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NAGASH THE UNBROKEN

The undead will rise...

MIKE LEE

NAGASH THE UNBROKEN

A Warhammer 'Time of Legends' novel

By Mike Lee

Having suffered defeat on the battlefield at the hands of the priest kings, the powerful necromancer Nagash is forced to retreat to the mountains of Nehekhara. Over time he rebuilds his strength and finds new allies in the skaven, mutant ratmen that live beneath the earth. In his new lair of Cripple Peak, the necromancer discovers something dark and powerful – warpstone. Coveted by the skaven, this magical rock could give Nagash unstoppable power...

About the Author

Mike Lee was the principal creator and developer for White Wolf Game Studio's *Demon: The Fallen*. Over the last eight years he has contributed to almost two dozen role-playing games and supplements. An avid wargamer and devoted fan of pulp adventure, Mike lives in the United States.



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The following is an excerpt from *Nagash the Unbroken* by Mike Lee.

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THE GREAT PALACE WAS honeycombed with a network of hidden passageways, built for the use of the household's many servants, and Ubaid led the queen through a veritable labyrinth of narrow, dimly-lit corridors and dusty storage rooms as they made their way to the cellars. Neferata could barely see where she was going within the confines of her mask. The servant's lantern bobbed in the darkness ahead of her like some teasing river spirit, luring her onward to her doom.

Finally she found herself descending a series of long, narrow ramps, and the air turned cold and damp. Gooseflesh raced along the skin of her neck and arms, but she suppressed the urge to shiver. Then a few minutes later she felt the weight of the narrow passageways fall away to her left and right, and she realised that they'd entered a large, low-ceilinged space. Neferata glimpsed stacks of rounded, clay jars sealed with wax, and heard the distant sound of voices somewhere up ahead.

Ubaid led her through one interconnected cellar after another, past jars of spices, salt and honey, bolts of cloth and bricks of beeswax. The sense of space began to shrink again,

and the queen reckoned that they were heading into a much older part of the cellars. The voices grew more distinct, until she could clearly make out her husband's hushed, urgent voice.

Suddenly, the grand vizier halted and stepped aside. Neferata rushed ahead and emerged into a small, dripping chamber stacked with wide-bellied wine jars bearing the royal seal. A handful of torches guttered from the walls, casting strange, leaping shadows across the floor.

Lamashizzar, Priest King of Lahmia, City of the Dawn, stood over an opened wine jar and gulped greedily from a golden drinking bowl. His rich, silken robes were grimed with the dust of the road, and his tightly curled black hair was matted and limp with sweat. Half a dozen noblemen stood around the king, all of them travel-stained and reeling from fatigue. Several drank along with the king, while the rest stole apprehensive glances at the slaves working feverishly at the far side of the room. None of them noticed the sudden appearance of the queen.

Neferata studied the men for a long moment and felt her irritation sharpen into icy rage. She took another step into the room and drew a deep breath. 'This is an ill-omened thing,' she declared in a cold, clear voice.

Startled cries rang off the stone walls as the noblemen whirled, their dark faces pale and eyes wide with shock. To Neferata's profound surprise, many of them reached for their swords; they caught themselves at the last possible moment, hands hovering over the hilts of their blades. Yet they did not relax. None of them did. Instead, their eyes darted between Neferata and the king, as though uncertain how to proceed.

Now it was the queen's turn to stare in amazement. Some of the men she knew to be Lamashizzar's closest supporters,

while others, though Lahmian, were strangers to her. All of them shared the same tense, hard-edged expression, the same fevered glint in their eyes.

They look like cornered animals, Neferata thought, thankful that the all-enclosing mask hid her startled reaction. Is this what war does to civilized men?

The king himself was no less stunned to see his queen. His handsome face was sallow and drawn; his eyes were sunken and his cheeks hollowed out from poor eating and little sleep, but his gaze was sharper and more penetrating than ever. Lamashizzar lowered the drinking bowl. Red wine trickled thickly down the sides of his sharp chin.

‘What in the name of the dawn are you doing here, sister?’ he rasped.

