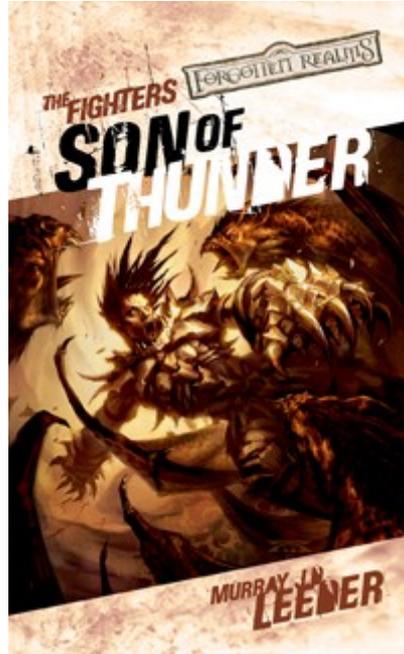


The Bones of the Beast

By Murray J.D. Leeder



Before Uthgar was exalted into the god of barbarians, he lived a mortal life as Uther Gardolfsson, thane of the rugged island nation of Ruathym. After plundering the city-state of Illusk (modern day Luskan), he and his men were separated from the sea and driven inland, where they mingled with native tribes and spawned the Uthgardt barbarians. The story of the modern Thunderbeast tribe is told in Son of Thunder (The Fighters), but here is the tale of how the Thunderbeasts were originally brought into Uthgar's fold, and of how Uther committed to the path that would lead him to godhood.

107 DR, the Year of the Fledglings

Uther stood atop the natural watchtower of Berun's Hill, where he had a splendid view of a whole panorama of terrain -- plains, forests, moors -- as well as the mysterious new barbarian tribe, now traveling in his direction. They marched from their forest home, a herd of dots on the eastern fields, but did they come to challenge Uther's horde or to join it? Their name had reached his ears: "Thunderbeast."

As pressing a matter as they were, Uther's attention strayed away from them, and his gaze along with it. He looked to the west, out past the sprawling woodlands to the ocean, the blue waves of his birthright.

"I think we shall never see it again," he said.

His brother Morgred, always wiser than he, stood next to him on the hilltop.

"What do you mean?" Morgred asked.

"Ruathym," he said. Somewhere out beyond the coast was the wave-battered isle of their homeland. But time, tide, and Tempus's will stranded them here. "Sometimes when I close my eyes I can still see our dragonships burning on the shores of Illusk."

"The defeat seemed so complete then," Morgred agreed.

All those years in the Craggs, fighting goblins for food, living on the brink of extermination. . . . "We never would have survived if it weren't for them." Uther looked down on the camp at the foot of Berun's Hill, where men -- his men -- awaited the Thunderbeasts' arrival, even as Uther's scouts rode out to greet them. Many were men of Ruathym, other survivors of the doomed siege of Illusk, but far more were the black-haired barbarians native to this area. These primitive tribes made their homes in the foothills of the mountains and deep in the forest. They wandered the trails of rothé and reindeer and let the chill wind guide their way. The wild men taught Uther's men how to survive as the tribes had for forgotten centuries, and in return Uther taught them how to make war. Soon all the harsh frontier towns of the North paid Uther tribute, and rightly so, for he helped them keep the orcs at bay.

"I should be with them," said Uther. "I should ride to meet the Thunderbeasts. It is cowardly for a leader to stay behind and watch." In past times he not only fought with his men but also kept camp, drank, and made merry with them.

"You are more than the leader of armies now," Morgred reminded him.

It was true: He now headed not just an army but a whole people. Children already had been born mixing the blood of the wild men and Uther's followers.

Uther stroked his long yellow beard. "I have heard that when the tribesmen worship around their stone menhirs, my name is spoken alongside those of their animal totems. Perhaps I should put an end to it. They could certainly destroy us if they cared to. If I should prove a disappointment, anything less than their vision of me . . ."

