



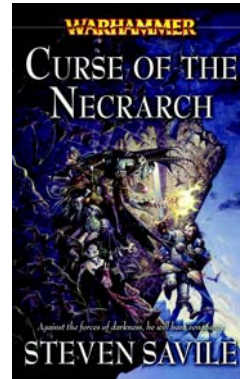
## ***CURSE OF THE NECRARCH***

*A Warhammer novel*

*By Steven Savile*

*Feared and reviled, the reclusive necrarch vampires lurk in their lairs, engrossed in mad experiments and dreams of depraved glory. When one of these foul creatures invades an Empire town and slaughters its inhabitants, its knight protector, the ageing hero Reinhardt Metzger swears vengeance. Gathering an army, he leads his men to the vampire's castle for an epic confrontation against the forces of evil.*

*Curse of the Necrarch brings you gruesome horror from the author of the Von Carstein trilogy.*



### **About the Author**

British author Steven Savile is an expert in cult fiction, having written a wide variety of sf, fantasy and horror stories, including Star Wars fiction. He won the L Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future award in 2002, and has been nominated three times for the Bram Stoker award. He currently lives in Stockholm, Sweden.

### **More Steven Savile from the Black Library**

Vampire Wars : The von Carstein Trilogy – Includes the novels *Inheritance*, *Dominion* and *Retribution*.

The following is an excerpt from *Curse of the Nocrarch* by Steven Savile. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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KASPAR RAPPED ONCE on the study door and opened it without waiting to be bidden to enter.

Reinhardt Metzger sat alone nursing the last of the now tepid wine. He looked bone tired, carrying every one of his fifty years heavily on his broad shoulders.

'You're a soft-hearted old beggar,' Kaspar said, sinking into one of the armchairs. He put his feet up on the waxed side-table and teased off his gloves one finger at a time. 'But if it means anything, you did the right thing.'

'We'll need to give that moaning swineherd some satisfaction. No doubt he will be hammering on the door the moment word reaches his cauliflower ears that she hasn't lost her hands, her child or her life. Have I told you lately how much I loathe men like Giles?'

'This morning, last night, and at least twice more since he sued for the Graf's justice.'

'Yes, well, let me just state for the record, men like him ought to be fed their own bloody tongues to put an end to their merciless bloody tittle-tattle. They're worse than old maids.'

'A few coins will buy him off.'

'It's blood money.'

'Aye, it is. But we both know if the shoe was on the other foot and Artur was dispensing justice to our widows we'd expect some kind of compassion from an old friend.'

'Damned right we would,' Metzger agreed. 'and he'd give it.'

'Still no word from Orlof?' Kaspar Bohme said, changing tack as artfully as any midshipman.

'Nothing.'

'That's not like him.'

'Did I ever tell you you had a talent for stating the bloody obvious, my friend?'

‘Well, there was that one time, at Essen Ford,’ Kaspar said, pushing back up out of the upholstered chair. He paced the room like a caged animal, prowling back and forth, back and forth. ‘Have you sent scouts?’

‘No, I thought I would sit here like a blind man in the dark rooting for navel fluff. Of course I have, two good men. One last week, one this.’

‘And neither have returned?’

‘That’s a real talent you have, Kaspar.’

‘I say we ride out,’ Bohme said, bracing himself on the wainscoting of the wooden window, feeling out the grain with his calloused fingers. Each knot and whorl in the wood depicted more years than either of them had been on the planet. Even at the simplest of times nature was a humbling thing.

‘Two old men against the evils of the world?’

‘I can think of no one better suited.’

‘Go to bed, Kaspar. We’ll talk in the morning.’

But they did not; they met in the middle of the night on the landing, drawn by the reflections in the streaked glass and a thicker, unnatural darkness.

‘Some foul miasma clouds out the moon,’ Kaspar said. ‘You know it and I know it, and where there is roiling darkness like this there is some unnatural curse beneath it.’

‘We don’t have a choice, do we?’

‘Would you send someone else out?’

Metzger shook his head.

‘I didn’t think so. Get dressed, I will meet you in the courtyard.’

‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘You weren’t planning on sleeping were you?’

‘No,’ Metzger said.

‘Neither was I. I believe they call that a coincidence. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go drain the snake. The old bladder isn’t what it used to be.’

A quarter of an hour later, still hours before dawn, the two men set off towards the clouds, grim-faced, all joking cast aside. Bohme roused the stable boy and had him saddle up two of the Knight Protector’s horses while Metzger woke Briony and had her bag up travel rations for them. They opted for speed over power, leaving behind the chargers they would ride into battle in favour of sleek, fast mares. They knew better than to gallop, moving out at an easy canter at first, resting the animals often as their long strides ate the ground, and still exhaustion claimed the beasts along with the first cry of the dawn chorus.

They were not the young men they had once been, of that the night had made them painfully aware. By midday they were forced to take shelter in the ruins of an old temple. The stripped roof offered little in the way of respite from the elements, but with the statue of Sigmar still standing sentinel in the corner it offered other protections.

