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Opening extract from

Urgum The Axeman

Written by

Kjartan Poskitt & Philip Reeve

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PART ONE
THE RETURNING HERO
The LOST DESERT

The Watchers in the Sky

The dust of the Lost Desert streamed out in a cloud behind the horses thundering around the brim of the Forgotten Crater and on towards Golgarth Cragg. Evil cries echoed across the dry plains, rock lizards cowered in the shadows, a rattlesnake hastily buried itself in the hot sand and a scorpion scuttled to hide in the roots of a giant yellow cactus. Even the bloated milligobs crawling over a donkey skull froze and held their breath, praying for the barbarian riders to pass by. The heavy figure on the leading horse was waving a massive axe



around his head so recklessly it was a miracle that it hadn't hacked any chunks out of the sweating beast's lurching neck. White sunlight glinted off the axeman's sharpened teeth and the muscles bulging from his arms were as thick and tight as tree roots. It was many years since he had first been sewn into his thick leather breastplate and the slashes and stains on it were a testament to all the many acts of savagery it had witnessed since. His speed and skill with the axe were legendary, his reputation for close-combat fighting was awesome, his treatment of enemies utterly ruthless and his greed at meal times was the subject of ballads. No wonder Urgum the Axeman was the fiercest savage that the Lost Desert had ever known.

"YaRGHHH!"

shouted Urgum happily.

Despite all his fantastic abilities and achievements, for Urgum, the main pleasures of life came from the simple things and if there was one thing he liked more than anything else it was galloping madly across the desert with his seven sons, shouting pointlessly. They had been

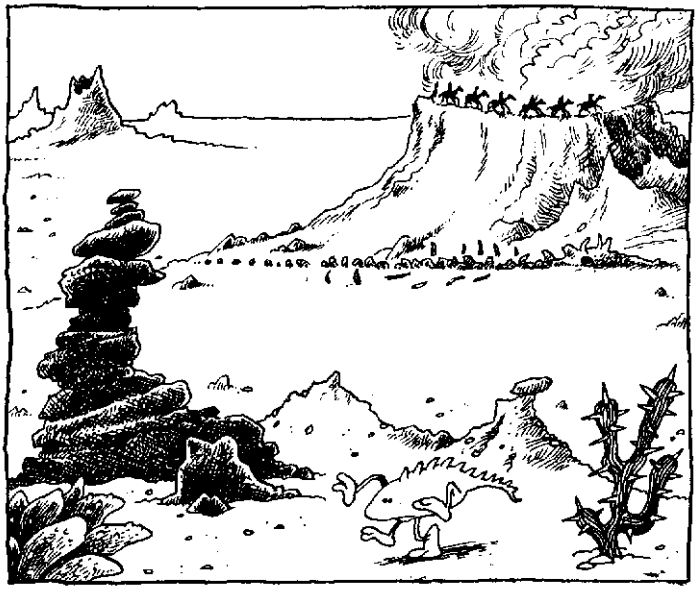


out at the Unicorn Hunt, and like all good barbaric social events it had involved fighting, bragging, brawling, partying and completely losing track of the time. The one thing it hadn't involved was actually catching any unicorns but they weren't going to let a small detail like that upset their fun as they galloped home to the cragg.

"Yarghhh!" shouted Urgum again. "Wouldn't you agree lads?"

"Yarghhh!" agreed the seven sons.

Urgum's chest swelled with pride. This was GREAT!



Nobody else in the desert would dare to gallop along the thin ledge that ran around the brim of the Forgotten Crater. Behind him the boys had started up their favourite battle chant:

"ARE WE SCARED?

NO!

DO WE CARE?

NO!

WE'RE COMPLETELY

MENTAL!"

Leaning over the side of his horse, Urgum looked straight down to where the rocky path came to a sharp edge and disappeared inches from the pounding hooves. Through the sulphur fumes he could just make out the blood-red glow of the lava lake half a mile below. His horse only had to take one false step and they would tumble together to a ghastly death.

"ARE WE SCARED?

NO!

DO WE CARE?

NO!

WE'RE COMPLETELY

MENTAL!'

Urgum was never worried about suffering a ghastly death for one simple reason: he was a true barbarian. He knew that if he died really horribly but was utterly fearless about it, he would impress the barbarian gods so much that he would be rewarded in the afterlife with a seat at the high table in the Hallowed Halls of Sirrus. In fact, if one thing did bother Urgum, it was the thought that he might die quietly in his sleep with a happy little smile on his face and – his biggest waking fear – his thumb in his mouth. That's why he never missed a chance to risk his life in the most ridiculous and diabolical ways possible.

There was also another reason why Urgum wasn't worried. Quite simply, he hadn't died yet. It didn't seem to matter what mind-numbingly dangerous situation he threw himself into, somehow he always survived. To Urgum it was obvious why – the gods needed him alive. If anything happened to him there wouldn't be anyone else half as good to uphold the

proud traditions of fearless savagery ... oh, unless any of his sons managed to become as fierce and fearless as he was. Ho ho, big joke.