"Do you know why this place is called 'Berun's Hill'?" asked Morgred. "Some of the tribes believe that a great hero named Berun died here while battling an orc horde. Their songs say he felled three hundred of them single-handedly. Did it really happen? Did Berun even live? What does it matter, if the stories have power? Perhaps after you die, you will be exalted in the same way." Morgred spread his hands over the panorama of land to the east and north. "All the lands the wild men walk can be yours. This is the path to true power."

Uther turned his back to Morgred. "I did not know my brother had appointed himself the shaper of my legacy," he said, cynicism thick in his voice. "What will happen when they compare me unfavorably to their legends?"

"Think of what you've done already," pressed Morgred. "You've unified enemy tribes. The townsfolk tremble in fear of you. How many orcs, goblins, leucrottas have you slain? And even the Pale King's forces? These are deeds of a hero."

"But we failed." Uther turned to face Morgred, sadness in his blue eyes. "We stand here only because we failed at Illusk."

"A single city, a single prize," said Morgred. "What is that against the opportunity before us now? Were we not looking for a place in legends and songs when we sailed to challenge Illusk? Tempus has provided in a way we could never have expected."

Uther turned his eyes downward. "They call me 'Uthgar,' don't they? 'Uther Gardolfsson' is difficult for them to pronounce, so I become Uthgar instead. I feel like I am two people, the man I am and the - - what, god? -- they think me to be."

"You must decide which you truly are," Morgred answered. "But know this -- believe yourself to be a legend and so will they."

"What do we know of these Thunderbeasts?" asked Uther. He and Morgred had assembled his best warriors and a representative from each of his subject tribes on the wind-lashed top of Berun's Hill. The Thunderbeasts awaited an audience with him, but first he wanted the impressions of his closest advisors. The Thunderbeasts had met peacefully with the scouts, but said only that they wanted an audience with Uther.

There were half a dozen chiefs present atop Berun's Hill, all in the ceremonial garb of their respective tribes. Scant years ago many of them were prone to war with each other. Now they were united under Uther.

"My tribe has had some contact with them, but only in the past," said Ragdalf of the Elk tribe. "We hear more of them through the Blue Bears. Many Blue Bears and Thunderbeasts dwell among the trees of the distant forest, where we dare not tread. The High Forest is home to strange beings -- elves, fey, and trees that walk. There is strange magic there. The Blue Bears say the Thunderbeasts answer to a dark power in a place even elves shun."

A shiver passed through all assembled. Both the natives and the Ruathan newcomers held strong misgivings about arcane magic. Ragdalf said, "The Blue Bears are not friendly and we have fought with them often, but the Thunderbeasts are a mystery. They do not often make war, nor trade for pelts or other items."

"Yet it is the Thunderbeasts and not the Blue Bears who approach us now," mused Uther. "What are your impressions of their present outlook?"

"They are not communicative," said Chorgan, a Red Pony scout. "They say only that they wish to meet you. I urge caution. Not all tribes are honorable. They could be here to attack us -- or you."

"If they joined with us, it would swell our ranks considerably," said Morgred. "Do we know what a Thunderbeast is?"

"I believe I have seen one," said Fallen Feather of the Black Raven tribe. All eyes turned to him in surprise. "Not living," he went on, "but resting in the Ice Lakes. A great scaly behemoth as large as a hill. If alive, the ground would have shaken like thunder when it walked."

"We know that such creatures live in the sea," said Hauk of Ruathym, one of Uther's oldest and most trusted advisors. "The kraken, the leviathan . . ."

"A being of such size would inspire worship from a lesser tribe," opined the Griffon tribe chief, Goldtalon.

Uther looked down the hillside at the Thunderbeast camp. "We shall not know their intentions until I hear them from Chief Tharkane himself. If they are friendly, let us welcome them. But if they are hostile, they will be the first tribe wiped from the North by my hand."

The chiefs nodded in subtle affirmation and word went out to their tribes straightway. This edict did not apply only to the Thunderbeasts but to any tribe who spurned Uthgar's friendship. Their warriors would be killed wherever they were found and their noncombatants, absorbed. The word of Uthgar was absolute.

Chief Tharkane clutched a massive axe. Its design was clearly ancient, and yet it didn't have a speck of damage along its blade for all the skulls it must have split. Behind him stood seven hundred warriors. Uther could not discern Tharkane's intentions from his face.

