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THE TOWER OF THUNDER

by Jesse Alford

CHAPTER TWO

Burying one's enemies is a time-consuming process that tends to thoroughly blunt the edge of bloodlust. Brand's "you kill it, you bury it" rule struck me as an important soldiering adaptation to a similar rule I had heard growing up in Lasslen: a particularly sadistic young merchant's son had been admonished, upon being caught with yet another dead, tortured animal, "If you kill it, you will eat it."

After two days consumed in laying that nest of bandits to rest and knocking down their little hut, we found ourselves laboring in bad weather to compound our delays and indignities. I was beginning to worry about Reiftyr. His wounds rendered him vulnerable to illness, and it looked as if infection was beginning to take around the wound under his arm. So far the legendary hardiness of the Tyrfinng seemed to be serving as well as could be expected, but absent clean conditions and proper treatment, he had little chance of recovery. How a bandit got a decorative dagger clean through the linkage of imperial chain I wouldn't speculate, but the wound certainly would have been fatal if the armor hadn't stopped the full thrust of the blow. Sloan told me the blade simply couldn't have been clean; most probably the bastard that stuck Reiftyr with it had previously put it to use in similarly unsanitary activities. I considered digging the man up and hanging him for it, but we were pressed for time, and Sloan had put in good work to lay the brigands in proper Illumian graves. The inscription on their grave marker bore a more forgiving interpretation of Illumian scripture than I would have chosen, but we all have our vices. It read, "Here Lie Those Whom the Light Forgot, That Forgot the Light. May the Light Find Them as They Pass to Umbra."

We were falling behind schedule. Loring offered his solution early. "Lieutenant, we could just put him up in a farmhold. We would be within our rights." He glanced at Brand for support, received a slight nod of confirmation.

Brand said, "Technically true, sir. Imperial law may not hold here, though." I eyed Reiftyr; I felt fairly certain he would die if we kept on keeping on. He was walking, but fever was walking with him.

"If we did," Sloan said, "I'd have to stay with him. I can treat his wounds if we can make ourselves at home somewhere warm and dry with clean bandages. He ought to pull through." I hated the idea slightly less than I hated the idea of losing a man, especially to the kind of scum we'd tucked in back on the road. The logistics of splitting the unit concerned me; I'd leave it to Brand.

"Alright," I announced. "Let's get him on a travois. Sloan, you can find the cord for it in Brand's pack. Mather, find me a couple of branches a couple feet taller than a man. We'll rest for a bit while Loring looks for a good mark. Loring, be back in an hour – I don't want to linger here much longer. Reiftyr, you sit your ass down, have some water, take it easy. Brand, I need to talk to you."

As the men scattered to their tasks, I took the sergeant aside. He anticipated my question.

"You can take me and Mather along. You need me for the mules; no one else here can handle more than one of 'em. We'll leave Sloan in charge of the other two and a cart and mule; Loring's got a favorite he works well with, so let him pick which mule they keep. The kid can heal up, and then they'll come up after us. Meantime they can pay for their stay out of the milled flour on the cart; we'll miss it come winter, but not as much as we'd miss the support of the locals."

Sometimes I wondered why the Legions even bothered with commissioned officers.

"Good, Brand. Let's make it happen." He started rearranging the loads on the carts, leaving me to wonder again if he'd read the inventory, or made his own mental inventory as the carts were loaded. Maybe I'd ask him.

Loring returned before Sloan had the travois even half done. He'd found a lovely little farm tucked in off the main road and shielded from it by hills and trees; he estimated a family of a dozen or so agrarian types might be living in the place. After he made his report, he helped Loring and Mather get the travois together. Brand fitted himself with the makeshift harness, and I explained the plan.

"We've got to do this carefully; we don't know how the occupants are going to react to our request, and even if they seem friendly, we don't want them finding

out about the rest of our supplies or where we're headed, lest they let someone know about it who we'd rather didn't get any ideas. Mather, I want you to stay up in those trees on that hill there; we'll move three of the carts and animals up there, and you'll be able to see the road and the farm while staying mostly hidden yourself. The rest of us, and the last cart, are going in to the farm. Loring tells me that there's a road leading up the way we're headed, so we'll get up there then double back and come from that way. When we leave, we'll head south until we're clear of prying eyes, then strike north for the tower. We do not need some brigands taking a chance on us when we're split up. I'll handle the negotiations with the farmers.

