

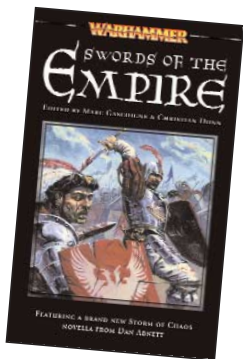
SWORDS OF THE EMPIRE

A Warhammer Anthology

Edited by Marc Gascoigne and Christian Dunn

IN THE GRIM world of Warhammer, the bloodthirsty followers of the Dark Gods ravage the land. It is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage!

Featuring brand new unseen stories from Dan Abnett and Gordon Rennie, as well as other short stories by Robert Earl, Jonathan Green, James Wallis and C L Werner.



SWORDS OF THE EMPIRE can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £5.99 (UK) / \$6.99 (US)

Bookshops: Distributed in the UK by Hodder. Distributed in the US by Simon & Schuster Books.

Games & hobby stores: Distributed in the UK and US by Games Workshop.

UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000

US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME

Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop's web store by going to www.blacklibrary.co.uk/store or www.games-workshop.com

PUBLISHED BY THE BLACK LIBRARY

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

© Games Workshop Limited 2004. All rights reserved.

Reproduction prohibited, in any form, including on the internet.

ISBN: 1 84416 088 2



*This is an excerpt from SWORDS OF THE EMPIRE Edited by Marc
Gascoigne and Christian Dunn,
published by BL Publishing, 2004.*

© Games Workshop Ltd, 2004. All rights reserved.

Reproduction prohibited, in any form, including on the internet.

*For more details email publishing@games-workshop.co.uk or go to the
Black Library website www.blacklibrary.com*

from THE CASE OF THE SCARLET CELL

by Gordon Rennie

WHAT THEY NEEDED, Varra decided, was a nice war or plague outbreak to get things moving again.

Things had been too slow recently. Business was bad all over. There hadn't been a decent war worthy enough of the name in months, and many of the establishments on Altdorf's legendary – or infamous, depending on which way you looked at it – Street of a Thousand Taverns had either had to lower their prices, or, worse still, relax their door policies and start allowing in the likes of halflings, dwarfs, Averlanders and even Bretonnians to tempt in enough customers to make up for the current chronic lack of free-spending, heavy-drinking mercenaries.

The owners of the Imperial capital's bars and hostelrys weren't the only ones to be feeling the pinch, of course. Things were bad down on the Reikerbahn too, Varra had heard. The gambling dens, whorehouses, weirdroot galleries and bawdy parlours there were also suffering from the lack of customers, and many a footpad and cutpurse would be finding the pickings scarce, with so few marks to go round in the ill-lit alleys and back ways of Altdorf's most crime-ridden district. Things were getting so bad in the Reikerbahn, they said, that the rogues would soon have to fall back on robbing each other.

Not that things were any better for those in the fortune-telling business either, Varra sighed to herself. Hers was a trade that did well enough when times were good, but often very well indeed when times were bad. Plague, war, famine, disorder, chaos. These were things that all brought fear and uncertainty into the minds of the inhabitants of the Empire, and, when people were afraid and uncertain, they wanted assurances of what the future was going to offer them.

Yes, a nice little war or outbreak of plague to get business moving again, that was what the situation was crying out for. Nothing too major, of course. Maybe just another border dispute with the Bretonnians or a greenskin attack through Blackfire Pass. A Chaos incursion from the north would have been ideal, far enough away from Altdorf not to be of any real danger, but troubling enough to get people nervous and help shake some of the silver out of their purses.

Or maybe she should get herself a gimmick. It certainly worked for that flashy Tilean bitch four doors down, Varra thought bitterly. She put kohl round her eyes, smeared brown unguent on her face, put on a half-veil and a ridiculous Araby accent, called herself Seraphina, Seer of the Desert Sands, and the customers and, more importantly, their gold and silver, just seemed to pour in. In Varra's younger days, before her looks went, her breasts sagged and the crow's feet appeared around her eyes, she had always been willing to oblige those who still believed the old mercenary superstition that it was good luck to bed a fortune teller before setting off to battle, but even that extra money-making opportunity wasn't open to her any longer.