‘I?’ Neferata snapped, her anger managing to overcome her growing unease. ‘More to the point, what are you doing here?’ She advanced on Lamashizzar, her hands clenched into fists. ‘There are sacred rites to be observed. The king may not return to the city without first performing the Propitiations of the East. You must thank Asaph for the blessing she gave when you first set out to war!’ Neferata’s voice grew in volume along with her ire, until her voice rang like a bell within the confines of the mask. ‘But the army isn’t expected for days yet. Asaph’s Quay is bare of offerings from the citizenry. The proper sacrifices have not been made.’

Without warning, the queen lashed out, striking the drinking bowl from the king’s hand. ‘What happened?’ she hissed. ‘Did you drink all the wine you plundered from here to Khemri? Couldn’t you have waited two more days to slake your thirst? This is an offence against the gods, brother.’

For a moment, no one moved. Neferata could feel the tension crackling like caged lightning in the air. The king

glanced past Neferata. ‘That will be all, Ubaid,’ he said to the grand vizier.

Ubaid bowed and hastily withdrew, his robes rustling as he fled from the cellar as quickly as his dignity would allow.

Lamashizzar stared at the queen, his eyes depthless and strange. He raised his hand and laid the tips of his fingers against the mask’s curved, golden cheek.

‘The gods do not care, sister,’ he said softly. ‘They no longer hear our prayers. Nagash the Usurper saw to that on the plain outside Mahrak. Did you not read any of my letters?’

‘Of course I did,’ Neferata replied, suppressing a chill at the mention of Nagash’s name. She and Lamashizzar had been born during the height of the Usurper’s reign, when the former Grand Hierophant of Khemri’s mortuary cult had held all of Nehekhara in his iron grip. It was only when the kings of the east had risen in revolt against Khemri that they had learned true horror of the Usurper’s power, and though they eventually triumphed, the cost of victory was almost too terrible to contemplate.

Angrily, she pushed aside the king’s hand and stalked past him. At the far end of the chamber, the slaves stopped what they were doing and abased themselves at her approach.

‘It doesn’t matter if the covenant has been broken or not,’ Neferata continued. ‘In matters of state – and religion – perception is every bit as important as reality. Lahmia was spared from the worst excesses of Nagash’s rule, but the war has disrupted trade with the west for more than ten years now. Fortunes have been lost – to say nothing of the enormous debt we now owe the Emperor of the Silk Lands. If the people had any inkling of the deal we struck to obtain their dragon-powder there would be rioting in the streets.’

‘That was Lamashepra’s doing, not mine,’ Lamashizzar pointed out, bending to retrieve his drinking bowl.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Neferata insisted. ‘Father is dead. You are the one on the throne, now. The people look to you for reassurance. They need to believe that the Usurper’s reign of terror is over and that a new era has begun. They need to know that Lahmia will prosper once more.’

The queen’s tirade had carried her nearly all the way across the chamber. The slaves were still as statues, their previous labours forgotten as they pressed their foreheads to the earthen floor. They had been in the process of shifting scores of dusty wine jars and dismantling wooden shelves to create a cleared space for—

Neferata came to a sudden halt. Her eyes widened behind the golden mask as she saw the linen-wrapped bundles resting on the earthen floor. ‘What—’ she stammered, suddenly at a loss for words. ‘Brother, what is all this?’

Behind her, Lamashizzar dipped his bowl in the open jar. He stared into its ruby depths, and an ironic smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

‘The dawn of a new era,’ he said, raising the bowl to his lips.

They were not jugs of plundered wine or wrapped brinks of lotus leaf. Neferata saw that at once. Each bundle had roughly square sides, some reaching as high as her knees. The linen wrappings were stained brown by countless leagues of travel, and were bound with braided twine. She went to the closest one. Slaves scattered from her path like frightened birds as she knelt beside the parcel and tugged at its bindings with long-nailed fingers. As she did, a stir went through the assembled nobles. Neferata heard angry growls and choked

protests, until finally one of the men could contain himself no longer.

