

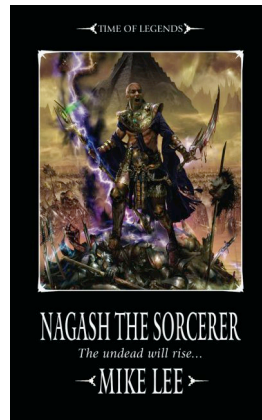
BL PUBLISHING

NAGASH THE SORCERER

A Warhammer 'Time of Legends' novel

By Mike Lee

Two millennia before the time of Sigmar, the mighty kingdom of Nehekhara flourished in the hot desert lands far to the south of the Old World. Mike Lee tells the bitter story of the rise of Nagash, a priest king whose quest for immortality would unleash a plague of death and evil that damned Nehekhara and its people forever.



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.

In the Same Series

HELDENHAMMER
By Graham McNeill

The following is an excerpt from *NAGASH THE SORCERER* by Mike Lee.

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AKHMEN-HOTEP HEARD the thunder of hooves off to the west and gritted his teeth in helpless rage. Pakh-amn's light cavalry was retreating from the Usurper's sudden attack. The shouts and screams from the far end of the battle-line had merged into a formless, toneless roar of pure noise. It was not the dull metal clatter of battle, but the sound of pure butchery. If the left flank had not already collapsed, it was teetering on the verge.

Men were pouring past the priest king's chariot in a seemingly endless flood, their faces slack with terror and exhaustion. Behind them came an inexorable tide of walking death; a new army of undead flesh, animated by a soulless, evil will.

He had shouted himself hoarse, trying to rally his men and return them to the fight. At first, he enjoyed some success, collecting stragglers here and there and ordering them back into threadbare companies – but as soon as the shambling corpses appeared, they lost their nerve once more. Unless something could be done to hold the undead creatures at bay, the Bronze Host would be utterly destroyed.

And if the fearsome warriors of Ka-Sabar were no match for Nagash the Usurper, Nehekara was surely doomed.

There had been no sign of the priests in the long retreat across the plain. Akhmen-hotep resigned himself to the fact that young Dhekeru had stood no chance against the horrors lurking in the darkness. All that remained was to reach the oasis and

make his stand there, hoping that the foul stain of darkness would not spread further.

Just then, a pearly glow flared to life, a few yards ahead of the retreating chariot. The driver called out in alarm, but the priest king laid a reassuring hand on the frightened man's shoulder. He could hear the sound of voices mingled in a steady, determined chant. 'The priests!' he cried, his heart lifting. His message had won through after all!

Within moments, Akhmen-hotep and his Ushabti led their chariots past a line of Neru's white-robed priests, all standing fearlessly in the path of the oncoming creatures and chanting the Invocation of the Vigilant Sentinel. The pearly light of the moon goddess radiated from their skin, pushing back the darkness and giving the frightened warriors a place of refuge. Beyond the line of stalwart priests, Akhmen-hotep spied their high priestess, Khalifra, offering prayers and sacrifice to her goddess. Farther off, he saw Memnet at the priests of Ptra, gathered in grim debate with Sukhet and the priests of Phakth.

A booming, bull-like voice rose above the distant roar of battle and the confused shouts of the retreating warriors: Hashepra, the iron-thewed high priest of Geheb was bellowing to the soldiers of the Bronze Host. 'Darkness comes and darkness goes, but the great earth is not moved,' he called. 'Stand fast, like the mountains, and Geheb will bless you with the strength to defeat your enemies!' The power of Hashepra's voice and his stern, intimidating presence had the desired effect on the men, restoring their courage and stopping their headlong flight. Slowly but surely, discipline was being restored. But would it be in time?

Strange, unearthly moans rose from the gloom as the first of the undead reached the barrier of moonlight cast by the priests of Neru. The creatures hesitated, raising their bloody limbs to shield their faces from the glow. They hissed and cried, but for the moment they could advance no further. Akhmen-hotep offered a prayer of thanks to the Heavenly Consort, then directed his driver to take him to Memnet.

The priests of sun and sky put aside their heated words at

the priest king's approach, but Akhmen-hotep could see the strain etched deeply on their faces. He dismounted from his chariot before it had fully stopped and rushed up to the grim-faced men. 'Thank all the gods that you got my message,' he began.

Memnet frowned. 'Message? There was no message.'