Uther wore the ceremonial skin of a ghost rothé, a gift from the Elk tribe. White as death, it was the most striking garment he owned. His features had been chiseled and worked by the northern wind and his beard was spun gold.

"Tharkane Scalehide," said Uther, projecting his voice over the entire Thunderbeast tribe as they met at the foot of Berun's Hill. "I welcome you and your noble tribe. We have much to learn from each other, if you will accept our friendship."

For a long while there was silence, except for the winds whistling across the plains. Then Uther watched a silent tear drip down Tharkane's cheek.

"We offer you this," Tharkane said, taking a few steps forward and holding out the axe. As he came nearer, Uther noticed that Tharkane had brown eyes. Almost every other northerner he had met had blue eyes. "Our storytellers tell us that in ancient times it was the weapon of Berun himself."

As Uther took the great battle-axe, the entire Thunderbeast tribe bowed before him like a great wave, falling to their knees and lowering their heads. Uther roared: "Let the celebration begin! The Thunderbeast tribe has joined with us. They are our brothers now. Let us forge a bond in steel, and let this . . ." he thrust the axe high into the air ". . . this weapon of Berun, become my weapon, a symbol to let us know that bonds of brotherhood will never be broken!"

"That axe is not for you!" came a cry. Immediately a murmur passed through the Thunderbeast ranks, many of them turning back to look behind them. Like a curtain they parted, giving Uther a clear view of a single man striding through the ranks of the Thunderbeasts, each of whom backed off at his presence.

"Who is this?" Uther demanded.

"One of the Shepherds," Tharkane answered. "They are a mystic order of our tribe. They live in secret in the deepest part of the forest. They claim a special relationship with our totem."

"Are they your rulers?" asked Uther.

"Though they claim dominion over our tribe, we have not seen them in years. We had hoped they would not protest if we left to meet you -- that we might pass beneath their notice or be beneath their care."

"And now you look to me for protection?" Uther said. "Liberation?" From one shepherd to another, he thought.

Tharkane nodded grimly. "We had hoped to avoid this. They are very powerful, and are skilled with magic. He is far more than a mere man. But so, they say, are you." He backed away.

Uther took a closer look at the approaching man, the Shepherd. His face was white as if it had never been touched by the sun, and his skin was thin and powdery. His hair, however, was jet black and flowed straight down his shoulders. He walked slowly, not to conceal his power but to emphasize it, as if he simply did care to hurry. Uther was not experienced in dealing with beings that hid their true nature behind false forms -- he despised such deceit.

"Pretender!" shouted the Shepherd in a strange voice, simultaneously forceful and wheezing. He possessed a different accent from Tharkane. "Your weak islander strain cannot be allowed to pollute the blood of Runlatha."

"Runlatha?" asked Uther. "What is Runlatha?"

"A vanished city of magic, lost in the desert. Its sons fled westward and became the Thunderbeasts, and all the lesser tribes who make your army. The greatest man of legend and history blazed the path from fallen Netheril."

"Netheril," repeated Uther. That was a name he knew, the lost Empire of Magic, though some in his homeland thought it a myth.

The Shepherd lips cracked into a twisted smile. "I see the name has reached even Ruathym's ignorant shores. You hold the axe of the Bey of Runlatha, who led the ancestors of these tribes to liberation as their empire crumbled."

"The Bey of Runlatha," Uther repeated. The name reminded him of his own father, Beorunna, and another as well. He spoke it aloud: "Berun."

"An echo of a distant memory," the Shepherd affirmed. "The corrupted recollection of a great leader, greater than could ever be conjured from the whirlpools of Ruathym. Some lesser tribes, their lore tainted, say he fell here . . ." the Shepherd pointed up at Berun's Hill ". . . but this is a hill of no special history. He fell far to the north and east, protecting his people from the demon Zukothoth. He and the demon fell together underground, the spot marked by the sacred well that the Black Lions still revere."

"A fitting death for a great hero," said Uthgar. "I can only hope mine will match it."

"I assure you, it shall not."

