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NAGASH IMMORTAL

The undead will rise...

MIKE LEE

NAGASH IMMORTAL

A Time of Legends Novel

By Mike Lee

In the tunnels of Nagashizzar, a new threat to the realm of the undead is rising. Nagash must call upon all his reserves of power to defeat the skaven assault and continue his unholy reign. But when Nagash realises he can use his enemy for his own nefarious needs, an uneasy alliance is struck and a vast, nightmarish army is formed. The necromancer launches his final attack on the lands of Nehekara, sweeping all before him. Only one man dare stand in his way – Alcadizzar, a peerless warrior and the leader of a defiant force. Their confrontation will not just decide the fate of Nehekara, but of all the Old World.

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. His credits for the Black Library include the *Horus Heresy* title *Fallen Angels* and 'The Rise of Nagash' trilogy for *Time of Legends*, as well as writing the *Malus Darkblade* series with Dan Abnett.

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THE MOUNTAIN HAD many names, stretching back to the dawn of mankind.

The nomadic herders of the far northern steppes knew it as *Ur-Haamash*, the Hearth-stone; in the autumn they would drive their herds south and spend the winter sheltered at the foot of its broad, eastern slope. As the centuries passed and the tribes prospered, their relationship to the mountain changed; it became *Agha-Dhakum*, the Place of Justice, where grievances were settled in trials of blood. Nearly a thousand years later, after a long summer of murder, raids and betrayals, the first high chieftain was proclaimed from the mountain slope, and ever after the tribes knew it as *Agha-Rhul*, the Place of Oaths.

In time, the tribes grew tired of the constant cycle of migration from the northern steppes to the foot of the mountain and the shores of the Crystal Sea. One winter they built their camps just south-west of the *Agha-Rhul* and decided to stay. The camp grew, transforming over generations from a crude settlement into a sprawling, foetid, noisy city. The high chieftain's territory grew to encompass the entire coast of the inland sea and even reached north onto the great plateau, within sight of the bleak steppes from whence the tribes had come.

And then came the terrible night that the sky-stone fell from the heavens, and the mountain's name changed once more.

It came on a night when the awful bale-moon hung low and full in the sky; it arced earthwards on a hissing spear of greenish flame. When it struck the mountain the blow could be heard for miles; the force of the impact reverberated from its slopes and flattened villages on the far side of the Crystal Sea. The great city of the tribes was devastated. Buildings were shattered or consumed in eerie, green flames. Hundreds died, hundreds more suffered hideous diseases and malformations in the months that followed. The survivors looked northwards in terrified wonder at the glowing pillar of dust and ash that rose from the great wound carved in the mountainside.

The destruction was so sudden, so terrible, it could only be the work of a wrathful god. The following day the high chieftain and his family climbed the slope and bowed before the crater, offering up sacrifices to the sky-stone so that their people might survive. *Agha-Rhul* became *Khad-tur-Maghran*: the Throne of the Heavens.

The high chieftain and his people worshipped the sky-stone. They called themselves *Yaghur* – the Faithful – and over time their priests learned how to call upon the power of the sky-stone to perform terrible works of

sorcery. The Yaghur became great once more and the high chieftain began to refer to himself as the chosen of the sky-god. His priests anointed him as a king and told the people that he spoke with the voice of the god itself. The priesthood of the sky-stone knew that, as the Yaghur kings prospered, their wealth and power would grow as well.

And so it went, for many generations, until the Yaghur kings grew decadent and mad, and the people suffered daily under their rule. Finally, they could take no more; they forswore their oaths in favour of a new god and cast down the king and his corrupt priesthood. The temple on the mountain was sealed up and the Yaghur went north once more, following the ancient pathways their ancestors had trod thousands of years before in search of a better life. When they spoke of the mountain at all in the years that followed, they called it *Agha-Nahmad*: the Place of Sorrows.