'When we saw the darkness unleashed, we knew that we would be called upon,' Sukhet interjected. 'Though none of us could have expected the blasphemous sorceries the Usurper now possesses.'

'I see,' Akhmen-hotep said quietly. 'What about this foul darkness? Can you not disperse it?'

Sukhet gave the king a sour look. 'It is all we can do to keep it from spreading further,' he snapped. 'It is no mere cloud of dust or ash, but a living thing; perhaps a swarm of beetles or locusts, marshalled by diabolical intent. It rides upon the wind, and cannot be easily swept aside.'

'Then what of the Great Father's light?' Akhmen-hotep said to the Grand Hierophant. 'Can you not invoke Ptra to burn this devilry from the sky?'

'Do you not think I have tried, brother?' Memnet said bleakly. The Grand Hierophant's face was pale, and his eyes were wide with fear. 'I have made entreaties. I have made sacrifices. I fed my own body servants to the flames, but Ptra does not heed me!'

Akhmen-hotep shook his head. 'You're not making sense. The covenant—'

'What the Grand Hierophant means is that we are being interfered with,' Sukhet said darkly. 'I do not know how.' He cast a worried look in the direction of the distant ridge. 'There is sorcery at work here unlike anything I have ever known. It is the foulest sort of magic, the work of the devils themselves!'

'Then you must strike at it with all the power you have available,' Akhmen-hotep said. 'Call upon the lightning. Tear the sky with Ptra's fire. Strike at the Usurper with all the wrath of the gods!'

'You don't know what you are asking for,' Sukhet

answered, genuinely shaken by the priest king's demand. 'The price of such power—'

'Pay it!' the king commanded. 'No cost is too great to rid the Blessed Land of such a monster. He has bled our cities white, terrorized our people and emptied our treasuries. And if we are defeated here, do you imagine Nagash will be content with a ransom of gold, or ingots of bronze? Have you forgotten what he did to Zandri, back in the days of our fathers? That will pale in comparison to the vengeance he will wreak upon us for our defiance.'

'But the omens,' Memnet moaned. 'I tried to warn you. While the sunlight shone, we had our way, but now—'

Akhmen-hotep took a menacing step towards his older brother. 'Then make it shine again,' he snarled.

The Grand Hierophant started to protest, but suddenly a faint, skirling sound rose wild and clear above the tumult, echoing from the dunes to the west. Heads turned, searching for the source of the sound. Sukhet, whose ears were keener by the grace of his god, cocked his head attentively. 'Horns,' he said. 'But made of bone, not bronze.'

'Another trick of the Usurper?' Memnet asked.

'No, not this time,' Akhmen-hotep said. His face creased in a triumphant smile. 'The princes of Bhagar have arrived at last!'

THREE-QUARTERS OF A mile distant, hidden from sight by the Usurper's unnatural shadow, four thousand robed horsemen came riding out of the blinding desert sands, hastening to the fight. The merchant princes of Bhagar had sent every fighting man they could spare to aid their allies in the struggle against Nagash, and there were no better horsemen in all the Blessed Land. In ancient times they had been bandits, preying upon Nehekaran caravans and slipping like ghosts back into the dunes, but in the time of Settra they had been tamed and welcomed into the empire. Since then, they had prospered as traders, but they had never forgotten their warlike ways.

The horsemen of Bhagar knew the Great Desert as a man knows his first wife; they were privy to its changing ways and

its fierce temper, its hidden gifts and shadowy secrets. And yet, as they rode to the aid of Ka-Sabar, they were bedevilled again and again by fierce sandstorms and false trails that cost them precious days amid the burning sands. When their outriders caught sight of the spreading darkness staining the horizon, they had feared the worst, and pushed their fiery desert steeds to the utmost.

Led by the bold Shahid ben Alcazzar, first among equals in Bhagar and called the Red Fox by his kin, the desert horsemen plunged fearlessly into the unnatural darkness hanging over the great plain, and found themselves behind a swirling mass of cavalymen threatening the Bronze Host's left flank. Calling upon the spirits of their ancestors, they winded their bone war horns and raced into battle. The lead riders drew short, barbed javelins from quivers hanging by their knees and let fly into the packed mass of heavy horsemen, while those further behind unlimbered powerful composite horse bows and thick, red-fletched arrows. The powerful missiles could punch through a wooden shield at forty paces, and the riders knew how to use them to deadly effect.