They talked little during the morning, wrapped up in their own thoughts as to the origins of the miasma. It appeared every bit as thick in daylight as the darkness had threatened it would be. Bohme struck tinder and saw to the small gathering of deadfall that he had scavenged to make a fire, while Metzger unwrapped two slabs of meat from the greased paper wrap and skewered them on his long dagger to cook them over the fire. The fat sizzled and spat as it dripped onto the hard stone beneath. The meat, when they ate it, was gamy, and still slick with fatty juices that had them licking their fingers and smearing the stuff on the grass that had slowly begun to reclaim the temple. Done, they grabbed a few hours of sleep before rising again to stalk the miasma through the early evening.

There was more to what Metzger had told Briony than she might have understood, more about his debt to her man. There were different types of leader, as many as there were types of men, but a man like Metzger felt responsibility for those in his service. His scouts had not returned: two good men with five children between them. The loss weighed heavily on his shoulders, and it was a loss. He did not for one minute think that they had suddenly become derelict in their duties. They were either dead or captured, and then as good as dead if they were. He studied the miasmatic clouds as they amassed, amazed that the sky could harbour such black hatred for the land beneath it. They had yet to spill their ire on the landscape, but when it came the deluge would be apocalyptic.

It was ever the way of the earth. It cleansed evil and good with equal disdain, scrubbing them from the land as though they had never existed.

'You know what we face as well as I do,' Metzger said after a while.

Kaspar Bohme pushed to his feet and scuffed up dirt to kick out the fire. 'I know nothing, Reinhardt. Neither do you. It's time to move on.'

And so it was for three straight nights, though without the stars they were forced to orientate themselves in the oppressive press of the trees with a loadstone on a string that pointed true north. The pair of them pushed their mounts to the point of exhaustion. Where they could they followed tracks carved into the forest, where it was impossible or impractical they wove their own paths through the trees. Sleep was a luxury for man and beast, though they grabbed an hour's rest here and there, until they woke on the morning of the fourth day to a shivering earth.

Kaspar came awake instantly, sensing that something was fundamentally wrong. He placed both of his hands down, palms flat on the grass, feeling the violent tremors rippling through the soil. He counted out the gaps between the ebb and flow of the shivers, judging the nearness and size of the enemy they faced.

'An entire army is on the march,' he whispered, 'and they are close.'

'The earth never lies,' Metzger said.

The horses whinnied and shied, spooked by their unseen enemy, kicking at the dirt and deadfall and prancing sideways as far as their tethers allowed.

Bohme surveyed the landscape around them. To the left there was little in the way of cover, scrub land leading towards the foothills, to the right, tree-lined slopes, and straight ahead a declivity leading down to the stream-bed cutting through a large u-shaped valley that ran for thirty miles and more. From his vantage point the valley floor was obscured by the overhanging cliff, making it ideal for the safe, unseen, passage of a substantial force.

'I'm going out, give me five minutes and follow,' said Kaspar.

Metzger stayed low, hunkering down beside Kaspar and said, 'Just watch yourself.'

'You worry too much, old man.'

'And you don't worry enough,' Metzger said.

He watched his back as Bohme moved off, skirting the low broken stones of the temple wall. He moved fast, running hard and keeping low. The weight of his body was always on the front foot. Metzger saw the subtle flash of silver in his left hand and knew that Kaspar was not taking any chances. A moment later he disappeared behind a crumbling spar of stone. Metzger wasn't about to sit by idly and wait. He set off in the opposite direction, running for the trees.

They offered little in the way of cover, but anything was better than nothing. He sprinted across the open ground, crashing through the undergrowth. He pushed through low, dragging branches, snapping them back in his haste.

The nature of both men was evident for any observer to see, the bull charging recklessly on, flattening anything in his way, the wolf moving with terrible swiftness, low, sleek and fast. A thoughtful enemy could deduce much from this simple observation, enough, perhaps to win a war.

Metzger hit the thick trunk of a withered tree. Chest heaving, he glanced back over his shoulder. For all the skeletal shadows and long sighs, the trees appeared empty of any real threat. He crouched and rummaged through the deadfall. There were no obvious signs of passage to announce the enemy's

advance, whoever they might be, no broken twigs or brown leaves crushed into the mud. He craned his head, listening, but there were no sounds either, no signs of life; the stillness was eerie and unnatural. In the dusk so many of the forest's natural foragers ought to be stirring, but the place was dead. He cupped his hands to his mouth and, shaping his lips, hooted twice, imicking the cry of an owl. It was greeted by silence as the forest rose to engulf it. Reinhardt Metzger shivered despite the relative warmth of the early evening.

When he placed his hands flat to the dirt he felt them again, the telltale tremors of marching feet, thousands upon thousands of them causing the ground to revolt at their vile advance.

'Talk to me, mother earth,' he whispered, digging his fingers into the dirt.

There was no miraculous revelation.

He crept forward, deeper into the trees. The first blush of moonlight filtered through the canopy of leaves, scattering its reflection across the forest floor like a wealth of ghostly coins. He moved on, deeper into the trees until quite suddenly the land dropped away steeply beneath him.

