

# Zavant

*A Warhammer novel by Gordon Rennie*

**'YOU HAVE EXAMINED the corpse, no doubt?'** Graf Otto rasped, looking at Zavant Konniger. **'What are your conclusions?'**

**Konniger set down his wine glass and composed himself before answering. 'Foul play has been committed, certainly. But it was not a robbery-turned-murder. The victim's killer left a full purse of gold behind him. And Altdorf's footpads and cut-purses may be a bloodthirsty lot, but I have yet to meet one who would make a habit of ripping out his victims' throats with his bare teeth.'**

**'Surely it is the work of some wild animal, then?'**

**Konniger paused, sensing that he was being tested. 'Animals kill for food. Whatever killed this poor unfortunate did so only for its own savage pleasure.'**



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VESPER KLASST. I believe he's expecting us.'

Two words forming one name. Spoken aloud, the combined effect of those two words, of that one name, could hardly have been more marked had Konniger instead chosen to detonate one of the Imperial Gunnery School's fearsome new explosive cannon-fire devices here inside the Murder Hole. From his position at the bar in the ill-lit interior of the alehouse, Vido heard the commotion from behind where he and Konniger stood. There was the scraping of chairs on stone as the tavern's ill-kempt and vile-looking patrons leaped up from wherever they were sitting in response to Konniger's mentioning of that name. Vido heard the soft slither of knife blades being drawn from leather sheaths, and from somewhere in the upper tier balcony gallery above them came the unmistakable harsh metallic click of a crossbow mechanism being cocked to fire.

Konniger's hearing was acute, Vido knew. If Vido had heard this, then his master would have too. Despite this, the gentleman sage gave no indication of the mortal peril they were now in, and instead continued to wait patiently for the ruffian barman's reply.

'There's no one here by that name,' the man said slowly and deliberately through clenched teeth, glaring at Konniger. 'You're a fool to come in here, whoever you are, and an even bigger fool to even think about using that name out loud.'

'Then perhaps I haven't made myself clear,' replied Konniger archly. 'I wish to see Vesper Klasst. You know the man I'm speaking of? The worst villain in all the Empire? The lowest, basest kind of gallows-scum who laughably styles himself as the so-called "Emperor of the Altdorf underworld"? A jumped-up, back-alley purse-snatcher possessed with ridiculous delusions of grandeur?'

The alehouse keeper snarled in fury, and reached for whatever kind of weapon he kept handy on a shelf just below the bar-top. They would never find out what he had down there – a cudgel, probably, or perhaps even a loaded crossbow or gunpowder pistol – because it was at that moment that Konniger reached across the bar and sharply tapped the barkeep at a certain point on the side of his neck. The effect was instantaneous: the man's eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped to the floor as if felled by an invisible poleaxe.

Vido spun round, pulling out his dagger as they turned to face the anger of the Murder Hole's patrons. There were an even dozen and a half of them he reckoned, all armed, the worst kind of cutthroat and Altdorf underworld scum. He reckoned he could probably put the point of his throwing dagger into the eye, throat or heart of one of them, and maybe have time to draw and hurl another dagger before they got to him. Konniger would probably also give a good account of himself. His master customarily eschewed the use of weapons, but those unarmed fighting tricks that he had learned from a travelling wise man from Cathay meant that he was capable of dealing out more than a few surprises, as the Murder Hole barkeep had just found out.

Nevertheless, the odds were heavily against them. Even before he had run off to Altdorf to take up a life of thievery, Vido's family back home in the Moot had often warned that he would come to a bad end – either swinging from the end of a gallows' rope or stabbed to death in some back-alley brawl – and Vido was now forced to agree that they had apparently been right all along. He spin-flipped the dagger in his hand, throwing it up and smartly catching it by its blade point as he prepared to send it hurling hilt-deep into the body of one of the oncoming rogues. He drew his arm back, ready to throw.

'Hold!'