Soon, she knew, she would probably have to give up her prime spot here on Street of the Fortune Tellers, and accept her eventual fate down in the Reikerbahn, selling fortunes and lucky charms for a few miserable coppers a time to drunken river-barge sailors and the down-on-their luck denizens of the Imperial capital's poorest and most infamous district.

The rattling of the beaded curtains at the entrance to her premises and the sound of soft footsteps in the corridor outside told her she would be able to put off that fate for at least one more day yet. She had a customer, and now it was time to

get down to work. She hurriedly threw another handful of herbs, cut with just a pinch of powdered weirdroot, into the incense burner on the rug in front of her, adding to the thick, smoky, scented ambience in the place that customers always seemed to expect. She pulled the cowl of her cape up and bent her head down, pretending to be deep in mystical contemplation, as the customer entered the room.

'Take a seat, my friend,' she said, deliberately not looking up, indicating the patched and threadbare silk cushion in front of her. 'Help yourself to a mug of good Reikland wine, if it so pleases you. Three silvers to find out what the fates have in store for you and those dearest to you.'

A jug of cheap, heavily-watered wine and a dirty clay mug lay on the rug by the silk cushion, a small dish beside them. As everyone knew, it was customary to leave a copper or two in payment for the wine. In the fortune-telling business, especially during lean times like these, every little extra helped.

The customer remained standing. The sound of their heavy, ragged breathing filled the small room. A chill of genuine premonition dread suddenly flashed through Varra's mind. She looked into the face of her last customer of the night, and opened her mouth to scream.

Something bright flashed through the air, but it wasn't silver. Something red spilled across the rug, but it wasn't wine.

'THIS WAY, HERR Konniger,' said the sergeant at arms of the Altdorf city watch solicitously, indicating the way through the press of curious onlookers. City watchmen formed dual lines on either side, pushing back the crowd that had gathered outside the fortune teller's premises.

'Make way!' bellowed the sergeant to the crowd, in a manner considerably less solicitous. 'Make way for Herr Konniger. Make way for the great gentleman sage!'

Casually swung cudgel blows pushed back those onlookers not initially deterred by the watchman's commands. A few people on the fringes of the crowd broke away, running off to spread the big news that would soon bring even more blood-thirsty vultures flocking to the murder scene. If Zavant Konniger, the famous sage-detective of Altdorf, had been

brought in to investigate, then it must be something notably gruesome indeed.

Konniger glanced at the excited faces of the crowd. 'The good citizens of Altdorf,' he mused aloud, to no one in particular. 'I've been to the tomb-cities of the Land of the Dead and encountered carrion creatures there that were less ghoul-hungry than the inhabitants of our fair city.'

He pushed through the beaded curtain entrance to the room beyond. Vido, his halfling man servant, trailed along in his wake, scowling at their surroundings. There were streets like this in every city in the Old World, and Vido could never understand why. Humans were always in such an inexplicable hurry to find out what the future held in store for him. In Vido's experience, especially since he entered Konniger's service, the future just contained all sorts of nasty, gruesome unpleasantness, and Vido was in no hurry to find out what any of it might be.

Live for the moment and only worry about all the bad stuff when it finally turned up on your doorstep, that was the only way to look at things, as far as Vido was concerned.

They entered the short corridor beyond the curtain. Konniger sniffed the air with his impressive eagle beak of a nose. Vido smelled it too. The smell of stale wine and cheap incense, but with something else underlying it: the heavy tang of blood and raw meat, serving as a warning of what lay in the chamber beyond.

The warning still wasn't enough to fully prepare Vido for what was waiting there for them.

The corpse of the fortune teller lay sprawled on the floor, her robes ripped apart, exposing her body and the violations that had been inflicted on it. She had been gutted from groin to throat, her ribcage brutally pulled apart, her vital organs torn out of her. Some of them lay on the ground, trampled either by the feet of the killer or, more probably, by the boots of however many blundering watchmen had been in and out of the place before Konniger's arrival. The remains of other organs were stuck to the walls, smeared there amongst the thick, dried splatters of blood that had resulted from the killer's butcher work on the body of his victim.