So it remained for centuries. The mountain became a desolate, haunted place, wreathed in poisonous vapours from the immense sky-stone buried within its heart. The Yaghur settled on a great plateau north of the mountain, devolving into a collection of tribes once more. For a time they prospered, but their new god proved to be just as hungry and cruel as the one they had left behind. The Yaghur were wracked by schism and civil war. In the end, those who sought to return to the old ways and worship the god of the mountain were cast out. They found their way back to the shores of the Crystal Sea and tried to eke out a living in the bleak wetlands, offering sacrifices to the mountain and burying their dead at its feet in hopes of winning back the sky-god's favour.

Their deliverance came, not from the great mountain, but out of the desolate lands to the west: a wretched, shambling corpse of a man, clad in dusty rags that had once been the raiment of a king. Feverish, tormented, he was drawn to the power of the sky-stone like a moth to the flame.

He was Nagash the Usurper, lord of the living dead. When the energies of the sky-stone were bent to his will he raised a legion of corpses from the Yaghur burial grounds and slew their priests in a single night of slaughter. He demanded the fealty of the coastal tribes and they bowed before him, worshipping him as the god of the mountain made flesh.

But Nagash was no god. He was something altogether more terrible.

More than two hundred years after the coming of Nagash, the great mountain had been transformed. Night and day the necromancer's minions had carved a vast network of chambers and passageways deep into the living rock, and mine shafts were sunk deeper still in search of deposits of glowing sky-stone. Seven high walls and hundreds of fearsome towers rose from the mountain slopes, enclosing foundries, storehouses, barracks and marshalling yards. Black chimneys belched columns of smoke and ash into the sky, mixing with the mountain's own

vapours to spread a pall of perpetual shadow over the mountain and the sullen waters of the Crystal Sea. Polluted run-off from the mine works and the fortress construction spread across the empty burial fields at the base of the mountain and spilled into the waters of the sea, contaminating everything it touched.

This was *Nagashizzar*. In the tongue of the great cities of distant Nehekhara, it meant ‘the glory of Nagash’.

The great hall of the Usurper lay deep within the fortress mountain, carved by skeletal hands from a natural cavern that had never known the light of the accursed sun. They had laboured under the mental guidance of their master, smoothing the walls, laying flagstones of black marble and carving tall, elaborate columns to support the hall’s arched ceiling. And yet, for all its artistry, the great, echoing chamber was cold and austere, devoid of statuary or braziers of fragrant incense.

Thin veins of sky-stone glowed from the chamber walls, limning the towering columns and deepening the shadows in between. The only other light came from the far end of the hall, where a rough sphere of sky-stone the size of a melon sat upon a crude bronze tripod at the foot of a shallow dais. A sickly, green glow pulsed from the stone in slow waves, bathing Nagash’s throne in shifting tides of light and shadow.

In the tenuous light the necromancer’s robed form seemed to be carved from the same dark, unyielding wood as the chair itself. He sat as still as death, his cowed head turned towards the pulsing stone as though meditating upon its glowing depths. The hem of the cowl was stitched with complex chains of arcane symbols and the thick layers of his outer robe were faced with bronze medallions that had been enchanted with potent sigils of protection. The skin of his bare hands was dark and leathery, like that of a long-buried corpse, and the flesh beneath the robes was twisted and misshapen. In place of living eyes, twin green fires flickered coldly from the depths of his cowl, hinting at the cruel, unyielding will that animated the necromancer’s grotesque frame.

Once, Nagash had been a mighty prince, scion of a great dynasty in a rich and civilised land. By tradition he had been forced to become a priest, where otherwise he might have risen to become king, and that he could not tolerate. He scorned the gods of his people, calling them parasites and worse, and sought a new path to power. And so he learned the secrets of dark magic, as practised by the cruel *druchii* of the distant north, and combined it with his knowledge of life and death to create something entirely new and terrible. The secrets of necromancy granted him the secret of eternal life, and dominion over the spirits of the dead.

In time, he seized his brother’s throne and enslaved his wife, who was nothing less than the blessings of the gods made flesh. He subjugated the entire land, forging a kingdom the likes of which had not been seen in

centuries, and *still* it was not enough. He sought to become something still greater... something very like a god.

