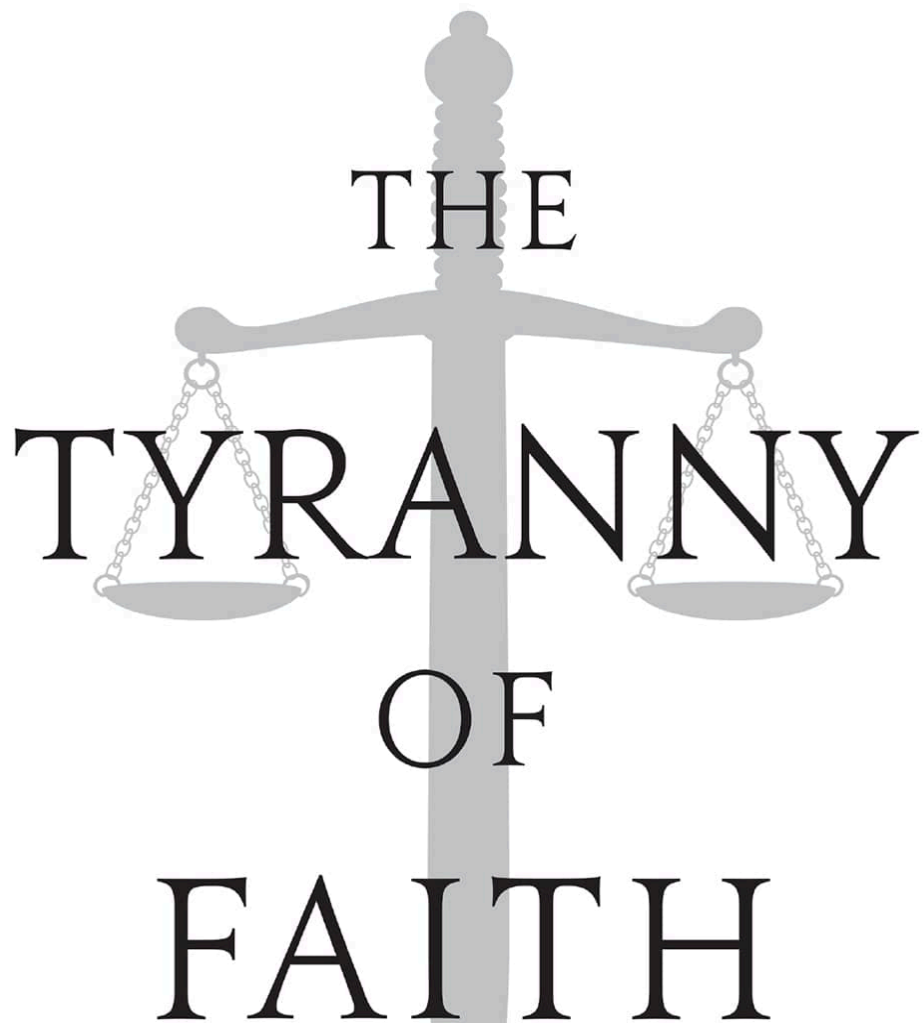


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thoroughly engrossing.
I could barely
put it down."

