

# TAINT OF EVIL

A Stefan Kumansky Novel • Book Two

A Warhammer novel by Neil McIntosh

FROM THE FROZEN wastes of Kislev, Stefan Kumansky desperately searches for his erstwhile comrade Alexei. As he heads towards the Imperial capital Altdorf, Stefan stumbles across a fortified community waging a bloody war against the dark forces of Chaos. Stefan finds himself welcomed as a recruit to their cause., but when Alexei arrives as a prisoner, this bastion of strength is thrown into turmoil as a taint of evil spreads throughout the land.



Neil McIntosh was born in Sussex in 1957 and currently lives in Brighton. He has contributed stories for the Warhammer anthologies, *White Dwarf* and other magazines, as well as writing for radio. Following a lengthy sabbatical, he returned to writing fiction in 2000 with two stories for *Inferno!* magazine. *Taint of Evil* is his second novel.

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### *from TAINT OF EVIL*

THEY RODE FOR three days beyond Mielstadt, three long days of wearying travel. Three days crossing the same, endless barren vista, a green and brown patchwork of vast, empty plains populated with nothing but the occasional stream or clump of trees. Any direction was much the same as any other, no better, no worse. But they chose to steer south, searching for the path of the mighty river that would lead them, at length, back to the heart of the Empire, then home to Altdorf.

Stefan still held to the belief that Zucharov would have come this way. That, in the end, he would turn towards the only place he knew as home.

But in those three days upon the road they had encountered no one, nor passed through anything that could be called habitation. The world had suddenly emptied. Stefan had never encountered desolation on such a scale.

That morning they had risen shortly after dawn, riding early to cover as many miles as they could in the light. But the days were shortening with winter's stealthy advance, and, after barely seven hours in the saddle, the sun was already drawing down below the cusp of the distant hills.

Bea had proved to be an easy travelling companion, happy to do her share and suffering the hardships of the road without complaint. But most of the conversation between Bea and her new companions had been small talk, guarded, incidental. In truth she was still a stranger to them, and they to her. Stefan was happy for the moment to respect the distance between them. There would be time enough yet to get to know one another.

Bea glanced around at the darkening skies, and drew her cape in tighter.

'Getting cold, and dark,' she remarked. 'When will we stop for the night?'

'An hour more, maybe two,' Stefan replied. 'We'll wring a few more miles from the day if we can, get as far south as possible.'

Bea nodded, seemingly satisfied, and rode on in thoughtful silence for a while. Stefan had the feeling there was something else on her mind, but it was a few minutes more before she said, 'So, Sierck was wrong, then. You weren't looking for Tal Dur?'

'Tal Dur?' Stefan had heard the name for the first time in Mielstadt. Now it took him a few moments to recollect it. 'No,' he said at last. 'Why do you ask?'

'It's what most who come here are looking for,' Bea told him. 'They've heard the stories. Stories of a place with magical powers.'

'A lot of nonsense, according to our friend the graf,' Stefan reminded her. 'Tal Dur doesn't exist.'

'But he's wrong,' Bea countered. 'It does exist. I know it does.'

'Stefan, look at this!' Stefan was shaken out of his thoughts by Bruno's shout. He turned to see his comrade a little way ahead of them, his outstretched arm pointed towards the horizon.

'Dead ahead,' Bruno called out. 'Smoke rising from the trees.'

Through the fading light Stefan saw three or four separate wisps of grey-white smoke rising above a canopy of trees that marked the boundary of a distant forest. He stared, momentarily captivated by the lazy beauty of the coils snaking skywards.

'What do you think?' Bruno asked. 'A camp fire?'

Stefan peered into the now fast gathering gloom. Buried deep in the forest, the source of the fire wasn't going to give up its secrets easily. But the pillars of smoke seemed to spread across a wide area. It couldn't be a camp fire.

'It's more than one fire,' he told Bruno. 'And there's been no attempt to conceal them.'

'That might be a good thing'

'It might.'

'Well, anyway,' Bea said. 'It's the first sign of life we've seen in four days. That has to be good at least.'

'It's a sign of something,' Stefan replied. 'I wouldn't assume any more than that.' He kicked in his spurs and started forward. 'Let's take a closer look. Then we'll know what we're dealing with.'

