was beneath the dignity of my rank to complain about it.

The road was straight, at least — though the gravel gave way to plain dirt about fifty miles north of the Terruna provincial border. After our first night of marching on the hard-pack dirt in the summer heat, each and every one of us was wearing a grim mask of earth. The mules, in a surprising turn, were behaving; Sergeant Brand was to be every bit as influential among the animals as he was among the men. Ahead of me, he turned briefly to catch my attention, and nodded at a toppled milestone nearby. I grinned at him and called a halt. The soldiers might have been dust-monsters, but they were sharply dressed dust monsters, and they lined up nice. I had a moment of unjustifiable pride; those had been my troops for about a week.

I ordered Sergeant Brand to set camp. He looked a little surprised, but it didn't keep him from getting the other four hopping-to. There were, admittedly, more hours of work left in the men than we would need to settle into our camp; the sergeant had surely expected the halt to be about fixing the monument. Well, Brand hadn't read the same books I had, if he read at all; I'd been reading a stack of books some clerk in the Endless Citadel had dreamed up for me, and they were making me uncomfortable about the idea of arriving at our new headquarters without having a good start on my reading. Any situation granting a couple of extra hours to catch up on the histories and personalities surrounding our new home appealed to me. Besides, the concrete in the carts was for fortifications, not for traveler's markers out past the receded border.

Apparently, Emperor Essinar, imperator of the First Legion, had cut a deal with Methea, which was one of the kingdoms that had sprung up in the northern part of the footprint of fallen Courark. The First Legion was to help the scattered frontier settlements organize militias, maintain roads, and otherwise generally make themselves useful, and the Royal Houses of Methea were to give up their long-standing claim on an old Imperial guard tower in the region that dated back to before the Courark civil war and the dissolution of government in what would become the Northern Territory, Methea and Four-Towns, variously. Our job, then, was

to hold and improve the tower, charmingly located at the base of the unclimbable Stonesky Mountain in the hills east of the Bitterstones, while generally complying as fully as seemed reasonable with the spirit of the agreement. Essentially, this allowed Methea's southern expansion into the once-Imperial Northern Territory — functionally abandoned by the Empire decades ago in the wake of the war of the spear — to proceed unmolested by bandits, rogue barons and brigands of all sorts. Well, except our sort; soldiers have to eat, and our own crops wouldn't be in for the first winter. I was going to have to play taxman after all... and I would have rather built highways in the rain, personally.

Anyway, the tower came with a complication, or a bonus, depending on how you looked at it. Soldiers aren't paid to be optimistic, though. The guardtower in question had been successfully held in the name of our Legion for decades by — you guessed it — a sorcerer. Better yet, an apparently eccentric sorcerer, the almost unspoken necessity of which did not escape me, what with him doing decades of duty alone in a tower in the middle of nowhere after having apparently spent years creating what Legion texts refer to as “wizards' war conditions.” He went by the name of Thunder, which apparently is an acceptable kind of moniker among spook-pushers; his colleagues in the art have had names like Bleak, Night, Graver, Vulcan, and Murgan Shadow-King. Thunder it was, then.

I also worried, in the back of my head, about Emperor Essinar's motives for securing a hinterland fortress poised on the edge of the Empire. Methea was little threat to the Empire, and the Northern Territory between Methea and the border of the Imperial Province of Terruna was devoid of any population substantial enough to challenge even a single company of any given Legion's troops — and on the other side of a river, besides. And using Imperial Legions to safeguard Methea's expansion into nominally Imperial land! If there were an Emperor, he'd almost certainly object. Of course, there hadn't been an Emperor for decades. The Interrex was as close as we had. At one time almost no one knew if it was legal to be Emperor of the First Legion and Imperial Interrex at the same time. Emperor Essinar had put that question to rest when he was sworn in as Interrex. So it goes.

As I unslung my own pack of heavy volumes and settled on the weathered, cracked stone of the fallen marker, one of the younger soldiers approached with the characteristic trepidation of those recently enlisted. He wiped away some of the dust now turning to mud on his forehead, leaving filthy streaks.

“Excuse me, sir?” he said.

“Yes?” My fingers betrayed my impatience to be back at my books, delving

once more into history, and drummed idly on the leather pack. He flinched, just a bit — I realized what I'd done, and put a stop to it. Maintaining the dignity of the office could be difficult.

"Sir, we've jus' seen people lurkin' about the edges of tha' clearing a bit down tha' road. I'd point, but tha' sergeant has already cracked me for that once, and I'd like-ta' to stay off his shit list, sir." His tone was respectful, but I could tell he was the rambunctious sort, given the chance. Red-haired and relatively slight — for an Imperial legionnaire of apparently Tyrfining descent, anyway — his posture suggested that perhaps he'd like to go over there and confront the lurkers personally, maybe going so far as to fit them for coffins. I doubted very much that he had ever seen combat.