The angry, urgent shout made everything freeze in its tracks. There was a long, almost endless, moment of hesitation and then the Murder Hole patrons simply retreated and faded away into the murky gloom of the room. Vido's throwing arm still seemed frozen in place, the blade held there still quivering in hungry anticipation, eager to fly into the unprotected back of one of those retreating figures. Again Vido felt his master's reassuring grip on his shoulder, the touch relaxing the muscles of his arm, allowing him to at last lower his throwing arm. He

breathed out for what seemed like the first time in an age, and realised then that the quivering of his throwing blade had been caused by a nervous trembling that gripped his entire body.

'Stoutly played, Vido, but all that was mere theatrics designed to impress and intimidate us. Now that these tedious preliminaries are over, perhaps we can now get down to the night's real business.'

Vido followed Konniger's gaze, seeing three men standing behind the bar, framed in an open doorway that Vido would have sworn had not been there last time he had looked. Two of them held lit firebrands, the flickering flames revealing behind them a set of worn stone steps heading down into darkness. They scanned the room with wary, dangerous eyes, and Vido recognised them for what they were: true denizens of this Street of Assassins. He recognised their companion too, and knew then why the other patrons of the place had been so quick to obey his shouted command. This third man grinned at Konniger and Vido, showing a mouthful of broken, rotted teeth, and stepped aside, mock-bowing to them as he gestured the way into the darkness below.

'This way, gentlemen. Herr Klasst is waiting for you.'

'BLINDFOLDS, ZAVANT? NO, I wouldn't wish insult you with such a cheap ploy, especially since we both know that, even blindfolded, you would almost certainly have been able to memorize the route between the Murder Hole and my humble lair here. Besides, we're old friends, aren't we, and friends often show each other such small favours, do they not?'

They were in some low-ceilinged, underground chamber, the walls of which were piled high with boxes, barrels and cases of different sorts. From the experience of his past life as a professional thief, Vido judged the place to be a storage point for loot and contraband in transit between any of Klasst's many criminal enterprises. To get here, they had traversed various secretive paths both through and beneath the Reikerbahn, arriving at last at what was obviously merely a conveniently anonymous rendezvous point for this meeting rather than the Altdorf crimelord's true hideout.

Their guides on this journey had been Reichel Scholke and his two assassin escorts. Vido knew Scholke of old. Knew him, and rightfully feared him. It was Scholke who clipped off the fingers of cutpurses and pickpockets who operated without licence from

Klasst; Scholke who took his blade to the faces of the street-girls who tried to deny Klasst his cut of their nightly earnings; Scholke who threw powdered lime into the eyes of the merchants and storekeepers who complained that the protection money sums they had to pay to Klasst's collection agents were too high. Scholke was Klasst's lieutenant and chief enforcer, the public face of the crimelord's manifold illegal schemes and operations, and a figure of considerable fear and dread among Altdorf's criminal fraternity.

Still, Vido did not fear Scholke as much as he would have once. After all, he had seen Vaul Steiner in action, and, compared to the deadly and unwavering abilities of His Imperial Majesty's personal assassin, Klasst's lieutenant was little more than a common street thug.

Scholke stood facing them, standing behind his master and grinning nastily at them, again displaying his mouthful of rotted teeth. Legend had it that Scholke carried a pair of rusty, blood-crust-ed pliers with him, to even up the balance whenever some poor unfortunate's perfect, tooth-filled smile reminded him too much of his own failings in that department. Vido didn't know the truth of that legend but, like many others, took care to keep his mouth closed and his teeth hidden now that he was in Scholke's company.

Konniger stood beside Vido, radiating assurance and confidence, and still apparently not at all intimidated by their surroundings. If you had been to some of the places that Konniger claimed to have visited – walked the sand-buried streets of the desert-drowned cities of the Land of the Dead or stood on the slopes of the World's Edge Mountains and stared out at the vast and dismal Dark-claimed wastelands beyond – then Vido imagined that the underground hideout of a common-or-garden crimelord, even one of Vesper Klasst's fearsome reputation, must pale somewhat in comparison.