—NICHOLAS EAMES
ON *THE JUSTICE OF KINGS*

THE TYRANNY OF FAITH

RICHARD SWAN



THE TYRANNY OF FAITH

Book Two of the Empire of the Wolf

RICHARD SWAN



orbitbooks.net

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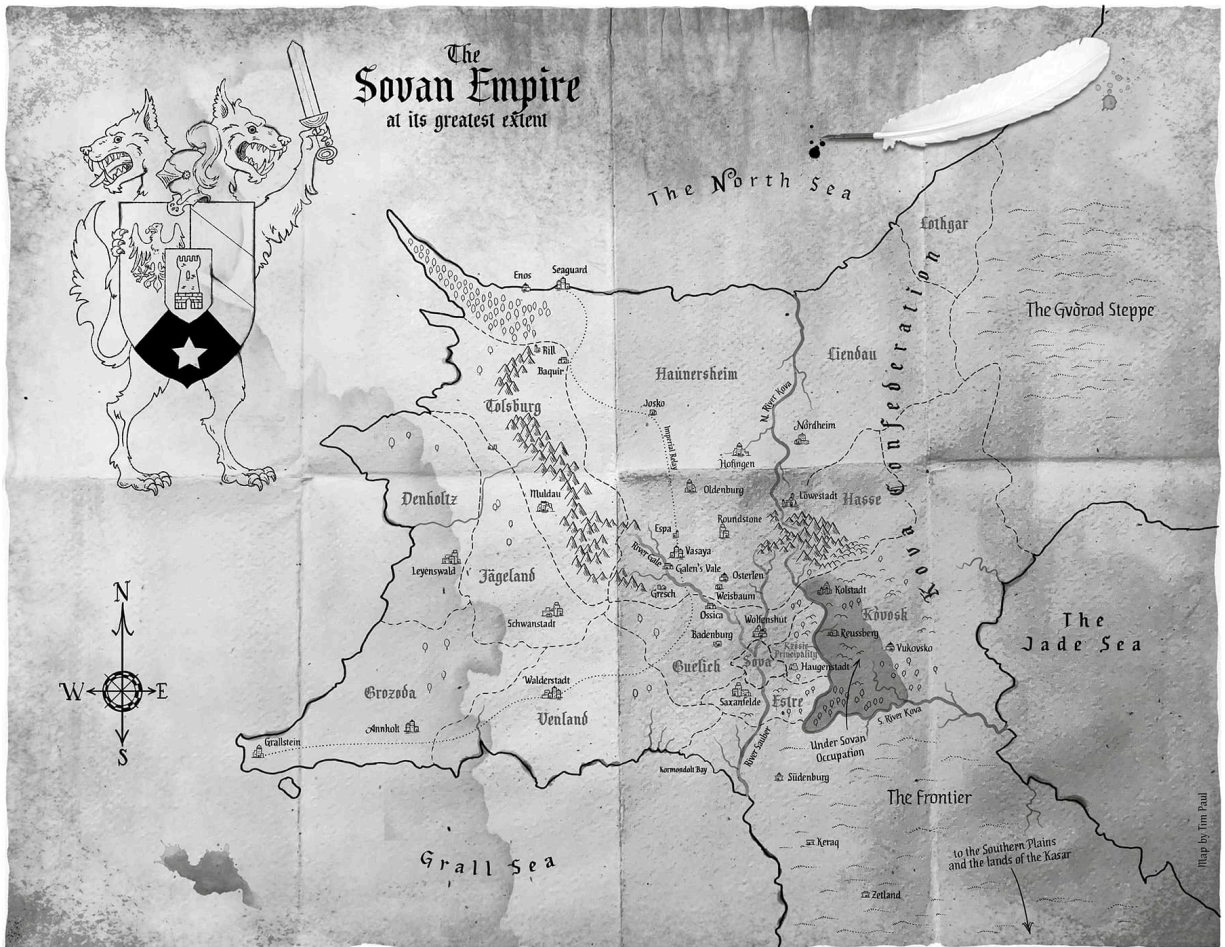
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I

On the Road to Sova

“No event simply occurs. Each is the culmination of countless factors that trace their long roots back to the beginning of time. It is easy to bemoan an era of great upheaval as a sudden commingling of misfortunes – but the discerning eye of history tells us that there are few coincidences where the schemes of man are concerned.”

JUSTICE (AS HE THEN WAS) EMMANUEL KANE, THE LEGAL ARMOURY:
ENTANGLEMENT, NECROMANCY, AND DIVINATION



“Do you think he’s dying?”

“Sir Konrad?”

“Aye.”

“The way he carries on you’d think so.”

It was a warm, drizzly spring morning in the Southmark of Guelich, and Sir Radomir, Bressinger and I were standing fifty yards from a tumbledown herbalist’s cottage. Vonvalt had been inside for most of an hour, and the three of us were trading bored, tired jibes, trying to get a rise from one another.

“There is certainly something the matter with him,” I said.

Both men turned to me.

