



THE TRIALS OF EMPIRE

"Compelling and wonderfully written. Brilliant."

—JAMES ISLINGTON ON *THE JUSTICE OF KINGS*

RICHARD SWAN

THE
TRIALS
OF
EMPIRE

Book Three of the Empire of the Wolf

RICHARD SWAN



orbitbooks.net

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Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

orbitbooks.net

First Edition: February 2024

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2023947284

ISBNs: 9780316361989 (hardcover), 9780316362214 (ebook)

E3-20231220-JV-NF-ORI

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue: To be Hanged on a Summer's Morning](#)

[I: The Natural Order of the World Begins to Degrade](#)

[II: Considering the Alternatives](#)

[III: Fruit of the Poisoned Tree](#)

[IV: Pagan Magicks](#)

[V: Dreadport](#)

[VI: Hostile Reception](#)

[VII: Empire of the Wolfmen](#)

[VIII: Death and Horror in the City of Sleep](#)

[IX: Prising the Jewel from the Eye](#)

[X: The Kasaraad](#)

[XI: Return to the Frontier](#)

[XII: A Costly Mistake in Time and Blood](#)

[XIII: On to Sova](#)

[XIV: Old Friends](#)

[XV: New Enemies](#)

[XVI: An Unexpected Reunion](#)

[XVII: Retaking the City](#)

[XVIII: The Battle of the Barracks](#)

[XIX: A Fortress of Evil and Sedition](#)

[XX: Fresh Devils](#)

[XXI: The Souls of the Things that Make Up the World](#)

[XXII: The Broken Path](#)

[XXIII: The Slow Evil](#)

[XXIV: He Who Pays the Piper...](#)

[XXV: ... Calls the Tune](#)

[XXVI: An Alliance of Convenience](#)

[XXVII: The Sky Turned Black](#)

[XXVIII: Hearts of Iron](#)

[XXIX: Nema Has Left Us](#)

[XXX: The Soul of the Empire](#)

[XXXI: Blades of the Sun](#)

[XXXII: A Sword in the Hand of a Good Man](#)

[XXXIII: Aftermath](#)

[XXXIV: The Murder of an Idea](#)

[XXXV: Parting](#)

[Epilogue: The Great Decline](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Discover More](#)

[Also by Richard Swan](#)

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A black and white illustration of a coat of arms. The central shield is divided into three sections: a top section with a castle, a bottom section with a five-pointed star, and a diagonal section on the right. The shield is supported by two wolves. The wolf on the left is facing left with its mouth open, showing teeth. The wolf on the right is facing right, also with its mouth open, and is holding a sword aloft in its right paw. The entire illustration is rendered in a simple, line-art style.



Map by Tim Paul

Prologue

To be Hanged on a Summer's Morning

“Culpability is born of intent.”

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



I remember watching a man being hanged once. It was in a small town, ten miles north of Leyenswald, and all I could think about was how cruel it was to be executed on such a warm and pleasant summer's morning.

The man – whose name escapes me, along with that of the town we were in – had been found guilty of murder. It was one of those ridiculous things: an argument over something in the street which should have been brushed off a few hours later in a tavern. Instead, hot words had become reckless deeds, and he had stabbed his victim in the chest. Then he had fled, though Bressinger had tracked him down less than a day later, hiding in a tree, of all places.

I was sitting with Vonvalt in a private chamber in the upper floors of a tavern, watching a work gang, under the supervision of the town's carpenter, construct the gibbet. Vonvalt was sitting at a desk, leafing through some papers, one of which was the formal indictment. The man himself

languished in the town gaol with a local Neman confessor.

“Why do you need all of that, anyway?” I asked, gesturing vaguely to the papers.

Vonvalt looked up. He did not look annoyed at the interruption; he normally welcomed an opportunity to teach me something, even if I had been rude or insolent.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The papers. That...”

“Indictment.”

“Indictment. Why bother with it?”

I knew immediately I had made a mistake when Vonvalt sat back, and pulled out his pipe and lit it. A faint smile played across his lips. “You have a problem with the procedure.”

“If that’s what it is.” I shrugged. “It just seems like a waste of time. You are going to hang him anyway. The result is the same. Why go to these... administrative lengths?”

Vonvalt considered this in his irritating, slightly amused way, as he did when he was in a generally good mood.

“Let us think on it a moment. What happened?” He nodded to the window, indicating the murder in question.

My features creased in confusion. Vonvalt knew what had happened. “A murder. A stabbing. They had an argument over, Nema, some *tools* or something? One stabbed the other, the victim died, and so it is murder. Plenty of people saw it, so there were lots of witnesses. The whole thing is beyond question.”

“Aye, that it is,” Vonvalt said quietly. He took in a long draw of smoke and exhaled. “All right. Then what happened?”