The sudden attack sowed death and confusion among the enemy ranks, and the squadrons of heavy horsemen scattered before the onslaught. Swift as a pack of wolves, the desert raiders wheeled about and dashed back the way they'd come, leaving a hundred dead cavalymen littering the bloody ground. Then, after a hundred yards they stopped, turned about, and came at the enemy once more, weaving effortlessly among the heavier warhorses and toppling men from their saddles. Furious, the Khemri horsemen tried to give chase, and the desert raiders began to slowly but surely draw them off to the west, away from the embattled spear companies.

ARKHAN HEARD THE wailing horns of the desert riders just as he began his charge, and realized the peril his warriors were in. Now they were caught between two enemy forces, and if the chariots could regroup and charge his men once more, they could very well break under the pressure. Without warning, the

tide of battle threatened to turn against them.

Hissing like an adder, the vizier bore down on Suseb the Lion. The champion of the Bronze Host likewise ordered his chariot forward, raising his mighty khopesh. The archer beside him raised his bow, but Suseb stopped him with a forbidding glare. This would be a battle between heroes. Or so the Lion thought.

As the distance between them dwindled, Arkhan began to chant. He felt the dark power bubbling in his veins, and at the last moment he stretched out his left hand and unleashed a storm of crackling ebon bolts at the occupants of the chariot. Screams and shouts of fury answered the vizier as he veered away from the onrushing chariot and its scything blades.

After a dozen yards he swung about and saw that the champion's armoured chariot had come to a halt. Its driver lay at Suseb's feet, his body a smoking husk, and the Lion was struggling to untangle the chariot's reins from the corpse's shrivelled hands. The champion's archer, meanwhile, leapt from the back of the chariot and stood between Arkhan as his foe. The vizier laughed at the sight and spurred his mount forward.

The bowman was a man of courage. His face was a mask of rage, but he moved with calm efficiency, drawing a long, reed arrow to his cheek and letting fly at the onrushing immortal. Arkhan jerked the reins at the last minute, trying to dodge aside, and the arrow struck him in the left arm instead of burying itself in his heart.

Before the archer could draw another arrow, Arkhan was upon him. His scimitar hissed through the air, and the bowman's headless body fell forward into the dust.

But the archer's death had given the Lion the time he needed. With an angry cry he lashed the reins and the chariot lurched into motion once more. Suseb handled the huge machine masterfully, turning it in a tight circle, but not before Arkhan dashed past. Once again, his scimitar whirred in a decapitating arc, but the blade shivered in his hand as though he'd struck solid teak. The Lion, it appeared, ranked high in the earth god's favour.

Despite the speed of Arkhan's charge he still felt the wind of Suseb's blade slicing through the air a fraction of an inch behind him. He continued on past the champion for less than ten feet before hauling furiously on the reins. His steed tossed its head angrily and pawed at the earth as the vizier hauled it back around for another pass.

Suseb was still struggling to control the chariot with one hand while looking over his shoulder at Arkhan. He was bringing the war machine around, but too slowly. Grinning like a devil, Arkhan bore down on the Lion's back, sword poised above his head. Once again he began to chant. Wisps of foul, black vapour curled from the edge of his blade.

The Lion watched the vizier approach with an expression of stoic resolve. At the last moment, Arkhan's sense of triumph turned to trepidation. When Suseb let go of the chariot's reins he knew that he'd been tricked. The champion became a blur of motion, spinning on his heel and bringing his massive sword around in a whirling, backhanded blow.

It was only the immortal's unnatural reflexes that saved him. Once more he tore at the reins, and the warhorse's charge was halted for the space of a single moment. Suseb's blade fell in a glittering arc, passing before Arkhan instead of through him, and sliced through the animal's thick neck instead. The horse's headless body lurched drunkenly to the right, sending mount and rider crashing full-force into the Lion's chariot. There was the sound of splintering wood and tearing metal; Arkhan struck the side of the war machine in a bone-crushing impact and knew no more.

A CHEER WENT UP from the beleaguered ranks of the Bronze Host at the sound of Bhagar's war horns. Their allies had arrived in the nick of time, just where they were needed. Akhmen-hotep felt a wild surge of hope. Could they snatch victory from the jaws of defeat?

The priest king regarded Memnet and Sutekh once more. 'You see? The gods have not abandoned us. Now it is up to us to show that we are worthy of their aid. Call upon their power,

and let us destroy the Usurper once and for all!’

A terrible look came over Sutekh as he heard Akhmen-hotep’s plea, but he nodded nevertheless. ‘So be it,’ he said in a leaden voice, and led his priests some distance away to begin the invocations.