This mad charge around the crater would show what they were made of. True, the seven sons were still keeping up with him but, despite their shouts and chants, they looked terrified. Urgum grinned, thinking back to his early savage years, and tried to remember what being scared felt like. In those days, he'd played the normal childish games, like knotting a pair of rattlesnakes together or running along the tightrope over the bear pit, but he would always mutter a quick prayer to his gods to deliver him safely.

At first, he'd worried that he might catch the gods at a bad time, when they weren't listening, or were in a grumpy mood, but gradually he'd got used to the fact that however often he tempted fate, the gods would always save him. After all, the gods had saved and protected his father Urgurt every single time, except when they didn't save him and he died a ghastly death. But if you didn't count that one time (and Urgum didn't because it was only the once), then the gods had always saved Urgurt and would always save Urgum.

Looming ahead of the riders was a thick yellow

sulphur-cloud. From behind him, Urgum could hear the boys desperately muttering prayers for luck, but he didn't bother. The gods wouldn't dare let anything happen to him, and if they did ... well, he'd soon be sitting at their high table eating as much divine food as he could shovel into his face for all eternity. Yum!

They all charged headlong into the cloud, singing:

"ARE WE SCARED?

NO!

DO WE CARE?

NO!

WE'RE COMPLETELY

MENTAL!"

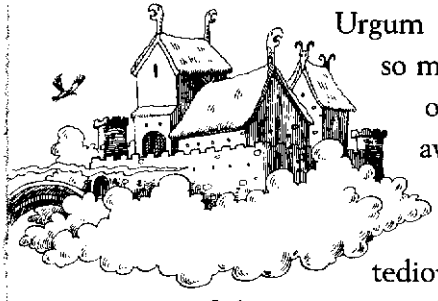
As the eyes of the riders and horses burnt with acidic tears, it became impossible to see the narrow path.

"What do we do now, Urgum?" shouted Ruff, the eldest son, through the yellow mist. "We can't tell where we're going!"

"We ride FASTER of course!" screamed Urgum.

"YARGHHH!"

* * *



Urgum was enjoying himself so much that it would never have occurred to him that up and away in the Hallowed Halls of Sirrus his behaviour was starting to become extremely tedious. Sirrus was where all the spirits of the Lost Desert lived, including the barbarian twin gods Tangor and Tangal. Like any other gods, the divine twins depended on mortal faith for their existence so it was lucky they had Urgum who believed in them absolutely. Unluckily for them Urgum hadn't grasped the real reason why they kept saving his life.

As Urgum led his sons head-first into the sulphur fumes, Tangal was frantically waking her brother from an afternoon nap.

"Look at Urgum!" she said. "He's charging blindly round the edge of the Forgotten Crater."

"So what?" Her brother yawned.

"So the idiot's trying to kill himself again!"

"Oh no! Why does he keep doing that?"

"You know why," said Tangal. "He wants to be seated at our table, eating for eternity."

"But we only just got rid of his father!" said Tangor. "It was fifteen years before he'd had enough, and we still haven't finished the washing up."

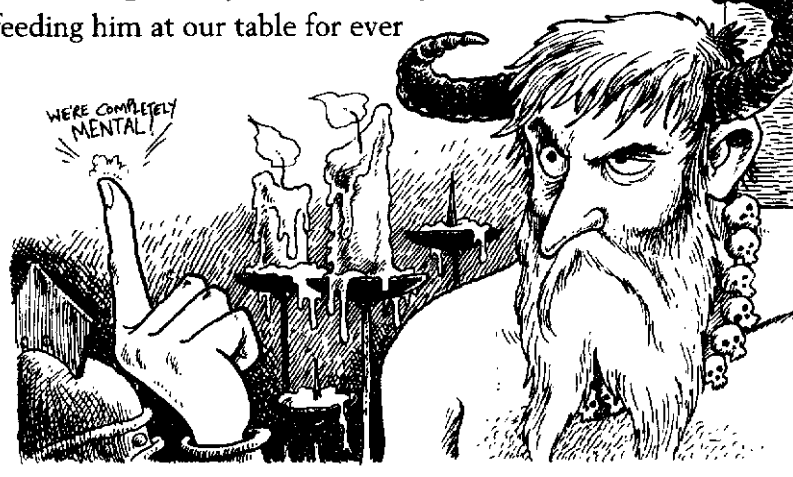
"I told you, you should never have let Urgurt die in the first place."

"But he was elephant-wrestling! How stupid can you get? He had to die, it taught him a valuable lesson."

"It taught me a lesson as well," snapped Tangal. "We don't want any more dead savages inviting themselves to our table! And besides, Urgum's the last of the true barbarians."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"If he dies then we'll have no true believers left," explained Tangal. "And if nobody believes in us then we won't be gods any more. We'll just be waiters feeding him at our table for ever



and ever. All the other spirits will laugh at us."

Tangor blinked. *What a miserable depressing thought,* he thought.

"Well?" said Tangal. "Do something!"