There were others in the room, more bodyguards, lieutenants and lackeys, but Konniger had eyes only for Klasst himself. Drawing himself to his full, imposing height, Konniger glared haughtily down at the surprisingly slight figure sitting at the makeshift casket-desk in front of him.

In truth, Altdorf's much-feared emperor of all things illicit and illegal was something of a disappointment in the flesh, an opinion which Vido wisely kept to himself at that moment. Like Konniger, it was difficult to determine how old the crimelord

was, although Vido would hazard a guess that he was much the same age as his master, being somewhere in what humans would term their middle years.

Klasst's clothes were a surprising mixture of the opulent and the threadbare. Small and balding, he might have passed for just another modestly successful merchant trader or some minor, provincial nobleman from an aristocratic clan whose fortunes had gone to seed, had it not been for the look of sharp, cold intelligence in the set of his face. It was his eyes in particular which gave the impression of the harsh and clinically ruthless mind lurking beyond that otherwise disingenuous exterior appearance. He had the same eyes, the same piercing gaze that Konniger had, Vido realised. Or would have, he amended himself, had his master's formidable mental processes ever been untroubled by any matters relating to conscience, morality and basic human decency.

Konniger looked unswervingly into those eyes now, locking gazes with the man who was in so many ways his matching equal and yet at the same time his mirror-image opposite.

'Friends?' he spat angrily. 'Did I miss something, Vesper? Did the Chaos Moon fall from the sky and unleash a new age of Dark-spawned evil upon the world? Did the World's Edge Mountains crumble to dust and leave the lands of mankind defenceless against the legions of greenskin savages that lie in wait behind them? I'm sure that some such event must have occurred, for surely the world itself would have to come to an end before I would ever acknowledge such as you as a friend.'

The crimelord laughed: a dry, unpleasantly bitter sound. 'Zavant, always so proud, even back in the days when we might truly have been friends, before our lives took such different paths. Have you ever wondered why you profess to hate me so much?'

'I hate you because of what you are, Vesper,' answered Konniger, clearly and coldly, 'because of what you have chosen to be. I hate you because you deliberately choose to use your Sigmar-given gifts and intellect for your own petty, ill-starred ambitions. You talk of our lives taking different paths as if what we do in life is a matter of fate rather than free will. I do not agree. There is good and there is evil, Vesper, and we have both of us chosen our differing sides in that equation.'

The crimelord smiled again, but it was the kind of smile that served merely to hide a snarl, and his eyes flashed with bright,

cold fury at what Konniger had said.

'Good and evil, you say? Take a look around you, Zavant. We are no longer in that old fool von Lattmann's draughty study, arguing over the finer points of all those worthless philosophies. Oh, I know that you do indeed hate me, but only because you cannot admit to yourself that we are so alike, you and I. I freely admit to seeing much of you within myself, but you dare not turn that famously acute vision inwards, into your own soul, for fear of what you may find. What are you afraid of, Zavant? That the face you see there may not wholly resemble your own?'

A silence settled in the chamber. Vido and the other bystanders shifted uneasily, unnerved by the clash of intellects being played out before them.

Klasst settled back into his chair, his fingers forming self-satisfied steeple shapes. Clearly, he felt that he had landed a direct hit on his opponent's sensibilities. He paused, savouring the moment, before continuing.

'We play our games together, do we not? How many chess games have we played together over the years, and how many have ended in stalemate? Most, I think. We play other games across the larger game board of the city, and there, I'll grant you, you have had your successes against me. Many times I've been on the verge of bringing our grand game to an end by removing you as an opponent.'

He broke off, gesturing at the grinning figure of the assassin standing behind him. 'Scholke here has always been keen on the idea of doing away with you once and for all. He does not understand why I never sanctioned him to do so. I'll admit that, at times, the idea has been tempting, Zavant, but do you know why I have never acted upon it?'

'I'll assume that it has little to do with mercy, or friendship for old times' sake,' replied Konniger, in a withering tone. His response only provoked a further smile of malicious pleasure from Klasst.