What he saw snatched his breath away: a shuffling river of death, rolling back across the countryside for league upon league, rotting skin and bone, dragging feet. He stared in absolute horror, scarcely able to take in the enormity of the force: a crusade of the armies of death, shambling corpses, moving blindly on, staggering and lurching mindlessly.

The column was so wide that he could not see its far edge. Several of the marchers carried torches that threw eerie light across the ranks of the vile army. The dead had no need of light, he reasoned, which meant that the living marched with them. He saw flesh that hung in grey tattered strips and all he could think was to pray to Sigmar that the dead passed by his homestead, knowing the selfishness of that prayer even as he thought it. Their salvation was someone else's damnation and yet he could not bring himself to care about those nameless others. He would willingly carry the burden of their deaths if their sacrifice saved even one of his own people.

The dead marched. Within the faceless ranks of rotting corpses he saw more recent fatalities bearing their wounds nakedly. In his mind he carved out the passage of the dead, using the valley and his memory of the lodestone to orientate his fear. Sickly, he realised that Grimminhagen lay directly in the path of their march.

There was a grotesque order to the force. There was a hierarchy that mimicked the structure of a real army, with the rotting zombies and flesh-stripped skeletons forming the infantry that made up the bulk of the lines,

marshalled by more fearsome foes: ghouls, ghosts and wights clinging to the flanks, and black riders on skeletal mounts that snorted smoke and flame that in turn fed the miasma that clung to the dead army. In the centre of the abomination he saw a huge chariot fashioned from bone, and a withered vampire spurring on the corpses that dragged it, flaying strips of skin from their backs with his whip.

Metzger lurched away from the tree, dread, fear, and horror ripping his mind asunder as he scrambled down the hill, tripping and sliding, and digging his heels in to stop himself from pitching forward and falling even as he started to run. His first instinct was to draw his sword and throw himself into the river of shambling dead swinging, but that instinct did not last long. He had to get back to Grimminhagen in time to warn his people.

A hand came down hard on his shoulder and pulled him up short. He wheeled around, blade raised to gut whatever ghoul thought to feed on him, and barely managed to pull the blow when he saw that it was Kaspar Bohme.

'We must away from this place,' Kaspar said, his face bled of all colour. 'Die here and we damn everyone.' It was a simple truth.

Metzger nodded, grimly determined. All thoughts of age and retirement banished, the knight sheathed his blade. There would be time aplenty for swords and violence, but not now and not here.

'How many towns and villages have fallen along the way to feed that vile force? How many families are rotting in this river of filth because no one was strong enough to stop them? How many is too many? One hundred? Fifty? One, that's how many: one.' Bohme had no answer for that.

The moon burned within the dead, augmenting the eerie torchlight of the living that marched side by side with them. The dead were not, as he had first suspected, whole. Decay was rife, pallid skins and sallow complexions turned an ethereal grey. The rot of the grave bared white bones where the flesh had failed. More of the dead men were skeletal, cages of ribs torn open on putrid giblets, limbs stripped of muscle and tendon reduced to lichen-thick bones.

Carrion eaters flew above them, hundreds of black-winged birds that swept low time and again to feed on the soft tissues of the dead as they shambled and lurched and staggered, dancing to the pull of the chains that had dragged them back to this wretched unlife so mercilessly. Ravens clawed at the last remaining strips of muscle, beaks tugging at the wormed fat of gaping cheeks and the soft humours of leaking eyes.

It was a procession of damnation.

He rubbed at his stubbled jaw, the urge to throw himself at them all still strong. He imagined hacking and slashing at the mortal chains that bound them, but no matter how many he freed of their damnation, it could never be enough.

All he could do was prepare his town for the worst.

Had Orlof been somewhere in there marching on with blindly staring eyes? That was what the dead did, after all. They swelled their ranks with the corpses of the men they killed, growing stronger and stronger by the mile.

Metzger turned his back on the dead. Bohme was looking at him strangely. Metzger had seen enough blood shed in hate to know that the things seen in the eyes of others were reflections of the things that burned in your own eyes. They were not secret glimpses of the other man, they were the hidden truths of the self. There had been fear in Bohme's eyes, Metzger's fear.

The cries of the ravens rose, mad caws that spiralled, taking on an almost human quality. It took him a moment to realise what he was hearing within them: the wretched sobs of a baby.

'Did you hear that?' he asked, but Kaspar was already moving, swiftly back up into the next layer of undergrowth where the brambles and thorns tangled around the tree trunks. The cries became more and more obvious and heartbreaking as they retreated back up the hillside, until they found the baby, wrapped in a bundle of swaddling clothes, nestled down beside a hollowed out tree stump, crying and crying and crying for the mother that had abandoned it. Metzger gathered the crying child into his arms and hushed it, offering his thick finger to the babe to suckle on in the hopes of quieting it.

'Who left you here, little man?'

Had the babe's mother fled her doomed village hoping to deliver her child from the procession of the dead? Was she lying somewhere near or had she become a part of the shuffling zombie army? Or was the babe some unwanted bastard brought out to die? It didn't matter. Reinhardt Metzger cradled the helpless child to his chest.

Down the slope he saw the first of the pallid corpses pushing through the trees, drawn by the baby's cries.

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