Finally, the people of Nehekhara could bear the horrors of his rule no longer, and rose up in revolt. The war was more terrible than anything they had experienced before: entire cities were devastated and uncounted thousands were slain. The greatest wonders of the age were cast down and, in the end, even the sacred covenant between the people and the gods was sundered forever, but the power of the Usurper was broken.

With the kingdom in ruins, Nagash fled into the wastelands to the north, where he wandered, wounded and raving, for a hundred years. And there he might have perished at last – bereft of power, and without the life-giving elixir to restore his vitality, the sun and the scavengers eventually would have succeeded where all the kings of Nehekhara could not – but for his encounter with a pack of twisted monstrosities that were neither man nor rat, but some horrible combination of the two. The creatures were foragers of a sort, searching the land for fragments of sky-stone that they took to be gifts from their strange, horned god. Nagash slew the creatures in a wild frenzy; he sensed the raw power of the stone fragments they possessed, and so great was his need that he *ate* them, choking them down his shrivelled throat. And in that terrible moment, the necromancer was reborn.

His search for more of the burning stone, as Nagash called it, had brought him to the shores of the Crystal Sea and the slopes of the ancient mountain. And here, his schemes of vengeance against the world of the living had taken root.

From Nagashizzar he would reach forth to choke the life from the world and rule the darkness that would follow. And the first to die would be Nehekhara, the Once-Blessed Land.

There were tens of thousands of corpses labouring in the halls of the Undying King, each one driven to some degree by a fragment of Nagash's will. The demands upon his awareness created periods of cold reverie, scattering his thoughts like sparks from a flame. Time ceased to have any real meaning; his world turned upon the progress of construction and excavation, of coal fed to the great forges and metal hammered into the shapes of axes, spears and swords. From the moment of its construction, Nagashizzar had been arming for war.

Now the creaking of braided sinew and the groan of ponderous hinges intruded upon his meditations. His attention shifted, coalescing from thousands of scattered notes to focus on the towering doors at the far end of the chamber.

The doors – twin slabs of thick, unfinished bronze more than twenty feet high – parted just wide enough to admit four silent figures. They

strode swiftly into the darkness of the hall, moving with purpose and a small measure of deference. Monsters prowled and snuffled in their wake: naked, filthy things whose bodies resembled those of men, but who loped across the stone floor like apes. The creatures kept to the deeper shadows of the chamber, circling the four interlopers like a pack of hungry jackals.

The leader of the four was a tall, broad-shouldered man, clad in bronze and leather armour in the Nehekharan style whose refinements clashed with the warrior's scarred, heavy-browed face. His wild mane of red hair and long, forked beard were streaked with grey; the skin around his deep-set eyes was etched by the weight of many years, but the warrior's thick arms were still corded with muscle. Once he had been Bragadh Maghur'kan, a mighty warlord and leader of the northern tribes that in ancient times had been called the Yaghur. Nagash had conquered the tribes after two and a half centuries of bitter warfare and made them vassals of his growing empire. Now the hill forts of the northern plateau tithed two-thirds of their men to guard the walls of the great fortress until they died and their bones were put to work in the mines.

Beside the former chieftain came Diarid, his chief lieutenant, and a shaven-headed barbarian named Thestus. Unlike Bragadh and Diarid, Thestus had descended from one of the first conquered tribes and had known nothing but servitude to the Undying King, and during the war had risen to command the necromancer's living army. He had been seconded to Bragadh, his former enemy, as soon as the former warlord had bent the knee. It was clear to Nagash that the two men hated and distrusted one another, which was exactly as he wished it.

The fourth member of the group was a woman, and she walked a measured two paces left and one pace behind Bragadh. Unlike the men, she disdained civilised attire, clinging stubbornly to the wool-and-leather robes of her former station. By tradition, the leaders of the northern tribes were counselled by a trio of fierce and cunning witches, who stood at their chieftain's side in times of peace and fought beside them in times of war. Akatha's two sisters had both died in the last battle of the war, when Nagash's warriors broke through the gates of Maghur and defeated Bragadh's exhausted warband. Despite her years, she was still lean and fit. Her narrow face might have been attractive once, but the years at Nagashizzar had hardened it into something like a blade: cold and sharp and eager to harm. Ever since Bragadh had bent his knee in submission she'd worn ashes in her tightly braided hair as a sign of mourning.