Immediately, all of the Thunderbeast tribesmen began backing off. Tharkane's eyes met Uther's and Uther could see true fear.

"This does not have to be," Uther told the Shepherd.

"The weak, the debased . . ." the Shepherd cast his gaze over all Uther's assembled followers, "those you may keep. The nobility of their bloodline is gone. But the Thunderbeasts are ours. Never will the blood of Runlatha bow to Ruathym sea rats!" snarled the Shepherd. "Relinquish the axe and the tribe with it, or you shall know the Thunderbeast's fury."

"This axe shall meet your skull," promised Uther, "and that is the only way it shall return to you."

A deep rumble sounded from the Shepherd, out his stomach and rolling across the plains. "You have chosen," said the Shepherd, his voice deepening. Before Uther and the unbelieving eyes of the horde behind him, the Shepherd underwent a terrifying change. His clothes melted away from him as his skin, shifting from white to a dark brown and growing thicker, grew out from within. The Shepherd fell forward onto all fours as his flesh rippled and bulged, erupting in reptilian scales. Whatever human light had been present in the Shepherd's brown eyes vanished, replaced by cold instinct, and likewise its body lost all trace of itself. The semblance of a man was gone.

The beast was mountainous. Its legs were as thick as trees, and its neck was as long and distended as the great serpents that swam the Trackless Sea. It looked down on him from a towering height, its few teeth jutting out forward. He fancied he could detect a cruel smile on those inhuman lips.

This was the most implacable foe Uther had ever faced, worse even than Gurt's frost giants. His knees almost failed him but he stayed tall and let out a war cry. His men unleashed a barrage of arrows, slings, and spears against the beast, and Uther held Berun's axe high above his head, meeting the challenge.

The behemoth charged, its shadow passed over Uther, and he was left behind as it plunged into his horde. The ground shook and trembled with its every step. Uther spun about and was left gaping helplessly as men vanished beneath its great feet with each step, their bones and armor crushed. He wondered why it had ignored him, and decided that it must want to visit on him to the ultimate humiliation of having his followers destroyed. He felt impotent as the field echoed with awful screams, and the massive beast strode through the ranks undeterred, showing little reaction to the few arrows penetrating its thick hide.

Uther looked behind him to see the Thunderbeast tribe standing clear of the battlefield and against Berun's Hill with grim, impassive faces. He understood. This battle was fought for their benefit, and it was not their place to interfere. As he looked at the behemoth crushing his men with each lumbering step, its massive tail striking through the lines behind him, he felt a weakness in his depths just as he had that day in Illusk. He was their leader -- their god even -- but he could do nothing to save them.

He felt a strange stirring from the axe, an energy flowing through the fingers clutching it and into his heart. How curious, he thought.

From the confusion before him emerged Morgred and Chief Fallen Feather, black war paint across their cheeks.

"To the fight, brother!" yelled Morgred, clutching his duskwood lance.

"The lines are shattered," Uther said. "How should we approach the beast?"

"On wings!" Fallen Feather pointed in the direction of the camp, where four or five giant ravens took to the air with Black Raven riders. Something else was with them -- the white horse with angel's wings, ridden by a Sky Pony warrior.

Uther felt an improbable laugh bubble up from his breast. "Let us draw the behemoth upward!" he yelled, pointing to the heights of Berun's Hill. "He claims nothing important happened there. Let us change that." When the ravens arrived, Fallen Feather relieved one of his men of his raven, and the Sky Pony jumped off the pegasus to allow Uther and Morgred to take his place. Over the noise, Uther said to Morgred, "I think this axe is magical. What kind of magic I cannot say, but it is responding to the presence of the behemoth."

"Responding how?" asked Morgred.

"I think it's giving me strength. My heart beats stronger. Perhaps it craves the behemoth's blood."

"It is Berun's weapon?" asked Morgred.

"If Tharkane and the Shepherd are to be believed," said Uther.

"Could it be," suggested Morgred, "that the axe thinks you're Berun?"