'You assume correctly. No, my dear Zavant, it is because I always knew that one day I might actually need your help.'

'And that day is now, I suppose,' said Konniger, stiffly. 'There is little in this world that would give me more satisfaction than the knowledge of your destruction, and an end to the evil that you bring to this city. Why then should I give you this aid that you now require?'

Klasst leaned forward, all trace of wry, wicked amusement now gone from him. He looked deadly earnest, his voice taking on a low, frighteningly stern tone, and at this moment Vido could indeed see much of Konniger in the crimelord's aspect and demeanour.

'Because I am under attack,' Klasst whispered harshly, 'from an enemy that even I fear and cannot fight alone. Because for once we fight on the same side, you and I, against an evil far greater than anything even you could ever accuse me of being capable of.'

Now it was Konniger's turn to laugh dismissively. 'You disappoint me, Vesper. I know that you have suffered recent losses amongst the ranks of your organisation, but do you really expect me to intervene in some petty alley war squabble with one of your criminal rivals?'

Klasst, however, refused to be provoked. 'The time for game playing is over, Zavant. You know that I can more than adequately look after my own affairs in such matters, just as we both know that you would not have come here tonight if you truly believed that the reason for my asking you was as trivial a matter as that.'

He paused, waiting for Konniger's expected retort. When none was forthcoming, the crimelord looked at his old opponent for a moment, seeking to gauge an insight into the thoughts going on behind the sage-detective's carefully neutral expression. 'I see that you still have your doubts,' Klasst decided at last. 'No doubt you require proof of what I have told you. Very well—'

Klasst rose from his seat, and gestured towards one of his unseen minions at the back of the chamber. In response to his command, there was the sound of heavy bolts being drawn open. A current of shockingly chill air rushed into the chamber as a door was pulled open, the icy current carrying with it the distinct and ominous scent of spoiled and rotten meat.

'Show them', ordered the crimelord.

THE ROUGH-HEWN stone walls of the chamber sparkled with diamond beads of ice. Konniger's frozen breath billowed out in small, condensed clouds as he bent over to inspect the bodies.

There were seven of them, stripped naked and laid out on crude wooden pallets, each of them blanketed with a thin patina of frost. Vido recognised two of them from his days in the



thieves' guild and knew them to be villains and gallows-scum of long standing. He might perhaps have recognised several more, but three of the corpses had little left in the way of recognisable faces. The flesh of all seven was torn and ravaged in terrible ways, not cut or crushed by any man-made weapon but instead seemingly slashed and ripped apart by something far more sinister. Konniger tutted in disapproval when he saw that the head of each body had been neatly severed, and that makeshift wooden stakes had been hammered into the chests of each cadaver.

'Inflicted post-mortem, I assume?' he asked Klasst, who nodded in reluctant acknowledgement.

'It was the only way I could get my men to handle the corpses in order to bring them here. They fear they already know the nature of the enemy that is striking at my organisation and they required – certain assurances, shall we say? – that these lifeless bodies would be of no further danger.'

Konniger continued his inspection of the corpses as he carried on with his conversation with Klasst. Their exchanges now were exact and to the point, all trace of the enmity between them forgotten as they busied themselves with the task at hand.

'How many other deaths have there been before these?'

'It began a week ago,' answered Klasst. 'Five of my men slaughtered in an attack on one of my smuggling operations at the docks. Another six men two nights later at a gambling den just off the Ostmark Parade. There was plenty of coin there for the taking, but the killer left all of it lying there along with the bodies of my men. Three more two nights hence – one of Scholke's lieutenants and two of his associates, dangerous and wary men all three of them, not easily surprised by any ordinary killer – just across the street from the Murder Hole, and then these seven some time before dawn yesterday.'

Konniger digested all this without emotion, never once looking up from his work. 'It would have been better for the purposes of my examinations to have left these ones intact at the scene where they were found. Still, you did well to have them preserved in this manner for my inspection. The minor conjuring spell that has been used here to alter the temperature should not unduly interfere with some of the more unusual divining procedures that I may need to employ. I assume, of course, that you have kept the bloodied clothing and any other such items belonging to the deceased ready for my attention, should I wish to examine them?'