It took another hour in the falling light before they reached the edge of the forest. All that time knots of thick smoke continued to rise skywards, white against the darkening backdrop. As they entered the forest and rode beneath the canopy of the trees, all

trace of the fires disappeared. Bruno brought his horse around in a circle, scanning the forest floor.

'There's a clear path over here, a well-trodden one,' he announced. 'It must lead somewhere.'

The riders followed the path deep into the forest. Now, at last, there were clear signs of habitation. Neatly stacked piles of stones and hewn logs, the wheel from a cart, the debris of everyday living. Nothing out of the ordinary, but Stefan had the sense that all was far from well. Soon they could smell it: the slightly sweet scent of wood-smoke mixed with something else: the sharper odour of charred or burning meat, a smell that was becoming thicker and more pungent by the moment.

Bea had sensed it too. 'This isn't right,' she said, her voice small and anxious.

Stefan made no reply, but he was now certain his fears were justified. There was something very wrong here.

Soon they came to the first building, its shape emerging out of a smoky mist woven around the trees. Sturdily built from thick-cut stone, the house had probably stood for a hundred years and might well stand for a hundred more.

But it was a home no longer. The walls were blackened, scorched by the fire, and yellow tongues of flame still licked across what remained of its brushwood roof. The single door hung open, a gaping, broken mouth.

Further along they came upon a second burned out shell, and then a third. In front of the fourth house they found the first body, lying face down upon the forest path. A dark red bloom was spreading from a wound in the man's back. Stefan climbed down and turned the body over. The dead man was of middle years, with solid, weather-tanned features. Dead, vacant eyes stared up at Stefan. If the man had ever been armed, then his weapon had been taken from him. He had not died in battle. This was murder.

The toll of death mounted as they neared the centre of the village. The bodies were not soldiers or mercenaries. They were farmers, simple labourers. Men dressed in peasant smocks, some still clutching the tools of their trades: pitchforks, spades or hunting knives. Tools they had used to mount a last, futile defence against their executioners.

There were perhaps a dozen more houses in the village. All had been destroyed, all surrendered to the flames. At the heart of the village the trees had been cut down to make a small

clearing, a patch of bare earth barely big enough to call a square. In the centre of the clearing was a neat stone chapel, and inside the chapel they found the women and children.

Bea turned away, covering her face with her hands. Bruno left Stefan alone for a moment or two, standing in the doorway of the desecrated shrine.

'How many?' he asked at last. Stefan turned to face him, pulling the door to the chapel closed behind him. 'Twenty, maybe more,' he said, his voice subdued.

Stefan imagined their terror as the attackers closed in. Imagined them praying for Sigmar to spare them, or for their tormentors to show them some small vestige of mercy.

'Are they all-' Bea began. 'I mean are there any-'

Bruno shook his head. The chapel had become a tomb. 'None survived,' he said. 'Whoever was here made quite certain of that.'

'It looks like the village has been plundered,' Stefan observed. 'Food, provisions. Anything of any use taken.'

'A raid, then. But why destroy the whole village into the bargain?' Bruno asked.

Bea shivered. 'It looks like some cruel punishment,' she said.

'Cruel indeed,' Stefan agreed. Cruel, and methodical.

Across the village the fires still crackled, otherwise a silence, almost serene in its totality, hung over the place. Stefan moved away from Bruno, and sat alone upon the bed of an abandoned cart, staring at the ruins in silence. When at last he looked round, Bea was seated next to him.

'This is a terrible thing,' she began, then hesitated. 'It touches something for you, doesn't it? Something buried deep. A deep, terrible sorrow.'

Stefan raised his head, and looked at Bea intently, taking in her features. She was young, but there was a wisdom there that outweighed her years.

'Do you know me that well already?'

'I have a power of healing' she said. 'To heal, you must be able to know pain.'

She met his gaze steadily, waiting patiently for whatever answer Stefan might give.

'I came from a place like this,' he said at last. 'A small village. A place far away, in Kislev. It was a simple life, not much to it. But people worked hard, and they looked after each other. It was enough. Then, one day, raiders came - savage riders from

Norsca. They came, and when they'd left, there wasn't any village any more. I was eleven years old.'

'Your family,' Bea said. 'Were they all...'

'My brother and I survived,' Stefan said. He smiled, briefly. 'Mikhal's a merchant now, back in Altdorf. But our father died along with all the others, defending the village. They were just ordinary, hard-working people. Fishermen, not warriors. But they fought just the same, fought to save their village, their home. They fought, and they died. Just like they died here.'