"Thank you, Reiftyr." I glanced around, paying the clearing no particular extra dose of apparent attention. Two or three figures were just visible at the edge, crouching among the bushes and probably considering themselves hidden. Sneaking up on Imperial soldiers had never been a healthy habit, and I didn't intend to let that change. "Loring! Have you gathered firewood yet?" Loring looked up from the tarps he was rolling out and shook his head. "Grab Sloan and Reiftyr here and head out into the forest for firewood after you've got those tarps out. We'll finish up here; I want you to get around to the other side of that clearing while you're at it. Subtly."

Loring grinned, Reiftyr looked excited, but Sloan showed sense. He made a dour face, and said, "You want them dead or alive, if they look like trouble?" I afforded the surroundings another casual inspection and returned to sorting through my books.

"I'll be going up the road with Sergeant Brand and Mather here about the time the sun hits the horizon. Just be behind those fellows, and ready to go, when I do." The three soldiers nodded, finished up their tasks and straggled off into the woods, one at a time and in different directions.

"What do you think..." Brand said, "road agents?" I regarded the older soldier carefully. We both knew, he and I, who was the better soldier. His question was — what, an attempt to defer to my judgment? I had made it clear during our second day on the road that, my command being so small, traditional formalities would not be necessary. The veteran sergeant seemed to enjoy the discomfort this caused among the youngest men, Reiftyr and Mather. They were used to the rigid formality of titles and rank emphasized almost religiously in the academies, not the easier camaraderie that formed in a company where the officers came up from

within the rank and file.

"I think maybe so." I proposed and rejected various scenarios in my mind before continuing. "But maybe just amateurs — my thought goes, maybe they knocked over the mile marker so they could hit the crew that comes out to raise it? Out here military gear isn't easy to get hold of, and concrete — well, the dust and lime anyway — they don't even make it."

Brand snorted. Mather quietly busied himself with the latrine trench away from our conversation. He preferred not to take part in what, to his mind, was an undisciplined conversation. Military culture enforced the idea that all military units are unquestioned dictatorships; I disagreed, and I thought that for all her hard-ass policies, Mournia Sessa would have been on my side of that argument. Oh sure, I was a right dictator. I just didn't suffer the weakness of spirit that requires a man's rule to be unquestioned, and thus uninformed. Back when Sessa ran the Legion, it was a mercenary outfit and there was no Imperial law to enforce attendance. Truancy and desertion were averted through good pay, close camaraderie and accessible officers, though I'm sure the occasional beating was employed as well. I saw no reason not to resurrect the practice of listening to one's soldiers out here beyond the border and away from our captain and company.

After another moment of observation, Brand said, "Ain't it pretty ambitious for some aspiring builders or whatever to take a crack at the First Legion to get ahold of concrete? I mean, even if it's the Second that ends up out here picking this thing up eventually, they'll still be sending fifteen men in full battle dress. I don't buy it, Sir. I think they're just sizing up anyone who straggles on up this way. And I think they're experienced." The sun's lower edge kissed the hills of the horizon as night edged closer. I slipped my book back into the pack, having failed to even crack the cover. I checked the cinch on my sword belt.

"Let's go ask them. Here's the plan."

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Slowly, quietly, Loring took a knee and knocked an arrow. A few yards closer to the clearing, Reiftyr drew his longknife — Loring saw its trembling gleam through the low brush, and recalled that Reiftyr was unblooded. Several yards back, Sloan was in a tree with his own bow at the ready. There appeared to be only four of the bandits — but bandits they were. Dirty and unarmored, the leaders were nonetheless armed with jeweled daggers of the sort carried by rich sons who shouldn't travel such roads without escort. So, they had seen some success. Loring had grown up among bandits like these, though he considered his old

troupe to be much sharper. Well, before the Legion wiped them out, anyway. He didn't hold grudges when the alternative to "live and learn" was "die and don't." When a youthful Loring had found his way into the Imperial Legions as a way off the chopping block, he was already blooded a few times over.

He was not a nice person, but virtue was an encompassing concept in military service — nicety was not a requirement.

The Lieutenant came into view, walking into the clearing to confront the most visible of the bandits. His shield hung easy from his arm, but his sword was sheathed. The two ambushers at the flanks of the clearing may have actually escaped his notice; Loring smirked. Sloan had the same notion — he was considering moving to a better position to take the flankers, but then Brand barreled into view, subtly hanging back as he appeared to stride boldly forward, positioning himself close to one of the flankers. Both the soldiers let go of that particular concern; their trust in Brand was almost absolute.