"The plan is to leave Sloan to take care of Reiftyr; Loring, I want you to back him up and manage the mule. Pick the one you want now, and get it hooked up to the cart the sergeant has kindly prepared for you. We've given you mostly milled grains. We need the unmilled ones to get the crops at the tower going, and you'll be pulling on-spot rations from local supply... that is to say, you can trade some of the flour for it, if you have to. There's some salt in there, too, and what sugar we could spare. It should be more than enough to buy whatever you need; bring the rest up with you when Reiftyr's ready to travel. Try to keep on the locals' good side; we're alone out here."

Loring picked the mule he called, of all things, Daffodil. Daffo for short. This was exactly the sort of thing that justified the constant indignation mules seemed to be born with and nurture lovingly through their entire lives; it was a male.

We set off to the north.

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The land between Terruna and Methea was a mix of hills climbing up to meet the Bitterstone mountains to the west, forests clinging to the hills and frequent meadows lying clear of trees in the low places. The farm Loring had found sat in a fairly large meadow, with perhaps half the land occupied by rows of wheat and sundry other crops. The other half was given over to grasses and wildflowers, though it was getting late enough in the summer that what few hardy flowers remained were beginning to show the strain of a difficult existence. A pleasant brook wandered carelessly through the place, providing the perfect excuse for a beautifully built span of timber bridgework, which connected the residences on the one side with the fields on the other. We came on down the road as dusk approached, Loring pulling Daffo, Daffo pulling our one cart of cereals. Brand dragged Reiftyr's travois beside the cart; no one wanted to walk in the dust the wheels worked up in the dry dirt road.

The farmers were quick to get the women and children across the bridge and inside. If I'd had to guess, I would have said soldiers of some stripe had come that way before. There were more of them than Loring had guessed; at least two large families and several hired hands shared the work, from what I could tell. All the men came out to greet us before we finished crossing the wild half of the meadow; apparently someone had instructed them to casually get ahold of pitchforks and other such totally nonthreatening agrarian tools. I would have felt more at ease if at least a few of the field hands had struck a more casual pose — as it was, they elected to point their instruments at us, their faces rich with menace.

We did get the message, though. Loring muttered something about murder and rested his hand on his hilt, but looked calm and unafraid. In contrast, the others were all spooked, if discretely so, and had been uneasy since we set foot on the side road leading into the valley — I couldn't place exactly why. We outclassed these farmers. Sloan kept his hands away from his weapons, but he did have to clasp them behind his back to manage it. Brand folded his arms and didn't even try to adopt a friendly visage, though he didn't go for a blade. Reiftyr's contribution was a cough he couldn't suppress. Terrifying. At least intimidation wasn't my goal.

I held up my hands, sword in sheath and shield still slung over my pack.

"We're of the First Legion. I'm the lieutenant of this outfit, and this is my sergeant, Brand. We've a wounded man, and we'd pay for his stay so he might have a chance to recover." The farmers didn't seem convinced. "We've grain, and some salt, some sugar. Emperor Essinar has us up here to coordinate a militia for common defense—" I did my best impression of an ingratiating smile "—though it looks as though you folks have a pretty good start on it already." The only one of the farmers carrying a sword stepped forward and bowed, though not deeply.

"My name's Geith, lieutenant, and this is my farm-hold — well, mine and Dran's. We call it Whorl." He eyed me for a moment, then Brand. He said, "We can deal. This is my son, Orthan. He'll help your men get your cart and animal situated in the barn — will you join me for whiskey in the house?"

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The house had been built with the benefit of planks from a sawmill, and then repaired through its long life without any such benefit. Beautiful squared posts supported arched ceilings and bore intricate carvings derived of the Tyrfin style, though I doubt any of the actual barbarian carvers had done the work. Here and there the sharp old woodwork had been reinforced or replaced with carefully shaped logs. As farmhouses went, it was nice. Wooden floors, carpets here and

there — I mentioned it to Geith as he poured me a glass of whiskey.

"It's stayed in the family for generations, and we're far enough south that we've never been hit by barbarians, but far enough north that the nolls leave us alone. My grandfather's great-grandfather was knighted — for carpentry — and he took his grant in land and labor. Baron Neor up north may be a—" Geith caught himself before I could even raise an eyebrow. "Excuse me. Anyway, he leaves us alone, mostly, and we do good trade with the Librarians who come out of the ruins of Cu-Rashta to supply their fellows in Ravican."

"Does the baron levy a militia?"

"He never has. The one time there was more trouble than his reeves could handle, he called on Tyr for help, and though taxes were heavy that year — he even managed to tax us — the yield was good."

"These reeves of his—"

"Mercenaries."

"I've heard it's worse to the north."