“The murderer ran away and Dubine caught him.”

“And what then?”

I made a frustrated noise. “You questioned him. You used the Emperor’s Voice and he admitted it. And rather than taking his head off, you are in here, writing things down and putting everybody to the time and effort of

constructing a scaffold which tomorrow shall have no use whatever!”

Vonvalt smiled at my petulance.

“Let us imagine for a moment, then, that I had not been here,” he said. “That I had not been able to use my Voice on him, and so extract a confession. What would have happened then?”

“The townsfolk would have beaten him to death.”

“Be serious!” Vonvalt said, so sharply that I started.

“There would have been a trial,” I said after a moment.

“Indeed. He would have been questioned by lawmen, and probably the warden, too. Now, let us imagine for a moment that during the course of that questioning, it transpired that the perpetrator had lost his wits. What then?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Already I was on uncertain ground. “Well... that’s different.”

“Indeed. Does the common law make allowances for the insane?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I know not.”

“Think on it!”

I thought on it. “Because it is not their fault.”

“Precisely. Culpability is born of *intent*. ‘A man who knows not the nature of his actions cannot be held to the same standard as the man who does.’ Caterhauser. It is the same reason we do not indict children, or dogs.” He tapped the side of his head. “They know not what they do.”

There was a moment of silence whilst I considered this.

“What about if the victim had murdered the perpetrator’s wife?” Vonvalt asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying, what if the man who was murdered had himself that morning murdered the perpetrator’s wife? Or perhaps his child? What if the perpetrator was acting in retaliation? What then?”

“Then... well, he has still committed murder.”

Vonvalt smiled and nodded approvingly. “Yes. *But*: is it now *fair* that we

hang him?”

I thought about this, and eventually shook my head. “No, I suppose not.”

“No, it isn’t. So, what else can we do?”

“Send him to gaol?”

“We might send him to gaol. We might send him to gaol for the rest of his life; we might send him to gaol for a handful of years. He might even not be convicted. I think you would be hard-pressed to find someone in Denholtz who would begrudge a man for slaying his wife’s killer, no?”

“It seems unlikely,” I agreed.

Vonvalt sat back. He smoked quietly for a moment. “How quickly that an ostensibly straightforward case of murder becomes a tangled one. If we had carried away the perpetrator the moment he had stabbed his victim, and taken his head off by the river without having ever troubled ourselves to ask why, would justice have been done?”

“No, obviously not,” I said, feeling ungracious as I often did after Vonvalt’s lessons.

“No, it would not,” Vonvalt said. He extinguished his pipe and pocketed it, and examined the indictment one last time. Satisfied, he folded and pocketed that too, and then stood. “I know that procedure seems tedious, and dry, and pointless – often, in real terms, it is. But it exists for a reason. And *especially* when we are dealing with matters of life and death, it is all the more important. Who knows what will come out in the wash?”

“I take the point.”

Vonvalt nodded. “Good. I know that the law seems boring to you, Helena, but trust me when I say: there are few things more important in this world than procedure.”

I snorted before I could stop myself. Vonvalt looked at me sharply, but the anticipated reprimand never came. Instead, he watched out the window as the work gang finished construction of the scaffold. It truly was a beautiful day.

“Come on then,” he said, sweeping towards the door. “Let us be about it.”

I

The Natural Order of the World Begins to Degrade

“Life has no meaning. Forget the Neman Church: there is no one, or thing, to judge you save those about you and you yourselves. Be defined by your deeds this day. Few of us linger in the halls of human memory for long.”

LORD WOLF OF WARINSTADT, ADDRESSING THE 1ST LEGION ON THE EVE OF
THE BATTLE OF RABSBACH



I was dreaming of Muldau when the attack came.

No – dreaming is the wrong word. It was a nightmare. We had all been having nightmares, for days by that point. Sometimes we all shared the same nightmare, and those visions were freighted with portent; other times, they were simply nonsensical horrors. But they were consistent, and consistently frightening. Decades later I pray for a quiet and dreamless night’s sleep. Those prayers are seldom answered.

I had been dreaming about Muldau. I did not care to think of Muldau often. The first seventeen years of my life were largely unhappy ones, characterised by cold and hunger, danger and loneliness. But there were flashes of good, even if I did not appreciate it at the time.

Muldau had its fair share of temples, and those temples had their fair share of charitable ventures. Many were predatory organisations, little better than places through which illegitimate money could be laundered; but there were some, like the Order of the Temple of Saint Grimhilt, which cleaved to their stated purpose.

I was availing myself of their services, as I sometimes did. I took a few turns with a broom around the ambulatory, knocked the dust out of the altar cloths, polished some of the silverware, all in exchange for a hot meal and a cot for the night. In the dream, the matria, a woman whose name has long faded from my memory, took me aside whilst I was eating to teach me the Cardinal Virtues.

