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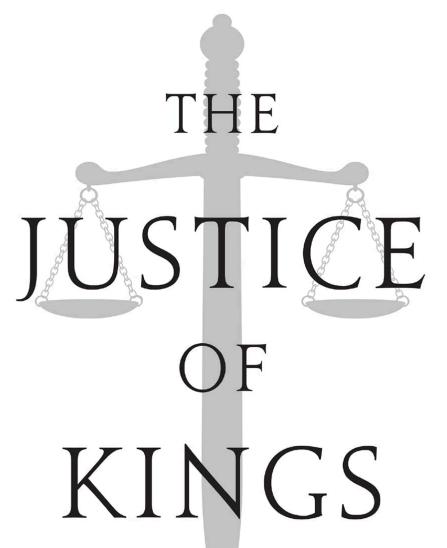
-RJ BARKER, AUTHOR OF

THE

JUSTICE E

KINGS

RICHARD SWAN



Book One of the Empire of the Wolf RICHARD SWAN



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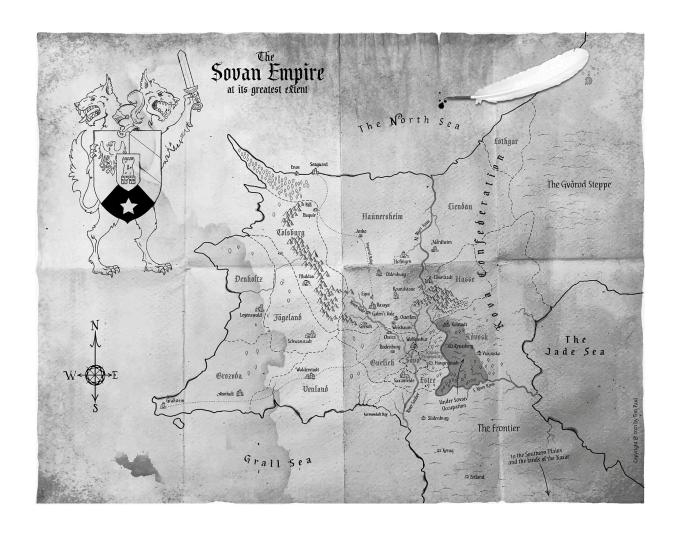
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The Witch of Rill

"Beware the idiot, the zealot and the tyrant; each clothes himself in the armour of ignorance."

FROM CATERHAUSER'S THE SOVAN CRIMINAL CODE: ADVICE TO PRACTITIONERS



It is a strange thing to think that the end of the Empire of the Wolf, and all the death and devastation that came with it, traced its long roots back to the tiny and insignificant village of Rill. That as we drew closer to it, we were not just plodding through a rainy, cold country twenty miles east of the Tolsburg Marches; we were approaching the precipice of the Great Decline, its steep and treacherous slope falling away from us like a cliff face of glassy obsidian.

Rill. How to describe it? The birthplace of our misfortune was so plain. For its isolation, it was typical for the Northmark of Tolsburg. It was formed of a large communal square of churned mud and straw, and a ring of twenty buildings with wattle-and-daub walls and thatched roofs. The manor was distinguishable only by its size, being perhaps twice as big as the biggest cottage, but there the differences ended. It was as tumbledown as the rest of them. An inn lay off to one side, and livestock and peasants moved

haphazardly through the public space. One benefit of the cold was that the smell wasn't so bad, but Vonvalt still held a kerchief filled with dried lavender to his nose. He could be fussy like that.

I should have been in a good mood. Rill was the first village we had come across since we had left the Imperial wayfort on the Jägeland border, and it marked the beginning of a crescent of settlements that ended in the Hauner fortress of Seaguard fifty miles to the north-east. Our arrival here meant we were probably only a few weeks away from turning south again to complete the eastern half of our circuit – and that meant better weather, larger towns and something approaching civilisation.

Instead, anxiety gnawed at me. My attention was fixed on the vast, ancient forest that bordered the village and stretched for a hundred miles north and west of us, all the way to the coast. It was home, according to the rumours we had been fed along the way, to an old Draedist witch.

"You think she is in there?" Patria Bartholomew Claver asked from next to me. Claver was one of four people who made up our caravan, a Neman priest who had imposed himself on us at the Jägeland border. Ostensibly it was for protection against bandits, though the Northmark was infamously desolate – and by his own account, he travelled almost everywhere alone.