The priest king turned to Memnet. ‘And what of you, Grand Hierophant?’ he asked. ‘Will the Great Father Ptah aid us in our time of need?’

Memnet stepped close to the king. ‘Don’t take that tone with me, little brother,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Did you not hear Sutekh? The gods are not soldiers to be commanded, like your warriors. They will exact a heavy price for such power, and we will be the ones to pay it, not you!’

But the king was unmoved. ‘If you fear to call upon your god, Memnet, then go and bend your knee to Nagash. Those are the only choices any of us have left.’

Memnet’s face twisted into a mask of rage, so sudden and so intense that the Ushabti took a protective step towards the king. His fleshy hands clenched into trembling fists. The Grand Hierophant’s jaw bunched angrily; but when he spoke, it wasn’t to utter imprecations against the priest king. Instead, he began to chant in a heated voice.

Akhmen-hotep saw beads of sweat gather on Memnet’s round face, then felt a puff of hot air brush against his skin that quickly became a whirling, restless wind. The clacking, chattering cloud of darkness overhead roiled like a stormy sea. Narrow spears of fierce sunlight stabbed through the churning mass, touching the ground for an instant before the shadow swallowed them. Black, smouldering shapes fell to the earth around Akhmen-hotep and his warriors in a steadily building rain. They were the husks of tomb scarabs, the king realized, each as large as a grown man’s fist.

Memnet’s voice grew louder, rising over the howling wind in counterpoint to Sutekh’s piercing, nasal voice. The priest of Phakth, the sky god, sounded as though he were in terrible pain.

Akhmen-hotep started as he felt his ears pop, then he heard

his soldiers cry out in fear and awe as a forked bolt of lightning crashed down on the distant ridge.

The crash of thunder that followed sounded like the end of the world.

ARKHAN'S EYES SNAPPED open at the crescendo of noise; the thunder's concussion was so great that for a moment the vizier thought someone had struck him.

He was lying on his back a few yards from the twisted wreckage of his enemy's chariot. The impact of his dead horse had splintered the war machine's left wheel and flipped the heavy vehicle onto its side; the four horses that had drawn it were galloping away in terror, dragging the broken yoke behind them. Horses and men were screaming all around him in the gloom; his cavalry, beset from two sides, was struggling to survive.

Cursing, Arkhan struggled to regain his feet. His right leg was weak and stiff; belatedly he realized that a dagger-sized shard of bronze was jutting from his right thigh. He tore it free with his left hand and forced himself upright. A shudder passed through the immortal and he felt the familiar, dreadful ache begin in his guts. The exertions and the wounds he'd received had consumed much of his master's vital elixir, and a deadly lassitude began to steal along his limbs.

Feeling a tremor of fear, Arkhan surveyed the wreckage of Suseb's chariot. Had the champion survived?

He saw the mass of wood and metal shift. Twisted bronze plates groaned and popped, and Arkhan felt a surge of dread as the Lion's head and shoulders struggled into view.

Desperate, the vizier raised his sword and chanted the Incantation of Summoning. The dark magic was fickle, resisting his control due to his weakened state, but three of Arkhan's dead cavalymen stirred and struggled to their feet.

'Kill him!' the vizier commanded, pointing to Suseb.

The undead warriors lurched forward. One cavalryman pulled a javelin from his chest and hurled it at the pinned champion. It struck Suseb in the left shoulder, piercing his armour but not

the blessed flesh beneath. The Lion roared in anger and redoubled his efforts, pushing himself onto his knees. With his right hand he tore a jagged piece of bronze plate from the wreckage and hurled it end-for-end at the nearest walking corpse. The impact crushed the revenant's skull, dashing it to the ground.

Cursing, Arkhan charged in alongside his remaining warriors, hoping to slay the champion before he could free himself.

One of the dead cavalymen lunged at Suseb, chopping down at him with an axe. The stone blade glanced from the Lion's skull, leaving a shallow gash along the side of his head. The other reached for the champion's throat with bloodied hands. Suseb grabbed the empty-handed creature by the arm and hurled it into the axe-wielding warrior's path. The clumsy revenants tangled together and fell in a squirming heap, and before they could rise again the Lion snatched up his massive khopesh and cut through both bodies in a single, ringing stroke.