A chorus of squawks sounded as the ravens harried the behemoth, swooping close enough to enrage the great beast but pulling away at the last moment. Repeated attacks on the behemoth's legs by the troops on the surface had succeeded in drawing some blood, but its flesh was like rock and it was scarcely slowed down.

"Such power!" marveled Uther. "Truly we are fighting divine might!"

"A fitting foe," said Morgred.

"A foe beyond our strength, I fear," answered Uther.

A raven flew close to the behemoth's face and Chief Fallen Feather thrust out a sword, drawing blood from the lizard's cheek. The behemoth rammed its head against the giant bird, sending the raven astray and Fallen Feather tumbling from his place on its back. The chief fell to the army far below.

Uther let out a war cry and tugged on the reins. The pegasus flew over to Berun's Hill, from which Uther and Morgred could survey the entire battlefield, including the Thunderbeast tribe standing still on the fringes. Uther sat back on the pegasus and it lowered, closing in on Berun's Hill. Uther met the eyes of the behemoth and saw something he didn't expect. Deep in those bulging orbs, yellow slits swimming in citrine, he saw the clarity of a true opponent. A steely composure overtook Uther as he locked eyes with the beast, and it stopped its rampaging and trampling to return his gaze.

Then, with slow steps it began making its way up Berun's Hill, forsaking every other foe for Uther.

"Brother," Uther told Morgred. "You must leave me now."

"What do you mean?" asked Morgred.

"This fight is mine alone." With that, he jumped off the pegasus, falling to the hilltop, and surprised himself by landing with the ease of a mountain cat. Morgred look concerned but, as the younger brother, he would obey, and he flew the pegasus clear. There on the hilltop, the sounds of the throng below seemed to vanish and all Uther could hear were the singing wind and the steps of the behemoth marching ever closer and ringing with the thunderous beats of his own heart.

This was the moment, he knew. A test from Tempus. Maybe Berun, "the Bey of Runlatha," with this same axe in hand, had just such a moment when he fought the demon. Part of Uther wondered whether such a struggle was worth waging over the Thunderbeast tribe but he silenced that thought, for the Thunderbeasts represented all the unknown and untamed tribes. If it was Uther's destiny to bind them together, each tribe was as important as the next.

The axe tugged at his mind. Something sleeping within it awakened in Uther's hands; they augmented each other. Uther knew how Berun felt, battling that demon at the cost of his own life. A curious insight surface in his raging mind -- Berun did not fight for glory, though he achieved glory. He fought for his people. He saved them from the demon, and gave his life doing it.

Uther did not fear death. All he feared was that he would fail his men. If he should die alongside his opponent as Berun did, this would be a most suitable end for Uther Gardolfsson.

Or for Uthgar.

Closing his eyes a moment in prayer to Tempus, Uther plunged forward. Choking back all his doubts, he swung the axe against the behemoth's thick legs. His personality faded away as fury overtook him and the world became a blur of steel, blood, and scales. He had entered such blood frenzies before, following the wild men's technique and modifying it with the berserker style learned on Ruathym, but never like this. Drunk on rage, he became a hacking, whirling engine of destruction, as inhuman as the beast he fought. His instincts took over, awakening the most fiery lines of his blood and heritage, and he became the perfect unification of island blood and Northern spirit.

Again and again the axe carved through the behemoth's flesh, cutting to the bone. Each new slash brought a throaty squeal from the beast and it stamped, trying to trample Uther, but he dodged the planting of each massive foot. Slipping back and evading the behemoth's slashing tail, he sank the axe into its scaly hindquarters and used the oozing wound as a gruesome handhold to climb up onto the behemoth's unsteady back.

Only the faintest impressions filtered through to his higher mind as the battle went on: the deafening whine from the behemoth as the axe sank into its shoulder blade, and the feel of scales beneath Uther's feet. Slitted eyes stared at him, as large as shields and filled with incalculable malice. Swing after swing of that great axe, slicing through skin hard as rock, snapping bones, and bringing forth great plumes of blood. Uther was covered in blood. Was it his or the beast's? He lost his footing as the behemoth bucked and rolled its mass beneath him. His own bones cracked and broke as he smashed into the hillside.