"Who?" I asked.

Claver smiled without warmth. "The witch," he said.

"No," I said curtly. I found Claver very irritating – everyone did. Our itinerant lives were difficult enough, but Claver's incessant questioning over the last few weeks of every aspect of Vonvalt's practice and powers had worn us all down to the nub.

"I do."

I turned. Dubine Bressinger – Vonvalt's taskman – was approaching, cheerfully eating an onion. He winked at me as his horse trotted past. Behind him was our employer, Sir Konrad Vonvalt, and at the very back was our donkey, disrespectfully named the Duke of Brondsey, which pulled a cart loaded with all our accourtements.

We had come to Rill for the same reason we went anywhere: to ensure

that the Emperor's justice was done, even out here on the fringes of the Sovan Empire. For all their faults, the Sovans were great believers in justice for all, and they dispatched Imperial Magistrates like Vonvalt to tour the distant villages and towns of the Empire as itinerant courts.

"I'm looking for Sir Otmar Frost," I heard Vonvalt call out from the rear of our caravan. Bressinger had already dismounted and was summoning a local boy to make arrangements for our horses.

One of the peasants pointed wordlessly at the manor. Vonvalt grunted and dismounted. Patria Claver and I did the same. The mud was iron-hard beneath my feet.

"Helena," Vonvalt called to me. "The ledger."

I nodded and retrieved the ledger from the cart. It was a heavy tome, with a thick leather jacket clad in iron and with a lockable clasp. It would be used to record any legal issues which arose, and Vonvalt's considered judgments. Once it was full, it would be sent back to the Law Library in distant Sova, where clerks would review the judgments and make sure that the common law was being applied consistently.

I brought the ledger to Vonvalt, who bade me keep hold of it with an irritated wave, and all four of us made for the manor. I could see now that it had a heraldic device hanging over the door, a plain blue shield overlaid by a boar's head mounted on a broken lance. The manor was otherwise unremarkable, and a far cry from the sprawling town houses and country fortresses of the Imperial aristocracy in Sova.

Vonvalt hammered a gloved fist against the door. It opened quickly. A maid, perhaps a year or two younger than me, stood in the doorway. She looked frightened.

"I am Justice Sir Konrad Vonvalt of the Imperial Magistratum," Vonvalt said in what I knew to be an affected Sovan accent. His native Jägeland inflection marked him out as an upstart, notwithstanding his station, and embarrassed him.

The maid curtseyed clumsily. "I—"

"Who is it?" Sir Otmar Frost called from somewhere inside. It was dark

beyond the threshold and smelled like woodsmoke and livestock. I could see Vonvalt's hand absently reach for his lavender kerchief.

"Justice Sir Konrad Vonvalt of the Imperial Magistratum," he announced again, impatiently.

"Bloody faith," Sir Otmar muttered, and appeared in the doorway a few moments later. He thrust the maid aside without ceremony. "My lord, come in, come in; come out of the damp and warm yourselves at the fire."

We entered. Inside it was dingy. At one end of the room was a bed covered in furs and woollen blankets, as well as personal effects which suggested an absent wife. In the centre was an open log fire, surrounded by charred and muddy rugs that were also mouldering thanks to the rain that dripped down from the open smoke hole. At the other end was a long trestle table with seating for ten, and a door that led to a separate kitchen. The walls were draped with mildewed tapestries that were faded and smoked nearblack, and the floor was piled thick with rugs and skins. A pair of big, wolf-like dogs warmed themselves next to the fire.

"I was told that a Justice was moving north through the Tolsburg Marches," Sir Otmar said as he fussed. As a Tollish knight and lord, he had been elevated to the Imperial aristocracy – "taking the Highmark", as it was known, for the payoffs they had all received in exchange for submitting to the Legions – but he was a far cry from the powdered and pampered lords of Sova. He was an old man, clad in a grubby tunic bearing his device and a pair of homespun trousers. His face was grimy and careworn and framed by white hair and a white beard. A large dent marred his forehead, probably earned as a younger man when the Reichskrieg had swept through and the Sovan armies had vassalised Tolsburg twenty-five years before. Both Vonvalt and Bressinger, too, bore the scars of the Imperial expansion.

"The last visit was from Justice August?" Vonvalt asked.