"Oh yes. The Oruk and Tyrfing war constantly, and the Shadow King of Four Towns is too busy dealing with spider cults, werebeasts and who knows what else to do much for us here in the abandoned lands. Methea has a civil war every few generations and spends the rest of the time recovering from the last one so they'll be ready for the next... they don't do much about barbarians, bandits or beasts either."

I finished my drink faster than I'd meant to when he mentioned the Shadow King. Four Towns was free to maintain that they were ruled by the ghost of their first king — himself an Imperial soldier turned renegade sorcerer — who was bound within the crown, but I didn't expect a man like Geith to buy into that kind of nonsense. The current monarch always claimed partial possession by the Shadow King, or at least that the shade was a close personal friend; down in the Empire we had learned to expect that kind of behavior from the north-most outposts of civilization. Even the Church of Illumi up there supported that particular brand of heresy, though there wasn't really anything the Cathedral could do about it — the Brettian strain of the Church indulged its varying whimsical heresies in the north without rebuke; without Brettian evangelists, there would be no Illumination in the north at all.

"It's good of you to keep up such a spot of light, then." I elected not to prick at the man's superstitions before trying to get a deal done. "And lucky, too, for my man Reiftyr — we came across some bandits a bit up the road, though they caught

worse than we did of the exchange.”

“I see. Bandits.” His brow furrowed. I waited. He tossed back the rest of his drink, poured another. Twice he seemed about to say something, but instead let his eyes wander. I elected to simply wait. Eventually, he said, “We could offer one of the field hand's rooms, for perhaps the remaining months before winter sets in. Grain we have, though we'll be happy to take a share equal to what he eats.”

“The pay would be in sugar and salt, then. We don't carry much else of worth out on patrol.” He considered that for a moment.

“There is one other thing,” I said, taking advantage of the pause. “I'd need to leave a couple of other men behind with him — they could camp or take a loft, though, as they're not wounded. They could help you with the harvest; Imperial soldiers know the ways of such things.” He again drew deeply on his glass of whiskey, finishing it off before giving a sigh.

“Alright, lieutenant. Let's figure weights and labor, and we'll have a deal.”

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Brand managed the settling-in period with grace and efficiency. He brought Mather down from his post on the hill and had everyone take shifts at watch up there; even I took a turn, as it wasn't unpleasant duty, if lonely. One of the Whorl kids worked up the temerity to ask where we were going, and Brand told him we were maintaining our own latrine up there. We were, but after that there was no further effort to pry into our forays out of Whorl. Every time I was tempted to do some officer-style interfering, I found that Brand had made it not only unnecessary, but unwise. Ever ready to embrace wisdom, I took to lounging about in my tent and reading.

Thunder had been in Imperial service for at least two hundred years, which surprised me. Beyond her fascination with the first Emperor (though he was, strictly speaking, a summoner, not a sorcerer), Mournia Sessa had avoided sorcerers almost religiously back in the early days of the Legions. The tradition had stuck, mostly, for decades. It wasn't until the Summer Rebellion of 103 I.E., sixty years after her death, that any mages formally took up arms alongside the Legions on a continuing basis, and even then it was strictly the arcanists of Aagion, who helped to quell the illusions and witchfear of the traitorous Pento Demea conspiritors.

Thunder had not gone to school in Aagion, that much was clear. Tellon Immural, either — those places were for reputable wizards and generals, supposing such things existed.

Thunder was part of a duo, a team of sorcerers who simply started appearing

in the records, or at least the ones I'd gotten to, about thirty years before the Summer Rebellion, during a small-scale intervention in a war among the northern clans. This was back before the Tyrping Council brought some measure of stability to the northern clans, and the Second Legion up there switched sides all the time, trying to keep the barbarians warring against one another so no one would think to try the mettle of the Second Legion. The First Legion sent a company of soldiers north to take on some of the worst fighting (that was what their pride bought them, incidentally), and the Second Legion's commander in Cu-Rashta, General Mekller, saw fit to provide his new allies with his "indispensible weapon in the fight against the clans" — Bolt and Thunder. Yes: Thunder's partner was called Bolt. I believe I mentioned that sorcerers weren't right in the head.

Anyhow, two hundred veteran, armored troops and a pair of somewhat talented spooky types apparently had an impact, because the campaign didn't last long. According to legion logbook accounts, neither did any of the battles they engaged in, excepting the final siege. Even the siege was brief, but only by siege standards.