Except she kept forgetting them. She would sit in silence, thinking fruitlessly, whilst I would grow increasingly impatient. I wanted to eat my food in peace. Listening to the woman was bad enough; listening to her sit there and say nothing was even worse.

After a while I began to prompt her, but still she said nothing. My prompting became more insistent; then I began to shout, then scream, and rave at her like an insane person, but I got nothing from the woman except the blankest, most incoherent stare, as though a thick fog had enshrouded her mind.

The woman began to cry as her rational brain dissolved into nothingness, as no single lucid thought could be conjured from it. As I ranted at her to tell me the Virtues, she was consumed by the most profound horror, unable to think of anything, let alone one of the tenets of the Neman Creed. As the essence of her spirit dissipated like steam from boiling water, she looked at me with eyes wide with panic and terror. And then she began to scream, to rail against the injustice of her insanity, her impotence and powerlessness in the face of her abrupt, terminal decline. She screamed like an animal, or a babe, a thing with no sense of self or place in the wider world.

The dream faded after that. I have had it many times since that first time, and it ends in more or less the same place: the matria screaming, me screaming, and then I wake up screaming.

I do not know what the nightmare meant. I still do not know. Decades of reflection have not yielded up any intellectual insight.

But I still think about it. I think about many things from that time.



It was Sir Radomir's hand that was clamped over my mouth and nose. His glove smelt of old leather and spirits.

"Silence, girl, in the name of Nema," he whispered. His breath was rank with wine. He had long used it to dull his nightmares, but this fresh crop of arcane visions was too much even for him.

I was quiet. Instinctively, I tried to press myself up to sitting, but Sir Radomir held me down.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head. He looked about the hall. There was a little moonlight, and I could see the whites of his eyes.

The hall creaked and groaned in the wind.

Through the gloom, I could see the Templar margrave, Severina von Osterlen. She was armoured in mail, and clad in a black and white Templar surcoat. She lay half-propped against the wall next to the hall's entrance, hand on the hilt of her short sword, her face a grimace of anticipation.

I turned, slowly. On the other side of the hall was Vonvalt, similarly poised. But where von Osterlen looked anxious, Vonvalt looked calm, almost meditative. I wondered what he was thinking.

Sir Radomir slowly moved away from me and back into his corner. I realised then that I had been the only one asleep.

The four of us lay in silence. Outside, the wind moaned through the trees, whistling through the branches and rustling the leaves. The timbers of the hall creaked like those of a ship at sea, like rigging swollen with saltwater. The cold air whispered through the thatch above, dislodging dust and debris.

Something was moving amidst the noise.

My blood sang in my ears as I strained to listen. Whatever it was moved slowly and carefully. That it waited for the wind to pick up, trying to disguise

its footsteps against the susurrus of rustling grass, suggested an intelligence that set it apart from, say, a passing doe.

My brow furrowed. My head bent to one side. Now there was a curious... *trickling* sound, though it had not rained, and there was no water in the hall. I looked around, but could see no leaks, and no one else seemed to have heard it either. It was like a patter, as though wine from an upturned goblet was seeping through the planks of a table and dripping on to the floor.

Ramayah.

The word came from nowhere, unbidden, rising from the depths of my mind.

And then I was distracted once again. Something brushed against the timbers of the far wall where Vonvalt sat, causing him to stir from his contemplation.

My hand went to the pommel of my short sword. The others tightened their grips. I looked between Vonvalt, Sir Radomir, and von Osterlen, but there was nothing to say, nothing to do except continue to pretend to be asleep and so perhaps surprise our attackers in return.

There was a gentle thump against the side of the hall that could not be accounted for by the weather. Three interlopers? Perhaps four? Or merely the advance scouts at the head of an entire army? In the best case, it was a few bandits looking to rob us; in the worst, it was some manifestation from our nightmares. There was no way to know. Charging through the door and out into the darkness was insanity. All we could do was wait and pray.

There were more noises now at the door, some scraping sounds, like claws against wood, and snorting like the snuffling of a boar. For a hopeful second, I thought that that was precisely what it was, and our fear and paranoia had finally overtaken us. I turned to look at Vonvalt, preparing to flash a wry grin, a rolling of the eyes and perhaps a knowing wink. In turn, he would smile, release the handle of his sword, and gesture for me to return to sleep.

He did one of those things, which was to release the handle of his sword. But then he brought out his Oleni medallion, which had been in his pocket,

and placed it around his neck.

My heart leapt with great violence. “No,” I breathed.

“What? What is it?” Sir Radomir demanded in a whisper.

I looked at the door. The clawing, pawing was more insistent now.