Sir Otmar nodded. "Aye. A long time ago. Used to be that we saw a Justice a few times a year. Please, all of you, sit. Food, ale? Wine? I was just about to eat."

"Yes, thank you," Vonvalt said, sitting at the table. We followed suit.

"My predecessor left a logbook?" Vonvalt asked.

"Yes, yes," Sir Otmar replied, and sent the maid scurrying off again. I heard the sounds of a strongbox being raided.

"Any trouble from the north?"

Sir Otmar shook his head. "No; we have a sliver of the Westmark of Haunersheim between us and the sea. Maybe ten or twenty miles' worth, enough to absorb a raiding party. Though I daresay the sea is too rough this time of year anyway to tempt the northerners down."

"Quite right," Vonvalt said. I could tell he was annoyed for having forgotten his geography. Still, one could be forgiven the occasional slip of the mind. The Empire, now over fifty years old, had absorbed so many nations so quickly the cartographers redrew the maps yearly. "And I suppose with Seaguard rebuilt," he added.

"Aye, that the Autun did. A new curtain wall, a new garrison and enough money and provender to allow for daily ranges during fighting season. Weekly, in winter, by order of the margrave."

The Autun. The Two-Headed Wolf. It was evens on whether the man had meant the term as a pejorative. It was one of those strange monikers for the Sovan Empire that the conquered used either in deference or as an insult. Either way, Vonvalt ignored it.

"The man has a reputation," Vonvalt remarked.

"Margrave Westenholtz?" the priest, Claver, chipped in. "A good man. A pious man. The northerners are a godless folk who cleave to the old Draedist ways." He shrugged. "You should not mourn them, Justice."

Vonvalt smiled thinly. "I do not mourn dead northern raiders, Patria," he said with more restraint than the man was due. Claver was a young man, too young to bear the authority of a priest. Over the course of our short time together we had all had grown to dislike him immensely. He was zealous and a bore, quick to anger and judge. He spoke at great length about his cause – that of recruiting Templars for the southern Frontier – and his lordly contacts. Bressinger generally refused to talk to him, but Vonvalt, out of professional courtesy, had been engaging with the man for weeks.

Sir Otmar cleared his throat. He was about to make the error of engaging with Claver when the food arrived, and instead he ate. It was hearty, simple fare of meat, bread and thick gravy, but then in these circumstances we rarely went hungry. Vonvalt's power and authority tended to inspire generosity in his hosts.

"You said the last Justice passed through a while ago?" Vonvalt asked.

"Aye," Sir Otmar replied.

"You have been following the Imperial statutes in the interim?"

Sir Otmar nodded vigorously, but he was almost certainly lying. These far-flung villages and towns, months' worth of travel from distant Sova even by the fastest means, rarely practised Imperial law. It was a shame. The Reichskrieg had brought death and misery to thousands, but the system of common law was one of the few rubies to come out of an otherwise enormous shit.

"Good. Then I shouldn't imagine there will be much to do. Except investigate the woods," Vonvalt said. Sir Otmar looked confused by the addendum. Vonvalt drained the last of his ale. "On our way here," he explained, "we were told a number of times about a witch, living in the woods just to the north of Rill. I don't suppose you know anything about it?"

Sir Otmar delayed with a long draw of wine and then ostensibly to pick something out of his teeth. "Not that I have heard of, sire. No."

Vonvalt nodded thoughtfully. "Who is she?"

Bressinger swore in Grozodan. Sir Otmar and I leapt halfway out of our skin. The table and all the platters and cutlery on it were jolted as three pairs of thighs hit it. Goblets and tankards were spilled. Sir Otmar clutched his heart, his eyes wide, his mouth working to expel the words that Vonvalt had commanded him to.

The Emperor's Voice: the arcane power of a Justice to compel a person to speak the truth. It had its limitations – it did not work on other Justices, for example, and a strong-willed person could frustrate it if on their guard – but Sir Otmar was old and meek and not well-versed in the ways of the Order. The power hit him like a psychic thunderclap and turned his mind inside

out.

"A priestess... a member of the Draeda," Sir Otmar gasped. He looked horrified as his mouth spoke against his mind's will.

"Is she from Rill?" Vonvalt pressed.

"Yes!"

"Are there others who practise Draedism?"

Sir Otmar writhed in his chair. He gripped the table to steady himself.

"Many... of the villagers!"

"Sir Konrad," Bressinger murmured. He was watching Sir Otmar with a slight wince. I saw that Claver was relishing the man's torment.