The woman's face was a mask of gore. The mouth was wrenched open in a silent scream. The lower jaw had been almost completely torn away, and a single, shuddering glance told Vido the tongue inside was gone. More than that, he didn't care to look at.

Konniger kneeled down beside the body, gently laying a hand on the woman's face. At first, Vido thought he was inspecting the ravaged ruins of her face for clues, but then he heard Konniger murmuring words under his breath, and realised his master was intoning a well-known prayer of comfort for the souls of the violently-slain. Before he had become Altdorf's renowned sage-detective, Zavant Konniger had a priest in the service of the Church of Sigmar.

'More light, Vido, if you please.'

Vido searched in his doublet pockets for a tinderbox, striking a flame from it to light one of the lamps lying on the floor. He held it up, spilling out light to better illuminate the most horrific details of the crime scene. Konniger went to work, poking and prying amongst the wounds on the corpse. The compassion of the one-time priest of Sigmar was gone, replaced by the clinical and keenly analytical mind of the sage-detective.

'Hmmm. The tongue's gone, of course. That much is obvious. No immediate sign of it amongst the other removed offal and fleshy detritus.'

More poking. More prodding. 'Ahh... the eyes are gone, too. Be sure to make a note of that, Vido.'

Vido did as instructed, glad of the distraction. He breathed heavily through his mouth, trying to avoid the abattoir stench that filled the small room.

The breakfast of ham, eggs and toasted muffins he'd happily consumed only an hour ago rumbled uneasily in his stomach. On past experience in helping his master in his investigations, Vido knew they might be here for hours yet. He could only hope his restless breakfast would remain in place for the same length of time.

Then, abruptly, Konniger rose to his feet, making the traditional hammer sign blessing of Sigmar over the corpse, a clear signal that his inspection was now over.

'Come, Vido. Our work here is finished. Time to report back to our potential new patron.'

Vido followed his master out, practically running for the door and the promise of the reasonably clean Altdorf air outside.

Konniger paused in the corridor, looking at his manservant. 'A dead fortune teller, her eyes and tongue missing. What does that suggest to you?'

Knowing what was expected of him, Vido stumbled for an answer. Very little of his apparent cluelessness had to be feigned.

'Uuuh...'

'It suggests perhaps a killer who is more than some mad or random butcher,' continued Konniger, answering his own question, as was his habit. 'It suggests purpose, Vido. A fortune-teller sees the future with her eyes, and speaks of that future with her tongue. Do you see now where this could be leading us?'

Vido nodded dumbly, not having a clue what his master was talking about, and all too willing to forget the whole business of missing eyes and tongues.

They were outside now, moving through a crowd that had increased in size in the time since they had been inside. There were more watchmen there too, several of them pushing and cudgelling the mob aside to clear a path through for the two of them. An excited murmur rose at the appearance of Konniger, adding to the crowd's bloodthirsty speculation on the exact details of whatever terrible fate they thought might have befallen the old fortune-teller.

'The Reikerbahn Butcher,' hissed a voice in the crowd. 'Sigmar protect us, it's the work of the Butcher! He's come back from the grave to kill us all!'

This piece of speculation caused the murmurs of the crowd to increase accordingly, and brought a new note of fear into their collective voice. Konniger shot a reproachful look at the watchman sergeant. One of his men, or perhaps this fat fool himself, had clearly told someone in the crowd something of what had happened to the fortune-teller, and the collective imagination of the mob would embellish the gristly details to its own morbid satisfaction.

'Continue your investigation, sergeant, and send word to the Temple of Morr for the body to be collected and the usual funerary rites conducted. Tell your superiors they will have my thoughts on the matter before the end of the day.'

The man nodded enthusiastically, barely able to contain his delight at not being saddled with the problems of investigating such a ghoulish, and frankly unprofitable, case. After all, Vido asked himself, how were the brave patrolmen of the Altdorf city watch supposed to collect their usual quota of bribes and extortion dues if they were all out hunting for the murderer of some useless old hag of a fortune-teller?

Konniger pushed past the man, ignoring his salute, and arrived at the decorated carriage that had first brought them to the Street of the Fortune Tellers.