He scanned the smoking ruins. 'You asked me why I have to keep searching until we've found the man we're looking for. This is why,' he said. 'My life changed forever on that day. That was the day I made my vow to avenge my father, and all those who had suffered like him.'

He lifted his head, and looked around at the smoking ruins of the village.

'Whoever did this,' he said, 'we'll find them. Find them and make them pay.' He stepped forward, and ran the length of his hand across the façade of the chapel, just above the door. The brick was charred and blackened, but, carved into the pitted surface, a single word was still legible.

'Grunwald,' Stefan spoke the word softly, with reverence. 'Remember that name,' he told Bea. 'Hold it in your heart. For that is all that remains of this village now.'

Bruno appeared, running back towards the chapel from the trees at the edge of the village. 'Stefan,' he called out, breathlessly. 'Come and have a look at this.'

It was another body, all but hidden in the long grass on the edge of the village. The body was burnt, so badly charred as to be almost beyond recognition. Bruno had thought at first it was another of the villagers. But it was not a villager. In fact, as Stefan now clearly saw, it wasn't even human.

'Sigmar protect us,' Bea said, quietly. 'A mutant.'

Stefan raked through the ashes with his sword. The charred remains gave off a pungent, rancid smell, and where not totally burnt, the flesh was a grey-green in colour. Whatever the creature was, it had once been human. But twisted horns protruded from what was left of its skull, and the creature's single remaining eye was a disc of sickly yellow.

'That's our answer then,' Bruno said grimly. 'This is what happened to Grunwald. Some consolation at least that the villagers managed to destroy one of the vermin that attacked them.'

'There must be others,' Stefan said. 'The rest of the mutants can't be far.'

'There are tracks,' Bruno told Stefan. 'Horses' hooves, heading away from the village. They look pretty recent to me.'

'How many?'

Stefan asked. 'Hard to be sure, but at least half a dozen.'

Stefan said a silent prayer for the dead of the village and climbed back into the saddle.

'You might want to think about staying here for now,' he said to Bea. 'We have to go after the mutants.'

But Bea was already back on her horse, following Bruno out towards the woods. 'I'd rather take my chances with you than stay here alone. Besides,' she added, 'you may have need of me before long.'

'Wait a minute,' Stefan caught up with the other horse and took hold of the reins, bringing the animal to a halt. 'Whatever we're about to get into, it's going to be dangerous,' he said. 'You'll need something to protect yourself at the very least. Here,' he slid a blade from the saddlebag slung at the side of his horse. 'Take this. It's light enough to wield, and it could save your life.'

The healer looked at the blade held out before her and seemed, Stefan thought, to back away from it.

'It's all right,' she replied at last. She patted a side pocket with the flat of her hand. 'I carry my own weapon,' she said. 'One I'm used to. I'll be fine with that.'

Stefan was unconvinced, and looked towards Bruno. His comrade turned his horse back on to the path. 'We need to get moving,' he urged. 'They already have a head start on us. Don't worry,' he said to Bea. 'We'll see you safe.'

She smiled. 'I know you will,' she said. 'Come on. Bruno's right. We need to get going.'

They followed the tracks through to the far side of the wood and back out onto the open plain. By now day had given way to night, the two moons shining like ghostly orbs through a thin curtain of mist spread low across the empty land. The hoof prints they were following cut a trail across the thin grass then disappeared abruptly as the grass gave way to stone.

'We've lost them,' Bruno declared. Stefan searched the desolate landscape, looking for any clue left by the riders. Just when it seemed their pursuit was to end in frustration, a shout rang out across the plain. A shout, followed by two long notes on a hunting horn.

The three riders raced towards the sound, closing the distance between them and their quarry. The horn sounded again, two, three more times. Soon they could hear voices and the unmistakable sound of clashing steel. Stefan had no idea exactly what they were riding into, what kind of men or monsters they were about to encounter, or how many. But at the moment that didn't matter. After weeks of futile searching they had found a purpose again. The creatures who destroyed the village would not elude them now.

The mist had thickened to a choking fog, snuffing out all light from the moons. Stefan could barely see Bruno riding five yards ahead of him. Then, out of the gloom, came the outline of a horseman riding hard towards them, his progress marked by a flaming torch held low by his side.