I would to invoke a previous assertion: I accused imperators and generals throughout the ages of being maniacs. This was a good example. The major in command of the Company of the Cliff, as that particular unit was called, decided that the best way to assist the Second Legion's efforts to secure safety and prosperity for the municipalities and townships of Courark was to march deep into the barbarian-overrun wilds, challenge war-chiefs' personal escorts in running battles in hostile territory, and then, having thoroughly riled all available hostiles, hole up in a pre-historic fortress and wave insulting slogans on banners from the walls, improvising insulting imagery when it became clear that many of the enemy were illiterate. It was a bad idea. They did it anyway. Major Beann ended up a general, but plenty of his soldiers ended up in shallow, frosty graves.

The annalist who put the official record of the campaign together seemed somewhat incredulous that the Company of the Cliff survived at all, though they lost over sixty men by the time the siege of Cal-Annda was broken and the mission declared an official success. Bolt and Thunder were a big part of Major Beann's survival and eventual victory. They spun illusions to conceal the movement of their forces, to double or triple their apparent numbers, to give superstitious warchiefs bad omens before planned battles — but illusions were just the beginning. The duo called down storms of white fire, sent ripples of magic terror through enemy forces that had battle-hardened Tyrping berserkers fleeing into the night, and caught enemy

scouts in webs of confusion and misdirection that in some cases led to seasoned woodsmen starving to death just miles from their camps, unable to escape their own befuddled sense of distance and direction. Beyond even that, they monitored enemy positions, somehow collected provisions for a two-hundred-man company from the northern forests, and generally proved to be just as indispensable as advertised.

Of course, the duo also made it clear why General Mekler was willing to dispense the indispensable: they made constant, difficult, insane demands. Unexplained detours into dark groves, weeks out of the way of the mission, often leaving critical tasks in the care of insufficient and exposed forces — but they insisted, and Major Beann's whole strategy revolved on their magics, so the Company complied. They demanded that precise records of many of their little side-trips be avoided or, if created, destroyed. Incredibly, the logbooks reflected that any recorded detail of such movements had been permanently destroyed. This was a more moving heresy than the insistence of Four-Towners that they are ruled by the ghost of a king long dead; even the most secretive of Legion movements are recorded somewhere, so that later Emperors may always discover exactly what the Legions had done.

If some crazed arcanist somewhere had demanded that I exclude relevant details from my personal addendum to the logbook, I might have considered it. If they demanded that I deface the log itself, however, it would have been my sacred duty to find a way to keep the record and provide it in good faith to the annalists in Lasslen at the first chance. The Empire of Eternity was defined, after all, by its records, which were not insubstantially its memory and its conscience. The consequences of over six hundred years of history were available to our rulers, and it was no small symbolic gesture that candidates for the Imperial Throne were required to receive an education in the Library at Rastros. This tradition continued even then, more than a hundred years after Cu-Rashta fell and left the Library within and under the city to fend for itself. Some of the worst decisions in living memory had fallen through the gaps in our understanding of history, with it being discovered only later that our pain could have been avoided, had only we known. History was sacred.

Apparently Bolt and Thunder didn't think so. They repeatedly vanished from the record, later reappearing with little explanation attached to either their departure or their return. They haunted General Beann throughout his entire career, sometimes to assist, sometimes seeking favors. Always, mention of them foretold gaps in the record, lost information, baffling demands. Beann committed suicide at

what should have been the height of his career. Frighteningly, many of the men who had passed through his command over the years came to the same end, though methods varied: hangings, bleedings, poisons, cliffs. Some just vanished.

I had been afraid before, during my time with the legion.

I had been in actions against the bestial noll and the walking dead they commanded. I had fought to keep dikes reinforced from inside polders during savage storms. I had camped under mortar bombardment during the Grayhill rebellion.

I was just as afraid of Thunder.

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Sloan was uneasy. Whorl was beautiful, almost idyllic — it reminded him of his home near Fieldpoint in Terruna, far from war and banditry, quiet and agrarian... but, here, there had been bandits just down the road, hadn't there? It was this disconnect that made him uncomfortable, almost suspicious. The Legion existed to protect little farmholds like Whorl, to patrol and keep highwaymen or noll raiders from savaging farm folk, who had hard enough lives even in tranquil times. And yet, here, beyond Imperial law and Legion protection, Whorl quietly thrived. He might've asked one of the locals about it, but every last one of them seemed to be avoiding the visiting soldiers as thoroughly as possible. Sloan was left to consider the matter on his own.