The bandit leader thought his luck was running hot, the soldiers coming up to confront him with half their force foraging, and thinking they matched him and his only visible partner in number. The leader took a couple of steps forward and drew his jeweled dagger. "You're out of your place, soldier. You have no business here. This is my road. Imperials pay a special toll, 'round here."

The line almost made Loring nostalgic. The bandit did himself justice with his delivery; his voice dripped threat.

The Lieutenant growled, a low, unnerving sound that instantly earned the officer some space in Loring's black heart. Being scary wasn't usually an officer's gig, especially an officer who dragged books about, and wrote far more in the logbook than Loring could imagine was necessary. "This is an imperial highway. My legion built it in a better time." The Lieutenant dropped into a squat, and ran his fingers reverently along the crowned and rutted surface of the road. Reiftyr looked confused, Loring figured it for a trick, and Sloan's usually grim face bore a slight smirk. Either Sergeant Brand was a gifted actor, or his surprise was genuine, if quickly submerged. He continued to move into position, nonetheless. "A good legion road like this deserves to drink blood now and again, brigand. Get off my road, or you'll never leave it." The Lieutenant locked eyes with the bandit - and as he stood, with the thumb of his left hand, he pushed his sword an inch free of its scabbard.

"You will pay - one way or another!" Loring didn't have time to admire the man's nerve.

As the bandit spoke, the two flanking bandits stepped out of the shadows,

and three more brigands rose from the tall grass on the other side of the road, crossbows in hand.

Even Loring was somewhat surprised.

Brand reacted instantly. He charged across the road at the new threat, threw his arms wide and tackled two of the crossbowmen. Sloan took a shot at one of the bandits on the Lieutenant's flank; intervening foliage knocked his arrow astray. Cursing, he knocked another arrow. The Lieutenant's sword sprung free and he dropped into a fighting crouch, bringing his shield to the ready as the two bandits initially exposed advanced on him, jewelled and wicked longknives ready, easy confidence in their step. They'd killed before. Loring wondered where Mather was as he sent a shaft whistling past the other flanker's ear in a narrow miss. Reiftyr finally took ahold of himself, and let out a mighty battle cry, charging forward with knife held high. Loring thought a sword might've been a better choice, but Reiftyr had insisted that it would be too awkward to sneak with.

It may have been the cry that turned things back in the right direction. For one thing, Mather came charging down the road past the cusp of the clearing, striking down the other bandit archer with a sharp blow just as the road agent had gotten an arrow off his string. For another, two of the four bandits closing on the Lieutenant looked away from their encircled prey, glancing up in reaction to the surprisingly robust roar. The Lieutenant raked both of them with a long slash, and then brought his sword around to beat back the advances of the men flanking him. Reiftyr crashed into the bandit-chief's cohort, and the two tumbled to the ground in a flurry of stabbing blades and shrieks of pain and rage.

Loring's third arrow took the bandit-chief solidly through the back, and the man lurched heavily to the ground. It was risky to shoot toward the Lieutenant like that, and he was sure it would have earned him a dark look and shit duty from Brand if he'd been seen. That was the magic of Loring's world though, the thing that made it worth living in: even sergeants couldn't see everything.

Sloan was having no such luck, but then, he was only addressing shafts to the safe targets, and they had cover. Besides which, he was distracted by Reiftyr's fight — Sloan had trained the kid, or some such. Sentimentality was not among Loring's various weaknesses.

The Lieutenant couldn't take the two experienced bandits at once. He held them off, but his sword and shield both worked overtime to keep the softer parts of his anatomy from catching a sharp edge — he fought like a man that didn't trust his armor. Brand was straddling one of the surviving archers, beating his face in with a

bloody, meaty fist, while the other, having apparently escaped Brand's ambitious grapple, struggled to keep Mather's blade out of his vitals. He was succeeding, but Mather continued to score painful hits on his legs and arms — it was only a matter of time, and not a long time at that. Reiftyr's man was down, his guts spilling all over the place in an appalling red tumble. The young soldier's armor had served to limit his wounds to a single stab in his side, and he picked himself up from hands and knees and charged one of the men menacing the Lieutenant with another explosive roar. The road agent turned to meet the charge and kept the raging soldier off him with quick footwork, but caught the Lieutenant's heavy blade through his collarbone for his trouble. He dropped like a cut branch, and soaked the road deep red where he fell. Suddenly alone, the last of the bandits dropped his knife and fell to his knees. The Lieutenant whirled on him. "Tell me something useful!" he roared.

The bandit stuttered for a moment, then said, "We were the ones that hit Lady Neaor's carriage last week!" The Lieutenant shook his head and kicked the man in the chest, hard. He heard ribs crack. He delivered another kick to the man's side and shouted, "Try again!"