“You said yourself the man is easily het up on matters of health,” Sir Radomir said.

“Nema, keep your voice down,” I muttered. Bressinger looked at me chidingly. He had always had a reproachful streak, but since the loss of his arm his humour had worsened. Now his hackles were quick to rise, especially when he felt Vonvalt’s character was being called into question. Once these non-verbal reprimands would have plagued me with guilt. Now I was beginning to give the chastisements short shrift.

“I don’t think anyone can sensibly argue he is not,” I said, glancing at Bressinger. “But this is different. I have not seen him like this in a long time.”

“Aye,” Bressinger murmured eventually, in what was a rare concession. “This is not his usual fussiness.”

I turned back to the cottage. It was a ramshackle place, a daub and timber construction sagging under the weight of its thatch. The place was mostly concealed behind a riot of wildflowers and other plants, and a strong herbal scent, intensified by the drizzly wetness, suffused the air and had led to no end of both human and equine sneezing.

We had been on the road from Ossica for most of the month of Sorpen, and were now but a few days’ ride from the outskirts of Sova itself. Guelich was one of the three principalities that surrounded Sova like the white around a yolk, and was ruled by the Emperor’s third son, Prince Gordan Kzosic. His castle, the fortress at Badenburg, was just visible on the distant horizon, a towering fastness of grey stone that caught the sun – and the eye – from thirty miles away.

Our journey was not supposed to have taken this long. Had Bressinger not lost an arm in Galen’s Vale, we would have left our horses and equipment in that city and then taken the Imperial Relay for a hundred and fifty miles south as far as the Westmark of Guelich. From there we could have simply taken the Baden road due east to Sova itself, for a total journey time of perhaps a week with good weather, or ten days in bad.

In fact, had Vonvalt not insisted on tracking down and then murdering

Obenpatria Fischer, we could have simply hired a ship to take us down the Gale, since the river was a tributary of the Sauber which flowed directly to Sova (and which itself was in part a tributary of the Kova). But this is as much a digression as the route itself.

In any event, Vonvalt's illness had scuppered any plans to make haste. It had come on suddenly one night. He had complained of light-headedness, which we had all attributed to the wine, but it had persisted the following day. Vonvalt, learned as he was in ailments, blamed vertigo – until he began to suffer, too, from a deep-seated sense of dread, which he could not place. The emergence of this second symptom had confused all of us, since fearfulness was not amongst his faults. But the nebulous dread continued, and then, not long after, tiredness, which itself turned into bouts of crippling fatigue.

The Empire was lousy with self-proclaimed medical men, and Vonvalt could pick out a quack – and prosecute them, since displaying the blue star without proper training was a crime – in seconds. But this particular herbalist had a good reputation, and so after our infuriatingly slow journey south, we had diverted another few tens of miles so that our lord and master could be plied with medicines.

“What he needs is a good fuck,” Sir Radomir proclaimed with great sincerity after a period of silence. He took a long draw from his flask, which I knew to contain watered-down wine.

I said nothing. I liked Sir Radomir, but I didn't really want to engage with such vulgarities.

We continued to wait. There was no way to tell the time beyond our innate sense of its passage; even the sun was obscured by banks of raincloud, each one intent on testing the limits of our waxed cloaks. And then, eventually, Vonvalt reappeared, carrying a parcel no doubt filled with powders and potions. He looked pale and drawn, and his bearing reminded me of the way he looked and acted after a séance.

“The herbalist has found you a cure?” Sir Radomir asked. His voice was gruff, but there was a trace of optimism in it. As with Bressinger and I, Sir

Radomir took great comfort from Vonvalt's stable and predictable temperament, and the man's abrupt decline had unnerved him.

"We can but hope," Vonvalt muttered. It was clear the ailment embarrassed him, particularly given that the rest of us rarely took ill.

He swept past us to his horse, Vincento, and stashed the parcel away in one of the saddlebags; then he mounted up.

"Come, then," he said, sitting upright with some effort. "We'll make Badenburg tonight with a tailwind."