Desperation crawled into his throat as he lay prone in a pool of reptilian blood, grasping for the axe lying just beyond his grasp, while a great foot threatened to squash him like an insect. He strained to resurrect his shattered limbs and rolled free. He grasped the axe and, empowered by the feel of it in his hands, climbed like lightning up a tree. Without even knowing how he got there, Uther found himself swinging away at that long, serpent neck. A single hack was all it took to slice it through, and once again he leaped free, collapsing onto the hillside. He clamped his eyes shut, but he could hear his mountainous foe rolling down Berun's Hill like a great stone.

As he sank into blackness he heard a distant roar coming from his men.

It took the dedicated efforts of all the shamans of the wild men to bring Uther back from his dark place. Morgred greeted him and helped him rise from his sickbed. When some of his strength returned, he limped to the foot of Berun's Hill, where the dead behemoth lay sprawled across the field, a vast line of its blood staining the hill where it rolled. Its head, hacked from its body by the axe, rested somewhat farther up the hill. Uther gathered it up and stared into its dead eyes for a long time before carrying it down to join its body. The axe itself was returned to him by a trembling wild man. Wherever he walked, many men stood and looked in open-jawed awe.

It would be different from now on, Uther knew. His men would look at him differently, and he would look at himself differently as well.

"Morgred," Uther whispered to his brother. "How can this be? I am a hero of legend, and yet I live?" For once, Morgred had no answers.

The Thunderbeasts made their camp separate from the others. Many ill words and hisses had been directed their way, for most blamed the Thunderbeasts for all the deaths during the behemoth's rampage. When Uther walked

over to meet them, all of his men formed into ranks behind him, ready for another fight. Tharkane walked out to greet Uther, his head held low in supplication.

"We visited this destruction upon you and your army," Tharkane said. "I offer myself forfeit. Take my life and let my men leave and return to the woods, and you shall never hear of us again."

Uther walked over to the trembling chief and thrust out Berun's axe. "I have felt the power of this weapon and know of the nobility of its past wielders." Tharkane expected Uther to bring the axe down on his neck, but instead Uther turned it sideways and held it out as an offering. "This belongs to you," said Uther.

"You honor us," Tharkane said, reclaiming the axe. There was disbelief in his voice. "We are humbled."

"You deserve the greatest honor," Uther said. Turning to the dead behemoth, he added, "And so does this being. Let its flesh rot away and keep its bones safe, and when I die, lay its bones around my grave. You of the Thunderbeasts shall not recall this day as a conquest but as a liberation. My men shall welcome you as brothers. I command that no song be written of today, nor any stories told. Let today be lost to legend."

"But then your accomplishment will be forgotten," said Tharkane.

"Fear not." Merriment filled Uther's blue eyes. "I mean to accomplish still greater things in the years to come."

Tharkane thrust the battle-axe high into the air. "Truly a hero to equal Berun. We pledge to you our lives, our blood, and our children now and forever. Uthgar! Uthgar! Uthgar!"

The other Thunderbeasts joined him in the chant. "Uthgar! Uthgar!" From behind him, a cheer came up from the other tribes of wild men until their shouts resonated off Berun's Hill and into the distance. The sound crashed and washed over Uther, and he felt a stirring in his heart as never before. A shining confidence overtook him, whether sent by Tempus or awakened by the adoration of his followers he could not say. Any misgiving melted away in that moment.

He knew now that he was Uthgar. This was how he could be a legend and yet live. Today was the death of Uther Gardolfsson. He would not think of himself by that name anymore, nor "Thane of Ruathym," a title with no meaning and no importance next to the adoration of his men.

There would be more struggles and more challenges. There were more lost corners of the North to explore and more tribes to bring into the fold. The Blue Bears would be next. They would join his people whether through conquest or consent. Perhaps then he would go north and find the Black Lions and the well of which the Shepherd spoke so that he could pay his respects at Berun's grave. And there were the orc hordes to break and the frost giants to face. A future of glory and victory rolled out before him, so plain that he could almost touch it. All this and more.

Though he spoke of this to no man as long as he lived, Uthgar knew at that moment he would be a god.