‘Stop her!’ the nobleman snapped. Neferata didn’t recognise the voice. ‘What is she even doing outside the Women’s Palace? She should be in her proper place, not—’

‘She is the queen,’ Lamashizzar said, in a voice as cold and hard as Eastern iron. ‘She goes where she wills.’

Neferata listened to the tense exchange with only half an ear. Her dark fingers teased the twine knot apart, and a corner of the linen wrapping fell away to reveal—

‘Books?’ the queen said. Her eyebrows knitted together in a frown. They were thick tomes of expensive Lybaran paper, bound in a strange kind of pale leather that sent prickles of unease racing down her spine.

‘The books of Nagash,’ Lamashizzar explained. ‘Smuggled from his pyramid outside Khemri. All his secrets: his plans, his studies, his... his experiments. It’s all there.’

Neferata felt her heart grow cold. She rose and turned to face the king. ‘I don’t understand, brother,’ she hissed. ‘You were supposed to forge an alliance with the Usurper. With the power under your command you could have broken the siege at Mahrak and handed the east to Nagash! He would have agreed to any terms—’

‘No,’ Lamashizzar said flatly. He took another long draught from the bowl, his face haunted with memory. ‘You weren’t there, sister. You didn’t see the... the creature that Nagash had become.’

‘We knew he was a sorcerer—’ Neferata began.

‘He was a monster,’ Lamashizzar said darkly. ‘None of the rumours we’d heard came anywhere close to the truth. Nagash was no longer human, and what he’d done to Neferem—’ The king’s words dried up in his throat. Finally, he shook his head.

‘Believe me, Nagash would have never honoured the terms of an alliance, much less shared the secrets of eternal life.’ He gestured at the stacks of linen-wrapped volumes with his drinking bowl, sloshing thick wine onto the floor. ‘So. Better this than nothing at all.’

Neferata spread her hands. ‘Indeed? Are you a sorcerer now?’ she shot back. ‘I’m certainly not.’

‘You were trained by the priestesses of Neru,’ Lamashizzar said. ‘You know how to perform incantations, how to create elixirs—’

The queen shook her head. ‘That’s not the same thing,’ she protested.

‘It’s enough,’ Lamashizzar said. He lurched forward, seizing Neferata by the wrist, and pulled her after him as he wound his way drunkenly through the collection of plundered tomes. Beyond the linen-wrapped books lay another shape, stretched out against the dank stone wall. ‘We also have this,’ the king said proudly.

It was a corpse. It had been inexpertly wrapped, and the linen bindings were devoid of the ritual symbols of the mortuary cult, but the shape of the body was unmistakable.

The king gave his sister a conspiratorial smile. ‘Go on,’ he said, squeezing her wrist with surprising strength. ‘Take a look.’ His eyes glittered like glass, sharp and fever-bright.

Lamashizzar’s hand squeezed harder. Neferata clenched her jaw and sank slowly to her knees. She heard the slaves shift nervously behind her as she stretched out her free hand and began to gingerly pull away the wrappings that covered the corpse’s head.

The face took shape by degrees: first a man’s beak-like nose, then a prominent brow and deeply sunken eyes. Next came sharp-edged cheekbones and a long, square jaw that

gaped in a grimace of agony, revealing a mouthful of jagged, blackened teeth.

The corpse's skin was pale as a fish's belly and covered in a patchwork of fine scars. The veins at his temples and along his neck were black with old, clotted blood. The very sight of it filled the queen with revulsion. Neferata recoiled from the ghastly visage. 'What in the name of all the gods—'

Lamashizzar pulled her close. 'He is the key,' the king hissed, filling her nostrils with the sour reek of wine. 'This is Arkhan the Black. Do you know the name?'

'Of course,' the queen said with a grimace. 'He was the Usurper's grand vizier.'