Stefan felt his heart pounding in his chest as his body tensed itself for the coming battle. Moonlight glinted on polished steel as he drew his sword from out of its scabbard. Had the other rider not seen them? If he had, the sight of Stefan and Bruno closing in upon him had given him cause to vary neither his course nor the thunderous pace of his horse. Inevitably, the thought flashed through Stefan's mind: could it be him?

The possibility vanished almost as quickly as it appeared. Too small, too lightly built. This was not Alexei Zucharov. But if this horseman had been with those who had ridden into the village of Grunwald, then Stefan would kill him all the same.

'Hold fast,' he shouted to Bruno. 'Here he comes!'

At the last moment the other rider looked up, and seemed to see Stefan and the others as if for the first time. He called out, words that were lost in the wind. But as Stefan swung his sword, ready to aim the first strike, he heard Bruno callout to him.

'Don't strike, Stefan!'

Stefan pulled back from the blow, and the rider thundered past. There was a flash of vivid red, and a shouted cry.

Stefan now saw the ugly gash that was causing the rider to clutch his side just below his ribs. Blood was flowing freely from the wound, all but invisible against the bright scarlet tunic that he wore over his chainmail vest. A moment later the rider lost control of his horse and tumbled from the saddle onto the ground.

The rider lay, groaning in pain, then twisted his body round to look up at Stefan and Bruno. The look of anguish in his face suggested he was unsure whether they were going to attack him or not, but his strength was all but spent. He sagged forward,

clutching feebly at the fallen torch with one hand, and pointing back the way he had come with the other.

Just in time, Stefan heard the heavy pounding of horses, riding in hard pursuit. The beasts and their riders materialised out of nowhere to appear on the path ahead of them. These were the living, breathing incarnations of the body left behind in the village. Stefan thrust out his sword to fend off a blow. Somewhere to his left he heard Bruno cry out, and the sound of metal slicing the air. In the next moment four – no, five – riders streaked past them, creatures clearly marked by the hand of Chaos. They rode upon hideous, altered steeds: horses with cloven hooves and eyes that glowed like burning coals.

The mutants thundered past, disappearing into the fog. The drumming of hooves receded, then grew louder again, beating a pounding tattoo upon the hard earth.

‘Get ready!’ Stefan shouted. ‘They’re coming back.’

This time he was ready for them, but the mutants rode with astonishing speed. His blade cut nothing but thin air, but the answering blow found its mark, razor sharp steel cutting a line across Stefan’s cheek. As the riders sped past he had a fleeting glimpse of a gaunt, bloodless face, and an arm that looked more like the claw of a crab. Then they were gone again, melted into the murky gloom. Stefan heard the hooves recede, then turn to launch yet another assault.

Blood from the cut on his cheek dribbled into his mouth, a warm, metallic taste of mortality. Stefan spat and cursed. Again the pounding beat of onrushing hooves. Stefan held his nerve as the hideous riders bore down upon them yet again, at the last possible moment striking out with his sword. He made only glancing contact, unseating one rider from its monstrous steed.

The mutant bellowed its rage at Stefan. It had the body and features of a man, but the pale, almost translucent flesh of one arm tapered off into a curved claw-like blade where the hand should have been. The sinuous limb flexed and lashed at Stefan, the claw-end missing his face by inches. Stefan pressed home his attack. Still the mutant fought back, coiling and unleashing the tentacle-like limb in a single movement. Stefan met the blow and cut cleanly through the creature’s arm, severing the lethal claw. The mutant pulled away, but Stefan blocked its retreat and aimed another blow square into the creature’s neck. A gout of dark blood sprayed from the creature’s mouth, and the mutant crumpled upon the ground.

Stefan cast his gaze about, ready for the next attack. But the mutant riders had vanished yet again.

'The scum are losing their appetite for killing,' Bruno commented, sourly.

'Any sign?' Stefan asked 'Have they gone?'

'Not gone,' Bea said. 'They're still out there, watching. Waiting.' She got down from her horse and picked up the still burning torch that lay beside the dead soldier. She turned her head slowly from side to side, as if following an invisible line. 'That way!' she shouted suddenly, leaping back onto her horse and gathering the reins. 'Over there!'

Without further warning, she surged forward, Stefan and Bruno close behind. Bea rode straight ahead a few yards further, then swung her horse about, drawing a wide circle around her body with the burning torch. At that moment the clouds drew back from the moons, and a wash of light pierced the smothering fog. Where before there had been only darkness, they now saw four or five riders approaching, towering mutant steeds closing fast upon Bea.