Nagash tolerated her continued existence because she tempered her hatred with flinty pragmatism that served to hold the barbarians' headstrong natures in check.

The northmen approached the dais and knelt. Akatha bent her knee

slowly, making it yet another gesture of defiance that the necromancer simply ignored.

Joints crackled and muscles creaked as Nagash turned his head to regard Bragadh. With a conscious effort, he willed his lungs to draw breath. It rasped down his throat like wind skirling over stone.

'What is the meaning of this?' Nagash said in a sepulchral voice.

Bragadh raised his head slowly and met his master's gaze. Whatever else the barbarian was, he was not without courage. 'I come to speak of your army, great one,' he replied, speaking in badly accented Nehekharan.

Nagash's irritation grew. When Bragadh spoke of the army, he meant his kinsmen. His *living* kinsmen. It galled him to think that he still needed the assistance of flesh-and-blood servants; they reminded him that, despite everything, there were still practical limits to his power.

'Is there an issue with their training?' he asked, his broken voice somehow mocking.

Bragadh visibly steeled himself. 'The training *is* the issue, great one,' he replied calmly. 'There is no end to it. There are men within the spear companies that have known nothing else their entire lives.'

The northmen were mighty warriors, but they fought like animals, hurling themselves wildly at their foes without a thought to the larger battle at hand. Nagash wanted soldiers who could fight in disciplined companies and not break the first time they faced a cavalry charge. The northmen were commanded to learn the proper arts of spear and shield, how to march as a unit and respond to trumpet calls just as Nehekharan infantry did. The forges of Nagashizzar worked day and night to arm them with the weapons that were the equal of anything that the great cities could provide, for in time they would march in the vanguard of the vast host that would reduce his former homeland to ruins. Even now, hundreds of years after the war against the rebel kings, the taste of his defeat at Mahrak burned like a hot coal in his guts. It was not enough to defeat the Nehekharans; Nagash wished to destroy them utterly, to crush their armies and grind their cities to dust, so that no one would ever doubt that he was the greatest conqueror to walk the earth since Settra the Magnificent.

'Are they not learning as they should?' Nagash rasped. The question was as pointed and as menacing as a poisoned blade.

'They are not learning the ways of *war*, great one,' Bragadh declared. 'They march to the trumpets in their sleep, but most of them have yet to spill a foeman's blood. The purpose of an army is to *fight*.'

The necromancer's burning eyes narrowed to pinpoints. *'The army will fight when I command it,'* he replied. He recalled the Bronze Legion of Ka-Sabar and the companies of Rasetra, his greatest adversary during the

war. He had no doubt they could grind the barbarians under their heel. *'Your companies are brittle. They are not ready to stand against veteran troops.'*

'That can only come with experience,' Bragadh countered. 'There are tribes of *rakhads* in the mountains, north of the great plateau. They are fearsome in battle, but as wild and undisciplined as we were, years ago. We could blood the warriors against them, great one. A short campaign, not far from the hill forts. The army would be easy to supply, and we could reap a fine harvest of slaves into the bargain.'

Nagash stared thoughtfully at the barbarian leader. There was some merit to the idea; in his day, the great cities would often stage small-scale raids against one another to give their young nobles the chance to spill some blood and see what battle was like first-hand.

But was that the only reason for Bragadh's request? After twenty-five years, the northmen had recovered the strength they'd lost in the long war against Nagashizzar; now they were better trained and better equipped than they had ever been before. Once they had left the shadow of the great fortress, would they not be tempted to rebel? It was possible, the necromancer thought.

His gaze shifted from Bragadh to his champion, Diarid, then to Akatha. Their faces betrayed no hint of treachery, but that meant little. The northmen were slaves, and what slave didn't dream of taking a knife to his master's throat?