Sensing an opening, Arkhan leapt forward and slashed at Suseb's face. The champion saw the blow coming and tried to twist away, but the scimitar left a deep slash across the warrior's brown cheek. The vizier laughed at the sight of the wound, but his triumph was short-lived; the Lion's khopesh flickered through the air and the immortal darted backwards barely in time to avoid having both legs cut from under him.

With a lusty roar, Suseb flexed his powerful legs and burst free from the wreckage. His huge sword wove a deadly pattern through the air as he advanced fearlessly upon the vizier. 'Vile, godless coward,' he growled. 'It's a disgrace to stain my blade with such an unworthy foe, but I'll do it gladly if it will rid the world of you and your ilk.'

Arkhan spat a swift incantation and hurled a bolt of necromantic power at the Lion. It struck Suseb full in the chest; the champion bellowed in pain, but he continued his implacable advance.

Another bolt of lightning smote the earth, this time striking in the midst of a company of Khemri warriors near the centre of

the battle line. Shouts of wonder and dismay were drowned in the peal of thunder that followed.

Then, to Arkhan's horror, a shaft of sunlight pierced his master's shroud of darkness and glinted from the Lion's blade. His cold flesh trembled at the sight, and for the first time he feared the possibility of defeat.

AN ANGRY WIND RUSHED northward across the battlefield, howling with the fury of a god. Lightning scourged the earth like a taskmaster's lash, clawing along the ridgeline amid a growing hail of burning scarab husks. More and more sunlight made its way through the writhing cloud, striking down the walking dead wherever it touched.

Within the black pavilion, a crowd of slaves grovelled in the dust before the king's grim sarcophagus and begged for deliverance. In the shadows at the back of the chamber, the Usurper's ancient slave turned his blind face skyward and uttered a terrible, croaking laugh.

There was a hiss of air and the grating of stone, and the lid of the king's sarcophagus slid open. A shrieking chorus of tormented spirits and a gust of freezing air washed over the terrified slaves, who raised their hands in supplication to their lord and master.

Nagash the Immortal, Priest King of Khemri, stepped from his ensorcelled coffin amid a whirling nimbus of shrieking souls. Wreathed in roiling, ethereal vapour, the master of the Living City paid no heed to the worshipful entreaties of his slaves. Green bale-fire blazed from his sunken eyes and crackled along the staff of dark metal clutched in his left hand. The faces of the four skulls that topped the fearsome stave glimmered with unearthly power, blurring the air around it.

The king's handsome, lined face and strong hands were the colour of alabaster, gleaming like polished bone from the folds of his dark, crimson robes. His bald head was covered by a skullcap of hammered gold, inscribed with strange glyphs in a tongue unknown to civilized men.

Cowering slaves scattered from the immortal king's path as

Nagash turned to the smaller sarcophagus that waited beside his own. The figure carved upon its surface was serene and beautiful: a goddess of the Blessed Land in the bloom of her youth.

A cold smile bent the necromancer's thin lips. He stretched forth his right hand, and the spirits surrounding him flowed down his arm and played across the coffin's surface. The marble lid shivered, then slowly drew aside.

From the depths of the sarcophagus came a faint, tortured moan. Nagash listened, savouring the sound. His smile turned cruel. '*Come forth,*' he commanded. The king's voice was bubbling and raspy, wheezing up from a pair of ruined lungs.

Slowly, painfully, a figure emerged. She was clad in priceless samite, with a queen's golden headdress set upon her brow. Bracelets set with brilliant sapphires hung from her fragile wrists, wrinkling the dry, parchment-like skin beneath. She clutched her claw-like hands painfully to her withered chest, and her head was bowed beneath the weight of her royal finery. Wisps of faded, brittle hair had escaped from the folds of her headdress and curled against her sunken, yellowed cheeks. Time had eaten away the gentle curves of her face, leaving only sharp edges and a thin, almost lipless mouth. Her joints creaked like dried leather as she moved, drawn to the necromancer as though by an invisible cord.

Bright, beautiful green eyes shone like emeralds from the queen's mummified face, etched with suffering so deep it defied human comprehension.

The slaves drew silent as their queen walked among them. They buried their faces in the dust and pressed their hands to their ears to shut out her pitiful cries.

Nagash waved his hand once more, and the tent's heavy flap was pushed aside. Into the raging tumult he led his queen, heedless of the wrath of gods or men. The necromancer looked out across the battlefield, and his smile twisted into a hateful sneer.

'*Show them,*' he commanded his queen, and she raised her withered arms to the sky and let out a long, heart-rending wail.

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

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