The rest of us exchanged a brief look at this absurd optimism; then we too mounted our horses. My attention was stolen by the harsh caw of a rook which had perched on the rickety fence at the boundary of the herbalist's land.

"'Tis a portent of spring," Sir Radomir remarked.

"'Tis not a portent if it has already come to pass," Bressinger said with scorn. He nodded towards the bird. "A single rook is death."

I scoffed. "I didn't think you were superstitious, Dubine," I said. I tried to inject some levity into my voice, for we had become a miserable little band, crushed under the weight of our mission and the doom and gloom it represented.

Bressinger simply smiled thinly, and then kicked Gaerwyn to a trot.

"Nema," Sir Radomir murmured to me as his own horse trotted past. "He needs a good fuck and all."



We did not reach Badenburg until almost noon the following day, thanks in large part to the Duke of Brondsey, our donkey, and the cart full of legal accoutrements and our own personal effects that he pulled. With the benefit of hindsight, it is a burden we should and could have done away with, but I think Vonvalt thought that, like Bressinger a month before, he might have needed use of it as a litter – or worse, a bier. Besides, Vonvalt had long before arranged for a liveried company of messengers to dispatch the ill

tidings from Galen's Vale – and we were hardly the sole source of the news.

The countryside here in the tip of the Southmark of Guelich was a hilly, rocky, forested place, the earth not quite as fractured as the Tolsburg Marches, but nonetheless full of feature. Guelich had long had a reputation as a province of exceptional beauty, filled with fragrant pine forests, clear rivers, and abundant wildlife to which lords from all over the Empire made pilgrimage for an unparalleled hunting experience. The castle of Badenburg reared up into the sky out of all of this beauty like a carbuncle, a jagged, blocky, functional fortress of grey stone. Cast in the unimaginative pre-Imperial style, it lacked all modern gothick ostentation – though what it lacked in beauty it made up for in impregnability, designed and located as it had been to keep the Hauner armies from penetrating into the Grozodan peninsula. Given Haunersheim's subjugation a half-century before, and the subsequent vassalisation of both Venland and Grozoda, the castle had become all but obsolete as a base for military operations, and now existed mostly as a dwelling for the Emperor's third son.

By the flags above the keep, however, it was clear that Prince Gordan was not in residence; and by the churned mud of the fields outside the front gates, the wild pigs and foxes rootling for bones in the muck and the unmistakable stench of a mass latrine, it was also clear that a great host had marshalled there until very recently.

"He has gone east, Milord Justice," the duty serjeant said. "Not a day ago. Left with the 16th Legion."

"The 16th Legion?" Vonvalt asked. "Nema. Where were they garrisoned?"

"As far as I know, sire, they came from Kolsburg."

"How many men?"

"Thick end of five thousand, sire. I believe the Prince is to take on siege specialists from Aulen and then make sail up the River Kova."

"Siege specialists?"

"Aye, sire. They are making for Roundstone, in Haunersheim, and then on to Seaguard. The Emperor has had word that some of the lords in the north have turned traitor. Baron Naumov is one. I believe Margrave

Westenholtz is another.”

Vonvalt grimaced at this. “Aye,” he said. He tapped himself in the chest. “It was me who sent the news. We have come from Galen’s Vale directly.”

“I heard the Vale was sacked,” the serjeant said. “’Tis true, then? The Prince could scarce believe it.”

“Indeed,” Vonvalt said absently. He looked up about the battlements. “I need to leave some things here. My donkey and cart, for one.”

The serjeant nodded. “Whatever you need, sire.”

“And you say the Prince is heading east?”

“Aye, sire. Are you heading to Sova?”

“Mm.”

“I daresay you’ll overtake him in a day or two. They are keeping to the Baden road.”

Vonvalt nodded. “Thank you, Serjeant,” he said, and we moved off.



Despite Vonvalt’s illness, we now rode hard down the Baden road. The evidence of the 16th Legion’s progress was everywhere: farms stripped bare; food waste picked over by scavengers; human, horse, and donkey shit in vast quantities; and of course the sides of the road trampled to stinking, cake-soft mud. Given we were but four people, mounted and riding on a paved road, I expected to reach the tail end of the army within a couple of hours, let alone the day that the duty serjeant had guessed. Five thousand men – around four thousand of them on foot, if the 16th Legion were a typical one – would normally be a cumbersome host, after all, lucky to make ten or fifteen miles a day in rainy conditions.