Nagash was silent for a moment, considering. *'How large a force do you propose?'*

Bragadh's shoulders straightened. 'No more than five or six thousand,' he replied quickly, his voice growing eager. 'A warband that size would be small enough to manage in the mountains, yet easily strong enough to deal with a single tribe of greenskins.'

The necromancer nodded slowly. *'Very well,'* he replied. *'How quickly can such a force be assembled?'*

Bragadh smiled wolfishly. 'The warband could be on the march by the end of the day, great one.'

'Good,' Nagash replied. *'Then Thestus and the raiding force should be back at Nagashizzar by the end of the summer.'*

Nagash watched Thestus look up in surprise. The lieutenant's gaze shifted from Nagash to Bragadh. A faint grin pulled at the corner of his mouth.

Bragadh frowned, as though uncertain of what he'd just heard. 'Thestus? I don't understand.'

'Your place is here, training the rest of the army,' Nagash explained. *'Surely you didn't intend to lead the raid yourself?'*

Bragadh glanced over at his rival. When he caught the grin on Thestus's

face, he ground his jaw angrily. After a moment, he said, 'Thestus is... a capable warrior. But he knows nothing of the *rakhads*. The only foes he has ever known have been his own people.'

Thestus bridled at the contempt in the warlord's voice. Nagash chuckled, a sound like grinding stones. '*One foe is the same as another,*' he observed. '*All men die in the same way.*'

'The greenskins are more beasts than men,' Bragadh declared. 'Sending Thestus against them would be a disaster!'

'*Then we will send no one,*' Nagash answered coldly. '*Your warriors will have to wait for battle until we begin the march on Nehekhara.*'

'And when will that be?' Bragadh demanded, forgetting himself.

'*Soon enough,*' Nagash replied. '*Do your work well, and you will hasten the day.*'

The tone of Nagash's reply made it clear that there was nothing more to be said, but Bragadh was not quite done. As the barbarians rose to their feet, he folded his muscular arms across his chest and scowled up at the necromancer.

'Forget the greenskins then, we will continue to train instead,' he said, 'but mark me, a knife can only be sharpened so much before it's worn down to a splinter. Men live to spill the blood of their enemies! If they aren't given a foe to test their strength against, they'll make one for themselves.'

Nagash stared down at the warlord. He leaned forwards slowly, his mummified hands clenching the arms of his throne. '*If there is blood to be spilled at Nagashizzar, I will spill it!*' he hissed. '*Caution your warriors not to crave death too much, Bragadh, or I will give it to them!*'

Thestus blanched at the tone in Nagash's ghastly voice. Figures stirred in the shadows: the misshapen forms of the necromancer's flesh-eaters edged towards the barbarians, their talons scraping across the stone floor. Long, black tongues lolled from their fanged mouths, and their pointed, jackal-like ears were pressed flat against their bald, bulbous heads. Wet, rasping growls rose from their throats as they readied themselves to pounce upon the northmen.

The barbarians glared hatefully at the flesh-eaters. Diarid's hand strayed to the hilt of his sword, but Bragadh forestalled him with a curt shake of his head. The warlord tore his gaze away from the monsters and looked up at Nagash.

'I hear, great one,' he said through clenched teeth. 'I hear and obey.'

Satisfied, Nagash leaned back against his throne. '*Then go,*' he said, dismissing the northmen with a wave of one leathery hand. '*And remind your warriors who is master here.*'

Bragadh bowed his head slowly, then turned his back on the flesh-eaters and stomped angrily from the hall. Still growling, the creatures made to

follow, but Akatha paused and fixed the pack with a cold-eyed glare that stopped them in their tracks.

Nagash's eyes narrowed upon the witch. Akatha met his stare fearlessly, turning away only a heartbeat before the gesture could be construed as a challenge. She fell into step behind the warlord, never once looking back at the necromancer or his beasts.

The flesh-eaters watched them go, growling deep in their throats.

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In the UK: Price £7.99 ISBN: 978-1-84970-034-4
In the US: Price \$8.99 (\$10.99 Canada) ISBN: 978-1-84970-035-1

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