Klasst nodded in assent, a quiet smile of satisfaction on his face. 'Then you are agreeing to help me, old friend?'

Konniger predictably declined any direct reply to the crimelord's question. 'I must return to my residence. There are certain items and materials I require before I can—'

'Tell me what you need,' asked Klasst, eagerly. 'Whatever it is, I assure you that I can provide it and have it here with you within the hour.'

'Very well,' agreed Konniger. 'Vido here will provide you with the full list of the items I require.'

THEY WAITED OUTSIDE as Konniger conducted his examination of the cadavers. Occasionally, there would come a curt, shouted summons which would bring Vido scurrying into the room to help his master. Mostly, this involved detailed note taking of everything Konniger said as he poked around amongst the ravaged flesh of the seven bodies. Once Vido was required to heat up a small glass tube of clear liquid over an ingenious fire-making device of dwarf manufacture while Konniger carefully scraped some dried flakes of a noxious-looking, black slime substance from out of one of the corpse's wounds. This substance, when added to the contents of the heated glass tube, transformed the clear liquid into a clouded, reddish-black mixture and filled the room with a near unbearable stench. Konniger merely murmured to himself in private satisfaction, whatever hypothesis he had formulated now having obviously been proven correct.

There were other rituals and tests to be conducted, some of them far more esoteric than these simple alchemical procedures, and these Konniger carried out behind closed doors. So Vido mostly sat outside, feeling distinctly uncomfortable in the company of Vesper Klasst and his crimelord court of rogues, thieves, spies and assassins.

Occasionally, messengers would come and go, delivering cryptic notes or urgent, whispered communications to the lord of the Altdorf underworld. Whatever these messages were, they did not seem to concern the murderous events that had brought him and Konniger here, and Vido assumed them to be part of the crimelord's normal, nightly routine. For it was while the ordinary, honest, Sigmar-fearing citizens of the Imperial capital slept that Klasst and his minions went about their illicit business, and Klasst styled himself not merely as emperor of the

city's underworld, but also ruler of the Altdorf night.

Or so it had seemed up until now, thought Vido, for now it seemed that there was another rival claimant to the title.

Wisely, Vido kept such thoughts to himself. Whatever the details of Klasst's business affairs were, Vido wanted no part of any of it, and he made a studied show of finding something – anything – else to engage his attention whenever one of these messengers was delivering word to Klasst.

Klasst had scarcely given Vido a second glance since the moment he and Konniger had been ushered into the crimelord's presence, and most of Klasst's men showed a similar, complete disinterest in the halfling's existence, a fact for which Vido was heartily glad of. Humans rarely showed much interest in his kind, he knew. Halflings seemed to exist at some point beneath the attention level of many of their larger, clumsier human cousins, who often considered them to be at best amusing and hapless child-like halfwits and, at worst, some annoying type of over-sized, two-legged vermin. Many halflings played up to the former role, and Vido had too, on more than one occasion; being considered harmless or even near-invisible was too much of a gift for any thief worthy of the name to easily pass up on.

Still, Vido fidgeted uncomfortably, knowing that there was at least one other person here in this villains' den who was still aware of his presence.

Scholke sat directly across the room from Vido, obviously bored and frustrated as he played the razor-keen blade of his dagger across the surface of an upturned barrel. He grinned nastily across at the halfling as he carefully carved long, neat lines into the wood.

'Well, well, look who's come back to us? Little Vido! I thought you'd forgotten your old Reikerbahn mates, Vido. We thought that you were maybe too good to mix with the likes of us these days, now that you're with the Herr High-And-Mighty Konniger.'