So Tangor reached a massive hand down through the sulphur-cloud and held a great fingertip by the inside edge of the crater. Just in time, he felt a tingling sensation from the tiny horse hooves as the convoy charged off the edge of the crater and started to run along his finger. He raised the finger up to his face and studied the figures galloping through the mist.

"This is the VERY last time, Urgum," Tangor said, without much conviction.

"We must do something to make him settle down and grow up a bit," said Tangal.



With a sigh, Tangor lowered his finger to the ground a safe distance from the crater and waited until the last horse had charged off and away. Behind him Tangal was rummaging in a box.

"Found it!" she exclaimed.

She held up a curious device that at first glance looked like an ancient hourglass. It was made of an upright brass framework supporting two glass bulbs connected by a narrow neck. The lower bulb was almost full of very fine blue sand and the upper bulb was empty, but the odd feature that made this hourglass different was the unexpected third bulb connected to the back of the neck. This extra bulb was black, making it impossible to see whether it was full or empty.

"The time shifter?" said Tangor. "How will that change Urgum?"

"It'll give us time to arrange a little surprise for him when he gets home."

"Like an ambush?" said Tangor. "Have him surrounded by a whole army, and make him surrender?"

"Surrender?" Tangal snorted. "Urgum? He's our barbarian champion! It'd take more than an army to make him surrender. He'd fight until his axe melted, then he'd punch until his fists melted, then he'd kick until

his feet melted and then ... well then he'd die and *then* he'd come up here and sit at our table and eat until his teeth melted. Oh no, to calm Urgum down will take something with a lot more power than an army."

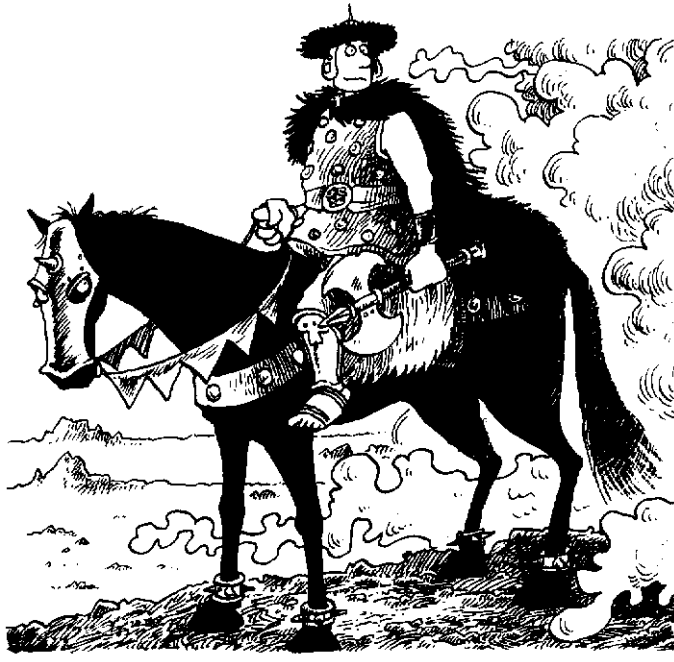
"So what's more powerful than an army?" asked Tangor.

"Honestly!" Tangal chuckled. "You men have no idea at all, have you?" She turned the time shifter over and placed it on the table. Very slowly, the blue sand started to trickle from the top bulb, but the lower bulb remained empty. The grains of time were disappearing into the third, black bulb leaving mortal days, months and even years completely unaccounted for.

Down in the land of the mortals, Urgum emerged from the sulphur-cloud, rubbing his eyes, while beneath him his horse snorted and coughed and finally came to a standstill.

"Wow!" said Urgum as he shook his head to clear it. "Wasn't that just ...

WOW?"



The horse looked around to see who Urgum was talking to, but they were alone. The horse quite reasonably assumed Urgum was talking to him, but not being used to conversation, he wasn't sure how to reply. What should he say? He carefully composed a speech: "You call that 'Wow'? You great sweaty lump. You should try running over jagged rocks through an acid cloud carrying a fat moron on your back sometime. I'll give you 'wow', you stinky lice-ridden hooligan." The

horse thought that sounded about right. It was nicely structured, it set the correct tone and delivered his views perfectly. OK, *Urgum*, he decided, *scrape out your ears and get ready for this...*

But just then the other horses and riders staggered from the cloud.

"Wow!" shouted Urgum. "Eh lads? Wow?"



They all cheered.

"So, let's see if you all made it," said Urgum. "Robbin, Ruff, Ruinn, Rakk n' Rekk, Raymond. Hurrah! Let's go."

"Hold it!" said Ruinn counting. "One, two, three, four, five, six."

"Great!" said Urgum. "Let's go."

"But isn't there supposed to be seven of us?"

"Nah!" said Urgum. "That fancy mathematics of yours must be wrong."

A final rider stumbled out of the cloud.

"Told you," said Ruinn.

"Oh!" said Urgum. "Fancy me forgettin' er, thingy ... oh you know who I mean ... whatsisface... "

"The Other One?" asked Ruinn.

"Yeah, him," said Urgum. "Right, let's go. Follow me boys!"