Brand and Mather were coming across the road, now — Brand's fists and forehead were covered in blood, and Mather was wearing a red sleeve of the stuff on his sword arm. Brand was limping. The bandit dragged himself back to his knees in wincing agony. The Lieutenant grabbed his hair and pulled the bandit's face up. "Are there more of you around here?" The bandit shook his head. "There's a big camp - but it's further in the forest. I've never been there."

"Take us to your camp. You are under arrest for harassing a duly authorized agent of the Imperial will. You will not be tried. The penalty is death, or—" "We're just trying to get by, you bastar—" The Lieutenant cut him off with a brutal pommel-strike to the jaw. Bone splintered, and the bandit wailed through broken teeth as he sprawled on the clearing's soft grass. Brand dragged the man to his feet and faced him toward the Lieutenant. Sloan and Loring made their way into the clearing; Sloan started to check Reiftyr's wound. Reiftyr slumped against a tree, breathing hard and bleeding.

"Or, conscription. You should have let me finish." The man couldn't seem to get control over his left eye, and it fluttered as he sobbed.

The Lieutenant muttered, "Well, let's see your camp then." The terrified bandit nodded, and began to lead Brand into the woods. The Lieutenant motioned briskly, and Loring spat on the corpse he had knelt to inspect and stood to join

them.

The three soldiers followed their prisoner into the forest.

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I didn't care what the histories said. The land between Terruna and the White Wander had never been truly Imperial. When Courark was still a proper province, the capital Cu-Rashta might have actually been Imperial, but when the city was sacked by the Tyrfin and Oruc horde just before the start of the Courark Civil War, any maps and records of the sort that might reveal little things like a supply depot a couple of miles off a main provincial road were lost. Maps and records defined the Empire, not treaties or flags. If that land had ever truly been Imperial territory, we would've known about the squat, single-story fortification the bandits were based out of. As it was, we got to find it the traditional way: led by a beaten local dragging his heels in front of an encouraging sword-point.

I hadn't decided if I would stay the man's execution, yet — maybe I would have conscripted him, if I hadn't broken his jaw. Men like that could forgive the slaughter of their comrades in crime, but I'd found that they bore personal injury with no grace to speak of. I shouldn't have done it.

If we'd been a few days south, I'd have had to find a magistrate or a captain or something to deal with the matter, but judicial independence was one of the few benefits of an extra-territorial post. Once we arrived at the cache, I saw little reason to extend the brigand's misery. He couldn't speak. Certainly he'd have a cleaner, happier death under my justice than under that of whatever baron he'd molested the associates of; mercy was an interesting reason for murder, but I'd heard stranger. Besides, with his jaw busted like that and no one to take care of him... I had to admit that unless I was going to have Brand adopt him, I'd as good as killed him already. He'd gotten a couple of gratuitous pokes out of Loring, too, and they were bleeding steadily. I supposed that, in addition to not breaking his face, I could have put someone less sadistic on encouragement duty if I wanted a shot at press-ganging the kid.

The squat stone hovel came into view as twilight began to give in to true night, and my prisoner winced his way through some approximation of "That's it."

"Very good," I replied. "Finish it fast, Loring." I suspected quick death was not Loring's favorite soft of death to deliver, but he followed orders well, and the man died without much fuss. Brand eyed him, then turned to Loring.

"You kill it, you bury it." Brand returned his attention to the depot. It looked like it might have been Imperial design originally, but over a century of harsh win-

ters and at least one fallen tree had improvised modifications to the structure. It had picked up an extra entrance, and one wall had been rebuilt in the form of a pile of rock, with posts holding up a tarp. "Looks cozy. Circle?"

"Sounds good." Brand and I began to cautiously walk a perimeter around the structure, each orbiting in an opposite direction, illuminating the place with our lanterns. When we met back where we had started, our assessment was unanimous: unattended, poorly maintained, and much better than our camp on the road. I decided to build our bandits a little graveyard on the roadside with a marker inscribed with some sufficiently threatening language explaining the implications of their deaths to other enterprising agents of the road, and Brand decided that Loring would do the carrying of the body. Loring volunteered for the complaining, though, which was good because neither Brand nor I were supposed to do any of that, but sometimes it just had to be done.

We needn't have worried; Sloan and Reiftyr took up similar duties upon being informed of the burial plans when we got back to our original campsite. I supposed Mather saw complaining as unprofessional; if so, he didn't know anything about professional soldiering. Brand and I moved the camp — to the men's credit, they had one of the graves dug and a decent start on a plank for a sign by the time I gave the order to turn in, and they did it without Reiftyr's help; he was hurt worse than I had initially believed. Loring wanted to throw all the bandits together in the grave that was already done. It was a good idea. We didn't do it.

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