Vido said nothing, but looked Scholke straight in the eye. Like the other men here, the assassin was bored and restless, afraid of the unknown enemy that seemed to be stalking Klasst's organisation and keen to take out his frustrations on any target at hand. Klasst's other henchmen started to stir with interest, sniggering from the sidelines in enjoyment at Scholke's swaggering performance. Vido knew how this single-

act playlet went; he had seen it performed many times before. Usually it ended with someone lying bleeding to death on the dirty, unswept floor of whatever thieves' den tavern or gambling house it was which had served as an impromptu venue for this familiar old drama.

He surreptitiously reached into his jerkin to check that his throwing dagger, and the two others like it, was still there within easy grasp, even if he doubted that the odds against him here were any more favourable than they had been back in the Murder Hole. Taking his eyes off his tormentor for a moment, he risked a quick glance over at Klasst, checking to see what the crimelord's reactions would be. Klasst feigned disinterest, choosing instead to devote his attention to a code-written inventory list that had been delivered to him some minutes ago.

If Vido was looking for help from that unlikely quarter, then, unsurprisingly, it seemed that none would be immediately forthcoming. Klasst had made it clear that Konniger's person was inviolable tonight; the question now was, did the crimelord's protective blessings extend to Konniger's halfling manservant?

From the mood of tense unrest in the room, and the growing smile on Scholke's face, Vido guessed he would have his answer soon enough.

'I remember when you weren't such a bigwig, little Vido,' continued the assassin, starting to put on a show for his watching men. 'Part of Hergabo Kleinbratten's mob from down on Albrecht Strasse, weren't you? Yes, he spoke very highly of you, did old Hergabo. Well, anyway, he did, right up until someone bashed his stupid, Moot-born brains in with a boot-hook one dark and foggy night.'

Scholke's grin grew broader and nastier, and Vido remembered the bloodied mess that had been his old thief mentor when they found him lying in the street the next morning. He hadn't been a bad sort, old Hergabo, even if he had been positively dwarf-like when it came to dividing up the loot, and Vido had genuinely mourned the old rogue's death. Now he had yet another reason to hate and fear Scholke.

He continued to stare down the assassin, aware all the time that Scholke's men were on the move, two of them moving in a supposedly haphazard, casual way round the room to his left and right, outflanking him on each side. All the time, Scholke kept talking, trying to keep Vido distracted as if he was some

young runtling just arrived from the Moot, wet behind the ears and with fresh cow-dung still between his toes.

'Yes, that's when you came to work for us, wasn't it? A good, hard-working thief you were. A good little earner for the organisation. But then you had that run-in with the City Watch, didn't you? We all reckoned you were a goner, off to dance the hangman's jig at the weekly hangings in the Konigplatz. And next thing we know there's some nonsense talk about an Imperial pardon signed by old Karl-Franz himself, and then, right enough, there you are giving all your old Reikerbahn mates the cold shoulder and swanking around town as manservant to his nibs, Herr High-And-Mighty Konniger.'

As he spoke, Scholke was idly spinning his dagger, cunningly flipping it from finger to finger, but Vido knew better than to allow himself to be distracted by the ploy. He kept a careful watch on Scholke's eyes – they would give the split-second warning of the assassin's intentions – and on the men still casually edging round the walls of the room, disappearing now into the dangerous areas on the periphery of his vision.

Whatever was going to happen, it was probably only a matter of seconds away now.

'Yes, when you left, we lost a nice little source of regular income there,' continued Scholke, 'but you never did ask permission to leave the organisation or offer to buy out the rest of your contract with us, did you? That means you tried to cheat us, Vido. You owe us a debt, and you know that Herr Klasst always collects in the end on any unpaid debts still owed to him.'

Forget the other two, thought Vido. One clear, easy throw, putting the blade right into his throat. For old Hergabo, if nothing else.

'If your thugs are quite finished their tomfoolery with my manservant, Vesper, then I've finished my examination and am ready to share my findings with you.'

Konniger stood in the doorway, wiping his blood-stained hands on a linen cloth and staring in challenge at the scene in the room before him.

Scholke looked, disappointed, towards his master, who brought his henchman's fun to an end with a curt and dismissive gesture. The crimelord had been watching the last few moments with vague interest, a hint of ugly enjoyment glittering in his dark eyes. Whether he would have called his pet killer

to heel before the final denouement was now a question that would never be answered.