I looked back to Vonvalt. He met my eye, gently shook his head. His face was grim set.

“*What?!*” Sir Radomir hissed.

“I think we might be about to die,” was all I could say.

Then the doors smashed open.



The following morning was a crisp one. The sky above was clear blue and still, the air fresh and cold. Our breath streamed away from our mouths in great clouds of vapour, and we pulled our cloaks about us.

We emerged from the hall, exhausted, shaken, but physically unharmed. Outside, there was no sign of any interlopers; no footsteps in the dew-laden grass, no broken stalks of wildflowers, no disturbed barrels or crates. The hall was unmarked, save for the marks we had left.

The village was a typical one for this part of Haunersheim. I do not remember its name, only that it was about twenty miles north of Hofingen, the last major settlement before one was faced with the vast, desolate emptiness that the Northmark was infamous for. In the distance to the east, the mountains of Hasse were reduced to the foothills of Leindau, though still high enough to be dusted with snow. To the west lay the beginnings of a network of huge ancient forests which stretched to the North Sea and the Tollish coast.

In front of us was a cluster of perhaps fifty houses, with thatched roofs so steep and tall that they were more roof than house. Of the villagers, there was no sign.

“Sir Radomir,” Vonvalt said.

“Aye?”

“Fetch the baron, would you.”

“Aye.”

Vonvalt, von Osterlen and I stood waiting as Sir Radomir walked to one of the larger houses about a quarter of a mile away and disappeared inside. A moment later he returned, this time with a handful of men, foremost of whom was an old lord who reminded me of Sir Otmar from Rill – stooped, ailing, and who had probably been the lord of this place since his twenties and outlasted several generations of his peers.

Eventually, the old baron reached us, flanked by his retainers.

“Our problem is solved?” he asked.

Vonvalt was quiet for a moment. “I believe so,” he said.

The baron grunted. “Will you take some victuals before you leave?”

“Aye,” Vonvalt said. “That and the information you offered me.”

The old baron winked at me, though I was in too sour a mood to give him the smile he expected. He did not seem bothered. “Come. Let us eat, and I will tell you what I know.”

The retainers set out a trestle in the hall, and fetched some bread to break our fast. They also brought a flagon of wine, which we divided eagerly between the four of us. The baron took none.

“So, Sir Dovydas,” the baron said, addressing Vonvalt. “You have some idea of what manner of beast has been terrorising my people?”

Vonvalt nodded slowly. “I believe a rare type of wild cat – rare *here*, in the Hauner Vale. They are much more common over the Kova, in the northern parts of the Confederation.”

“A large wild cat?” the baron asked. A note of scepticism freighted his voice.

“Aye,” Vonvalt said mildly. “A Gevennan swordfang. They are difficult to spot thanks to the colouring, and they hunt exclusively at night. We all of us saw it.”

“Yes, we heard the noise,” the baron said. He looked pointedly at the smashed bar which had hitherto provided a lock for the great hall.

Vonvalt inclined his head. “It is a fearsome beast, to be sure. But I have

two pieces of good news. The first is that there will only be one, given they are solitary creatures. The second is that we are likely to have frightened it off forever.”

“Why do you say that? How can you be sure?”

“My experience of the creatures is that they attack opportunistically, preying on the vulnerable. They will quickly abandon a hunting ground if they are challenged. It is likely you will never see it again.”

The baron appeared to accept this fabrication with relief. “Well! Here’s to that!” He raised his goblet. “I am indebted to you, Sir Dovydas!”

Vonvalt smiled thinly, lifting his goblet the barest amount. “I should be grateful, now, sir, if you would share with me the information you have.”

The baron nodded. “Aye, you have earned it,” he said. He turned to his right, and called out to the door, “Anthelm! The information!”

Vonvalt frowned as the door to the hall was opened once more. Only this time, a group of five strong-looking men, variously armed with melee weapons, entered.

“What the fuck is this?” Sir Radomir demanded, pressing himself to his feet. Von Osterlen and I did the same, each of us drawing our swords.

Vonvalt remained sitting. He gestured to the newcomers. “You could not have used these men to tackle the swordfang?” he asked wearily.

“Only there was no swordfang, was there? *Justice* Sir Konrad Vonvalt?”

Now Vonvalt did look up sharply. He stared at the old baron. “So. You know who I am.”

The baron laughed. “Thought I was just some provincial idiot, hey?” He grinned. “I never forget a face, Sir Konrad.” He stabbed a thumb into his chest. “I was in Sova for your investiture. Aye, we were both younger men then, eh?”

Vonvalt could not contain his surprise. “That was over twenty years ago.”

The man tapped the side of his skull. “And yet I remember it as though it were yesterday.”

Vonvalt’s expression turned sour. “And so what? Your plan is to kill me, is it?”