I was wrong. Vonvalt had often talked about the capabilities of the Imperial Legions, and I had often privately dismissed what I considered to be the more outlandish claims. After all, they might have had a reputation as an élite force, but they were still human beings, with all the fallibilities that came with it.

But we rode for the balance of the day, made camp, struck camp before dawn, and rode on again for another half-day before we caught up with the rearmost section of the baggage train. By that time the countryside had opened up considerably, and we were on the final approach to Sova itself.

Another half-hour's riding saw us to the head of the host, clearly identifiable by the knot of flag bearers, musicians, and Imperial Guard – and, of course, Prince Gordan himself. We had to come off the road and urge our exhausted horses through the mud to get past the long tailback of dismounted knights and soldiers. I marvelled at how uniformly well equipped they were, with mail, surcoats in the bold red, yellow, and blue Autun colours, and kettle helms for the majority. The knights, a fraction of the total force, all owned plate of varying expense, but did not wear it on the march since they did not want to die of exhaustion or otherwise overburden their horses.

Prince Gordan himself had the classic red hair and beard of the Haugenate line, the former of which was covered over by a flat-topped helmet and crown, the latter close-cropped. He wore a mail hauberk with an expensive-looking surcoat quartered in the colours of the Empire and resplendent with a black Autun rampant. He had a pleasant, handsome face and appeared to be in a good humour as we approached, laughing at a comment or joke from one of his retainers.

“Your Highness,” Vonvalt called out. He drew the attention of Prince Gordan, as well as every man in the immediate vicinity.

The Prince squinted at Vonvalt for a few moments whilst Sir Radomir, Bressinger and I made sudden and energetic obeisance; then his face broke into a grin. “That’s not... Konrad, is it? By Nema!”

“The very same, Highness,” Vonvalt said, touching his forehead out of respect rather than requirement – as a Justice, after all, Vonvalt outranked even the Emperor’s third son. Even after years of travelling with Vonvalt, and becoming fully acquainted with every aspect of his practice, it was still easy to forget just how much power he enjoyed.

“Faith, man, it’s been, what, three, four years? When were you last in

Sova?”

“About that,” Vonvalt said, nodding in the direction of the capital. “But I make for it now.”

“And not a day too soon,” Prince Gordan replied. His tone was serious, but his face retained its levity. It is easy to forget, having long since met and rubbed shoulders with the highest-ranking nobles in the Empire, that initial sense of awe and fear; but at the time I was near breathless with it. Riding but ten yards from me, after all, surrounded by all the extravagant trappings of state and tailed by an Imperial Legion, was one of the three princes of the Empire.

“You make for Roundstone?”

“Aye,” Prince Gordan said pleasantly. “Baron Naumov has apparently the will to suicide and has chosen a curiously long and expensive way to commit it.” The lords and retainers around him laughed with varying levels of sincerity.

“And then on to Seaguard?”

“Aye, you are well informed.”

“It was me, Highness, who uncovered the treachery,” Vonvalt said, “and sent word to His Majesty.”

“Ah!” Prince Gordan said. “My father did not mention you by name, only that a Justice had tipped him off to the rebellion being fomented in the Hauner lands. You are in his favour, Sir Konrad; you would do well to capitalise on it, for ’tis a fleeting thing!”

More bombastic laughter. I wondered if being the retainer of a prince was exhausting.

“I plan to pay your father a visit soon.”

“Good man,” Prince Gordan said. “Though I wonder if you would not prefer to accompany me? Your reputation as an accomplished swordsman precedes you – and I always have space for wise counsel.”

Vonvalt bowed deferentially. “Would that I could, Highness. Alas it would appear the Order is in some turmoil – and I myself am no spring chicken.”

Prince Gordan gave him an appraising look. “Aye,” he said. “You do look