'And one of the first immortals,' the king added. 'But he fell from favour during the war and betrayed Nagash on the eve of the great battle at Mahrak. He offered me the power over life and death if I would side with the rebel kings against his former master.' Lamashizzar gave the queen an almost boyish wink. 'After the battle, I hid him in my baggage train during the long march to Khemri. No one suspected a thing. The others thought he'd fled westward with the rest of the Usurper's immortals, so once we'd reached the Living City and the Usurper's troops made their last stand in the city's necropolis, I paid some soldiers to spread the rumour that Arkhan had been seen fighting to the bitter end at the foot of his master's pyramid. No doubt the story's taken on epic proportions since then.'

'And Arkhan actually held to his bargain?' she asked.

The king smiled. 'As much as I expected he would. He led me to the books, deep in the heart of the Black Pyramid.'

'Then you killed him.'

Lamashizzar's smile never faltered. 'Is that what you think?'

Neferata's expression hardened beneath the mask. With a savage jerk, she tore her wrist from the king's grasp. 'You're drunk,' she hissed. 'And I am not in the mood for games, brother.'

That was when the smile faded from the king's face. Slowly, deliberately, he lowered his hand and set the bowl of wine upon the floor. His eyes bored into hers. 'Then perhaps I should make it plain for you,' he said quietly. He spoke again, in that voice as hard and cold as iron. 'Bring them.'

There was a commotion behind Neferata, and the slaves began to wail in terror. She froze at the sound, and watched as Lamashizzar leaned forward and tore away the linen bindings wrapping Arkhan's torso. The immortal's chest was even more scarred than his face, but what was worse was the blackened, thumb-sized hole in Arkhan's breast, just above his heart.

'He was swift, but the bullet in my dragon stave was swifter still,' Lamashizzar said. His nobles crowded around him, dragging the terrified slaves over to Arkhan's body. 'It's still there, buried in his heart. Here. Let me show you.'

The king crouched over the body and pressed his fingers deep into the wound. There was a thick, liquid sound, and Lamashizzar grunted in satisfaction. When he drew his hand away his fingers were covered in a black fluid as thick as tar. A fat, round metal ball was gripped between his fingertips. He held up the bullet and studied it for a moment.

'You see?' he said. 'Such a wound would have killed one of father's mighty Ushabti, much less a mere mortal like you or I. But to Arkhan it was nothing more than an interruption.'

The king bent close to the immortal's face. His voice dropped to a whisper. 'He's still in there,' Lamashizzar said, but whether he said it to Neferata or to the immortal himself,

the queen could not be certain. ‘Locked in a cell of flesh and bone. So long as his heart cannot beat, Nagash’s elixir cannot circulate through his limbs, nor fan the flame of his cursed soul.’

The look on the king’s face sent a shudder through Neferata. This was not the libertine who had led his father’s army to Mahrak. The things he had seen on the field of battle – and possibly within the pages of the books he’d stolen from the Usurper’s crypt – had left an impression in the young king’s mind. Blessed Neru, she thought. What if he’s gone mad?

Lamashizzar chuckled to himself, entirely oblivious to his sister’s mounting unease. ‘I have had many discussions with the former vizier on the journey home, and I believe we have reached an understanding. He will serve us, unlocking his former master’s secrets and teaching us how to create the elixir for ourselves. If he serves well, then we will share the draught of life with him. If not...’ he paused, and his expression grew hard. ‘Then we will send him back into his cell, and we shall see how long it takes for an immortal’s body to collapse into dust.’

The king tossed the bullet aside, then nodded curtly to his noblemen. Without a word they drew knives from their belts and began slitting the slaves’ throats.

Hot blood sprayed through the air. The slaves thrashed and choked, pouring out their lives onto Arkhan’s still form. As they died, Lamashizzar picked up the pale leather tome and began turning its pages.

‘The world has changed, sister,’ Lamashizzar said. ‘The old gods have left us, and a new power has risen to take its place – a power that now we alone possess. We shall usher in

a new age for Lahmia and the rest of Nehekhara. One that we shall preside over until the end of time.'

At their feet, the blood-soaked body of Arkhan the Black drew in a terrible, shuddering breath. His bruised eyelids fluttered, and Neferata found herself staring into a pair of dark, soulless eyes.

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