'Come on,' Stefan urged Bruno. 'They won't hide from us now.'

The mutants howled, determined to avenge their fallen comrade. The four riders converged in a pincer movement, but Bea moved with astonishing agility, steering her horse through the gap between two attackers. Two mutants collided in a tangled mass of flesh and steel. A third wheeled around, straight into Bruno's path. Bruno held firm on a collision course with the mutant, at the last moment jinking to the left, his sword cutting through the mutant's guard. The blade sliced cleanly through the creature's neck, slicing its ugly, deformed head from its shoulders.

The remaining two mutants turned back towards Stefan in a last desperate attempt to break free. Stefan felled the first, a pale creature with a glistening pig-like face, cutting him down with a single stroke as he rode past. The second held his ground, parried Stefan's first strike, and aimed a blow at the horse's flank. Stefan's horse reared up, unseating him. The last of the mutants now charged down at him, wringing the last ounce of speed from its ghastly horse.

Stefan scrambled to his feet as the apparition bore down upon him. Moments before he was trampled beneath the hooves he dodged to one side. As the mutant horse thundered past he grabbed at the rider, and pulled the mutant from the saddle.

The mutant hit the ground hard, but sprang back onto its feet almost instantaneously. It turned and growled at Stefan, a yellow, gangrenous venom dripping from its open jaw. The mutant's face bore acquaintance with humanity, but the black, beaded eyes and scale-crusted flesh had more in common with a lizard than a man.

For an instant the two stood motionless, facing each other. Stefan held his sword low, leaving his guard temptingly open. It was a temptation the mutant could not resist. It lunged forward, torso flexing in a single, snake-like movement as a clawed limb raked at Stefan's face.

For the second time Stefan tasted blood as the talons tore at his face, but he made sure the opportunity cost the mutant dearly. He drove his sword up into a fold of blistered flesh at the base of the creature's neck. There was a sound half way between a scream and a rush of air as the reptilian face split open. A foul spray misted the air as the creature toppled back, clutching at its throat. It lay upon the ground, its body twitching and juddering.

Stefan sank to one knee, resting his weight upon the hilt of his sword.

If I kill a thousand of your kind, he reflected, there will still be more. He got to his feet, wiping the putrid gore from his jerkin and legs. I

t would never be enough. No matter if he killed a thousand, or ten thousand abominations such as this, it would still never be enough. Each small victory was an attempt to balance the scales of natural justice, an act of retribution for the dead of villages like Odenks, like Grunwald. But, for Stefan, the sense of justice earned was always short-lived. It could never be enough, and that thought troubled him deeply.

He felt Bruno's hand on his shoulder. 'You all right?' his friend asked.

Stefan gripped his comrade's arm. 'I'm fine,' he said.

Both men looked round at the sound of a horse approaching. Bea's expression was neutral, neither elated nor fearful. Only the tremor in her voice betrayed the ordeal she had come through.

'Well,' she said. 'I'm glad that's over.'

Stefan reached up and took her hand.

'Well done,' he said. 'Truly well fought.'

'It was the two of you who did the fighting,' Bea corrected him. 'I just stayed out of the way. I told you before,' she said. 'I've a talent for making myself vanish.'

Bruno fixed the girl with a look of honest admiration. 'Well,' he replied. 'Don't plan on vanishing on us just yet.'

'Don't worry,' she assured him. 'I won't. Whatever—'

Her words were cut short by the sounds of voices and clashing steel, the unmistakable music of conflict. Somewhere close by, battle was being joined. Stefan reached again for his second sword, and offered it across to Bea. 'No excuses this time,' he told her. 'You're going to need this.'

Bruno tracked the direction of the sounds. 'Just over the brow of that hill,' he announced. 'Quite close I think.'

Bea fixed her gaze upon Stefan. 'The man – the one you're looking for,' she said, 'do you think he could have had anything to do with this?'

Stefan gave no answer. Perhaps it wasn't a question he was ready to answer. Not yet. Instead he gathered up the reins and turned his horse about to face the sounds of battle.

'Come on,' he urged his companions. 'This isn't over yet.'

**Will Stefan be able to track down his missing friend  
Alexei, before he is lost to the world forever?  
Read TAINTOF EVIL to find out!**

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