"All right, Sir Otmar," Vonvalt said. "All right. Calm yourself. Here, take some ale. I'll not press you any further."

We sat in silence as Sir Otmar summoned the terrified maid with a trembling hand and wheezed for some ale. She left and reappeared a moment later, handing him a tankard. Sir Otmar drained it greedily.

"The practice of Draedism is illegal," Vonvalt remarked.

Sir Otmar looked at his plate. His expression was somewhere between anger, horror and shame, and was a common look for those who had been hit by the Voice.

"The laws are new. The religion is old," he said hoarsely.

"The laws have been in place for two and a half decades."

"The religion has been in place for two and a half millennia," Sir Otmar snapped.

There was an uncomfortable pause. "Is there anyone in Rill that is not a practising member of Draedism?" Vonvalt asked.

Sir Otmar inspected his drink. "I couldn't say," he mumbled.

"Justice." There was genuine disgust in Claver's voice. "At the very least they will have to renounce it. The official religion of the Empire is the holy Nema Creed." He practically spat as he looked the old baron up and down. "If I had my way they'd all burn."

"These are good folk here," Sir Otmar said, alarmed. "Good, law-abiding folk. They work the land and they pay their tithes. We've never been a

burden on the Autun."

Vonvalt shot Claver an irritated look. "With respect, Sir Otmar, if these people are practising Draedists, then they cannot, by definition, be law-abiding. I am sorry to say that Patria Claver is right – at least in part. They will have to renounce it. You have a list of those who practise?"

"I do not."

The logs smoked and crackled and spat. Ale and wine dripped and pattered through the cracks in the table planks.

"The charge is minor," Vonvalt said. "A small fine, a penny per head, if they recant. As their lord you may even shoulder it on their behalf. Do you have a shrine to any of the Imperial gods? Nema? Savare?"

"No." Sir Otmar all but spat out the word. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that Sir Otmar was a practising Draedist himself.

"The official religion of the Sovan Empire is the Nema Creed. Enshrined in scripture and in both the common and canon law. Come now, there are parallels. The Book of Lorn is essentially Draedism, no? It has the same parables, mandates the same holy days. You could adopt it without difficulty."

It was true, the Book of Lorn did bear remarkable parallels to Draedism. That was because the Book of Lorn *was* Draedism. The Sovan religion was remarkably flexible, and rather than replacing the many religious practices it encountered during the Reichskrieg, it simply subsumed them, like a wave engulfing an island. It was why the Nema Creed was simultaneously the most widely practised and least respected religion in the known world.

I looked over to Claver. The man's face was aghast at Vonvalt's easy equivocation. Of course, Vonvalt was no more a believer in the Nema Creed than Sir Otmar. Like the old baron, he had had the religion forced on him. But he went to temple, and he put himself through the motions like most of the Imperial aristocracy. Claver, on the other hand, was young enough to have known no other religion. A true believer. Such men had their uses, but more often than not their inflexibility made them dangerous.

"The Empire requires that you practise the teachings of the Nema Creed.

The law allows for nothing else," Vonvalt said.

"If I refuse?"

Vonvalt drew himself up. "If you refuse you become a heretic. If you refuse to *me* you become an avowed heretic. But you won't do something as silly and wasteful as that."

"And what is the punishment for avowed heresy?" Sir Otmar asked, though he knew the answer.

"You will be burned." It was Claver who spoke. There was savage glee in his voice.

"No one will be burned," Vonvalt said irritably, "because no one is an avowed heretic. Yet."

I looked back and forth between Vonvalt and Sir Otmar. I had sympathy for Sir Otmar's position. He was right to say that Draedism was harmless, and right to disrespect the Nema Creed as worthless. Furthermore, he was an old man, being lectured and threatened with death. But the fact of the matter was, the Sovan Empire ruled the Tolsburg Marches. Their laws applied, and, actually, their laws were robust and fairly applied. Most everyone else got on with it, so why couldn't he?

Sir Otmar seemed to sag slightly.

"There is an old watchtower on Gabler's Mount, a few hours' ride northeast of here. The Draedists gather there to worship. You will find your witch there."

Vonvalt paused for a moment. He took a long draw of ale. Then he carefully set the tankard down.

"Thank you," he said, and stood. "We'll go there now, while there is an hour or two of daylight left."