'And what have you discovered?' asked Klasst, blunt and to the point. He was all business again, showing no appetite for the intellectual sparring with Konniger of earlier in the evening.

'There are some puzzling aspects to the evidence, but I can confirm that your enemy is indeed that which you fear it to be.' Here Konniger deliberately raised his voice, no doubt momentarily enjoying the effect his chilling words had on Klasst's men. The darkest, hidden horrors of the world held far considerably greater terror in the minds of superstitious back-alley rogues than they did for gentleman sage-detectives who had made a lifetime's study of such things. 'You and your organisation are under attack from the forces of the undead. The killer is the very worst of that kind: a vampire, possibly of a variety I have never encountered before. There are others with it too, foul undead minions or accomplices that it has summoned to assist it in its task.'

'Then you know how to deal with such creatures?' asked Klasst, eagerly.

Konniger finished wiping his hands and threw the cloth into the doorway behind him. 'The precautions you took with the cadavers were more than adequate, but I am finished with them now, and I suggest that you have the remains cremated as soon as possible. You must do the same with the bodies of the other victims, if you have not already done so. I also strongly suggest you seek out the help of Morr for advice on the proper funerary rites.'

Konniger looked up sharply, staring Klasst straight in the eye. 'Your men may be the worst kind of villains, Vesper, but even they deserve better than to have their souls held in thrall for all eternity to the powers of darkness.'

'Zavant...' The tone in the crimelord's voice was half-threatening, half-pleading. It was the tone of a powerful man unused to asking for favours, and loathe to do so now from one who he must surely consider to be his worst enemy.

'Yes, Vesper, I will help you,' relented Konniger, at last. 'Not because I care in the least about the fates of you and your army of cutthroats, but because I cannot permit such foulness to continue to exist here in Altdorf. You and the vampire may share certain traits, Vesper, both shadow-dwelling predators feeding on the lifeblood of humanity, both ruling through fear and violence, but at least you are not yet so irredeemably damned as

those foul servants of evil. I warn you, though, that once this business is concluded, there will still one day have to be a final reckoning between us. As to the business at hand now, though, I can lend aid and advice to an extent, but there are certain people I can summon here, people who have much experience in dealing with such—'

'No outsiders,' warned Klasst. 'No damned witch-hunters and boy wonder Templars or Knights Panther, Zavant. We deal with this on our own.'

'Very well. As you wish.' Konniger folded his hands into the sleeves of his vestments, and calmly moved towards the passageway door leading out of the underground chamber. 'Good luck in your endeavours, Vesper. I would consider praying for you, but I do not believe you deserve Sigmar's blessings, nor do I think my prayers would in any way alter the outcome of your battle. Come, Vido, our work here is done.'

One of Klasst's men moved to block the way out the door, but before he could do anything, there was a commotion in the passageway outside. Vido heard hurried footsteps, and the sound of alarmed shouting. Blades were hurriedly drawn from scabbards, and Vido even saw one of Klasst's bodyguards ready a blunderbuss rifle and level its gaping, fully loaded barrel mouth at the doorway. To his surprise, Vido also found himself being hauled back by Konniger, the sage-detective deliberately interposing his own body between his servant and whatever was on the other side of the door.

The door burst open and a man, his face bloodied, his eyes wide with shock and disbelieving horror, came stumbling in. 'Herr Klasst, they've struck again!' he panted, delivering his fear-garbled message to his employer. 'There's been another one, over at the counting house on Talabec Platz. Ranald's eye, you've never heard such screams, and it's still going on!'

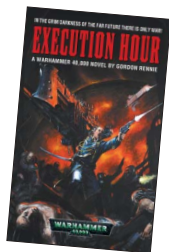
Klasst looked sharply over at Konniger, who nodded in silent understanding.

'Gather what men you can, Vesper, and let us go without delay. Quickly, there isn't a moment to lose.'

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