Their new patron, a well-to-do merchant called Gustav von Hassen, stood there waiting for them, delicately holding a perfumed silk handkerchief to his nose. Vido wasn't sure if this was intended to ward off the mystic smell of death, or merely just the odour of his fellow but less prosperous Altdorfers.

'You have viewed the cadaver, Herr Konniger?' asked von Hassen, anxiously. 'You have agreed to my offer and will take up the case on behalf of the Vigilance Committee?'

Konniger breezed past the merchant, climbing into von Hassen's carriage as if it were the sage-detective's own property. Vido nimbly scrambled in after him. 'Take me back to my quarters,' Konniger instructed. 'There are certain research materials there I must now refer to before we proceed any further with the investigation.'

So compelling was Konniger's manner that von Hassen's coachman carried out the command immediately, almost leaving his master stranded in the street behind the departing coach. Vons Hassen climbed in, accompanied by the ever-silent figure of the handsome and pale-skinned young man who had been with him ever since he had first turned up at Konniger's home earlier that morning. 'My nephew, Sigmund,' was how the merchant had first introduced the youth, although Vido presumed the blood-tie must be on Frau von Hassen's side of the family, since there was

absolutely no trace of a family resemblance between the younger man and the corpulent, ruddy-faced merchant.

If Vido had any thoughts on any other basis of a relationship between von Hassen and this 'Sigmund', then he wisely kept them to himself.

'Research materials?' asked von Hassen, eagerly. 'Then you already have some notion of what kind of a fiend you may be dealing with here?'

'Perhaps,' said Konniger. 'But I need to know more information first. Information which, to save a great deal of time and inconvenience, I was hoping you would be able to provide me with, Herr von Hassen.'

The merchant swallowed nervously. 'Me, Herr Konniger?'

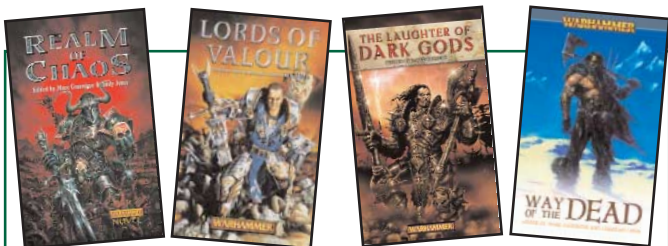
Konniger smiled. 'Indeed. For instance, although I have heard nothing concerning such events, I am almost certain that this has not been the first such murder in the city over the last few weeks, just as I am almost certain that you, my dear Herr von Hassen, can already tell me what I need to know about these other secret killings.'

The merchant swallowed again. Konniger smiled in satisfaction and sat back in his silk-cushioned seat. And listened, as the merchant began to talk.

**Will the great detective Zavant Konniger and
his halfling manservant Vido get to the bottom
of this gruesome case? Find out in:**

THE CASE OF THE SCARLET CELL

**A short story from the anthology
SWORDS OF THE EMPIRE**



Explore the grim world of Warhammer with these storming short story collections from the Black Library!

More Warhammer from the Black Library

WARHAMMER FANTASY SHORT STORIES

REALM OF CHAOS • LORDS OF VALOUR

THE LAUGHTER OF DARK GODS • WAY OF THE DEAD

WARHAMMER NOVELS

RIDERS OF THE DEAD by Dan Abnett

THE AMBASSADOR by Graham McNeill

URSUN'S TEETH by Graham McNeill

THE CLAWS OF CHAOS by Gav Thorpe

THE BLADES OF CHAOS by Gav Thorpe

MARK OF DAMNATION by James Wallis

MARK OF HERESY by James Wallis

WITCH HUNTER by C L Werner

THE DEAD AND THE DAMNED by Jonathan Green

MAGESTORM by Jonathan Green

STAR OF ERENGRAD by Neil McIntosh

TAINT OF EVIL by Neil McIntosh

HAMMERS OF ULRIC by Dan Abnett,
Nik Vincent & James Wallis

GILEAD'S BLOOD by Dan Abnett & Nik Vincent

• www.blacklibrary.com •