Legion education was thorough. Sloan knew it might be luck as much as anything else that preserved whatever peace Whorl may have enjoyed — many such places in these parts had been burned to the ground by barbarian raids or worse. He wrestled with theories in his head. Perhaps the Oruk's escalating wars with the Tyrving absorbed the aggression usually reserved for helpless, ripe targets such as Whorl? Perhaps there were many such easy targets closer to the barbarians, and they saw no need to range? Perhaps the bandits on the road wished to avoid attention by sacking a known hold? Baron Neaor could be behind it; was his protection adequate for Whorl to forgo even a basic palisade around the living areas? Still, he was careful to recall one thing: he was outside the Empire, and they were very much alone. The three legionnaires would be even more alone once the Lieutenant and his group moved on, and perhaps even more so when Reiftyr passed. Loring's hopes for his friend's recovery were not great, as the strange sickness that gripped Reiftyr continued to worsen.

The settling-in period was somewhat chaotic. The Lieutenant was nowhere to be seen, and Sergeant Brand was everywhere, bellowing orders to the soldiers and casually conversing with Geith, the only one of the locals who lingered. The farm-

steads, for their part, did exactly as Geith told them and then fled, avoiding the soldiers with almost superstitious regularity. Reiftyr got his own room in one of the longhouses used by the field hands; Sloan and Loring got a neighboring hayloft. Loring complained about it, but Sloan had rarely known Loring to fail to complain, regardless of conditions. As he was nominally in charge of the men who would be staying in Whorl, Sloan hoped Loring would focus on bitching instead of getting into trouble, but that was probably hopeless optimism. Time would tell.

Sloan was helping Reiftyr into his bed in the longhouse, carefully tucking pillows around him to make the man more comfortable. He caught movement at the door, and spun to face it abruptly, his hand jolted to his hilt. He inwardly cursed his nervous reaction: the girl in the door was startled, and nearly spilled the tray she was carrying, laden with cups, cloths and a pitcher of water. He smiled apologetically.

"I'm sorry. Please, come in." She set the tray on the table next to Reiftyr's bed.

"My name's Melony, sir. Dran's daughter." She gave a curtsy, and Sloan struggled to banish ungentlemanly thoughts as he admired her; she was all long brown hair and smooth, graceful curves. Neither he nor Reiftyr could afford that particular kind of trouble just then. Farmers with daughters of marriageable age rarely appreciated mischief on the part of visitors, and their attitude toward the soldiers so far wasn't exactly promising in that respect.

"I'm called Sloan, ma'am, and this here's Reiftyr, though he's in a bad way presently, or he'd greet you proper himself. We, ah, appreciate the water." The jumble of military cant, formality and off-balance familiarity nearly caught in his throat.

"I heard he was hurt fighting bandits?" Melony poured a cup of water, handing it to Sloan before preparing one for Reiftyr.

"Just one of the dangers of Legion life, I'm afraid." Sloan decided to play the stoic veteran, and tried to channel Brand. "Ma'am," he added belatedly. He sipped water from the dainty cup, buying himself time to regain his composure.

"My brother — we lost him to the Legion, too." She looked away. "I miss him." Sloan was acutely sensitive to such sentiments, as his own family back in Teruna had turned away from him after he enlisted, saying he was already lost, sure to die. His brother had been killed by nolls in the uprising near Trest. His father had never forgiven either of them.

"How did he die?"

"Oh, well. We've not heard anything like that, but father says there's no way

he'll survive out there..." Sloan gave the woman a warm smile.

"My family's said that about me, you know. But here I am!"

"Even if he's alive, father will never have him back."

"I didn't realize your father felt that way about the Legion..." Melony filled a low dish with water, and wetted one of the cloths. Her pale green eyes avoided Sloan's face.

"I'm sorry I brought it up. It's good that Geith's around, because my father would have made enemies of everyone in a hundred miles by now, left to his own. We take it hard when our boys leave us out here; it's uneasy country, and hard work. Father says we need every hand." Sloan nodded.

"Well, for now, you've got us. Let your father know we'll work as hard as anyone born to a farm; hell, I was born to a farm." His effort to channel Brand broke down completely. The Sergeant would never swear in front of a lady. Nervously, he continued, "We owe you; without a place like this — without people like you — Reiftyr wouldn't have a chance." Sloan drained his cup in a single draw, regained his composure, and looked the girl in the eye. "Thanks again for the water, and the cloths. I'd best finish getting Reiftyr arranged."

"Let me know if you need anything — I'll be happy to help. I'm in charge of cleaning and such out here. I hope your friend gets better." She curtsied again, and then went about her business. Sloan stared after her for a moment... he was fairly certain he'd be in trouble if he spent too much time around her. He resolved to keep Loring out of the longhouse as much as he could; Loring would get into trouble right away around a girl like that.

She was the only farmholder to speak to him since his arrival in Whorl.

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