

JOE *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ABERCROMBIE

**BEFORE
THEY ARE
HANGED**

THE FIRST LAW
TRILOGY: BOOK 2

"The finest epic fantasy
trilogy in recent memory."
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BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED

Book Two of the First Law Trilogy

JOE ABERCROMBIE

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[**Begin Reading**](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[*A Preview of Last Argument of Kings*](#)

[*A Preview of Snakewood*](#)

[Orbit Newsletter](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For the Four Readers

You know who you are

Part I

“We should forgive our enemies, but not
before they are hanged.”

—*Heinrich Heine*

The Great Leveller

Damn mist. It gets in your eyes, so you can't see no more than a few strides ahead. It gets in your ears, so you can't hear nothing, and when you do you can't tell where it's coming from. It gets up your nose, so you can't smell naught but wet and damp. Damn mist. It's a curse on a scout.

They'd crossed the Whiteflow a few days before, out of the North and into Angland, and the Dogman had been nervy all the way. Scouting out strange land, in the midst of a war that weren't really their business. All the lads were jumpy. Aside from Threetrees, none of 'em had ever been out of the North. Except for Grim maybe. He weren't saying where he'd been.

They'd passed a few farms burned out, a village all empty of people. Union buildings, big and square. They'd seen the tracks of horses and men. Lots of tracks, but never the men themselves. Dogman knew Bethod weren't far away, though, his army spread out across the land, looking for towns to burn, food to steal, people to kill. All manner o' mischief. He'd have scouts everywhere. If he caught Dogman or any of the rest, they'd be back to the mud, and not quickly. Bloody cross and heads on spikes and all the rest of it, Dogman didn't wonder.

If the Union caught 'em they'd be dead too, most likely. It was a war, after all, and folk don't think too clearly in a war. Dogman could hardly expect 'em to waste time telling a friendly Northman from an unfriendly one. Life was fraught with dangers, alright. It was enough to make anyone nervy, and he was a nervy sort at the best of times.

So it was easy to see how the mist might have been salt in the cut, so to speak.

All this creeping around in the murk had got him thirsty, so he picked his way through the greasy brush, over to where he could hear the river chattering. He knelt down at the water's edge. Slimy down there, with rot and dead leaves, but Dogman didn't reckon a little slime would make the difference, he was about as dirty as a man could be already. He scooped up water in his hands and drank. There was a breath of wind down there, out beyond the trees, pushing the mist in close one minute, dragging it out the next. That's when the Dogman saw him.

He was lying on his front, legs in the river, top half up on the bank. They stared at each other a while, both fully shocked and amazed. He'd got a long stick coming out of his back. A broken spear. That's when the Dogman realised he was dead.

He spat the water out and crept over, checking careful all around to make sure no one was waiting to give him a blade in the back. The corpse was a man of about two dozen years. Yellow hair, brown blood on his grey lips. He'd got a padded jacket on, bloated up with wet, the kind a man might wear under a coat of mail. A fighting man, then. A straggler maybe, lost his crew and been picked off. A Union man, no doubt, but he didn't look so different to Dogman or to anyone else, now he was dead. One corpse looks much like another.

"The Great Leveller," Dogman whispered to himself, since he was in a thoughtful frame of mind. That's what the hillmen call him. Death, that is. He levels all differences. Named Men and nobodies, south or north. He catches everyone in the end, and he treats each man the same.

Seemed like this one had been dead no more 'n a couple of days. That meant whoever killed him might still be close, and that got the Dogman worried. The mist seemed full of sounds now. Might've been a hundred Carls, waiting just out of sight. Might've been no more than the river slapping at its banks. Dogman left the corpse lying and slunk off into the trees, ducking from one trunk to another as they loomed up out of the grey.

He nearly stumbled on another body, half buried in a heap of leaves, lying on his back with his arms spread out. He passed one on his knees, a

couple of arrows in his side, face in the dirt, arse in the air. There's no dignity in death, and that's a fact. The Dogman was starting to hurry along, too keen to get back to the others, tell them what he'd seen. Too keen to get away from them corpses.

He'd seen plenty, of course, more than his share, but he'd never quite got comfortable around 'em. It's an easy thing to make a man a carcass. He knew a thousand ways to do it. But once you've done it, there's no going back. One minute he's a man, all full up with hopes, and thoughts, and dreams. A man with friends, and family, and a place where he's from. Next minute he's mud. Made the Dogman think on all the scrapes he'd been in, all the battles and the fights he'd been a part of. Made him think he was lucky still to be breathing. Stupid lucky. Made him think his luck might not last.

He was halfway running now. Careless. Blundering about in the mist like an untried boy. Not taking his time, not sniffing the air, not listening out. A Named Man like him, a scout who'd been all over the North, should've known better, but you can't stay sharp all the time. He never saw it coming.

Something knocked him in the side, hard, ditched him right on his face. He scrambled up but someone kicked him down. Dogman fought, but whoever this bastard was, he was fearsome strong. Before he knew it he was down on his back in the dirt, and he'd only himself to blame. Himself, and the corpses, and the mist. A hand grabbed him round his neck, started squeezing his windpipe shut.

"Gurgh," he croaked, fiddling at the hand, thinking his last moment was on him. Thinking all his hopes were turned to mud. The Great Leveller, come for him at last...

Then the fingers stopped squeezing.

"Dogman?" said someone in his ear. "That you?"

"Gurgh."

The hand let go his throat and he sucked in a breath. Felt himself pulled up by his coat. "Shit on it, Dogman! I could ha' killed you!" He knew the voice now, well enough. Black Dow, the bastard. Dogman was half annoyed at being throttled near to dying, half stupid-happy at still being alive. He

could hear Dow laughing at him. Hard laughter, like a crow calling. “You alright?”

“I’ve had warmer greetings,” croaked Dogman, still doing his best to get the air in.

“Count yourself lucky, I could’ve given you a colder one. Much colder. I took you for one of Bethod’s scouts. Thought you was out over yonder, up the valley.”

“As you can see,” he whispered, “no. Where’s the others at?”

“Up on a hill, above this fucking mist. Taking a look around.”

Dogman nodded back the way he’d come. “There’s corpses over there. Loads of ’em.”

“Loads of ’em is it?” asked Dow, as though he didn’t think Dogman knew what a load of corpses looked like. “Hah!”

“Aye, a good few anyway. Union dead, I reckon. Looks like there was a fight here.”

Black Dow laughed again. “A fight? You reckon?” Dogman wasn’t sure what he meant by that.

Shit,” he said.

They were standing up on the hill, the five of them. The mist had cleared up, but the Dogman almost wished it hadn’t. He saw what Dow had been saying now, well enough. The whole valley was full of dead. They were dotted high up on the slopes, wedged between the rocks, stretched out in the gorse. They were scattered out across the grass in the valley bottom like nails spilled from a sack, twisted and broken on the brown dirt road. They were heaped up beside the river, heaped on the banks in a pile. Arms and legs and broken gear sticking up from the last shreds of mist. They were everywhere. Stuck with arrows, stabbed with swords, hacked with axes. Crows called as they hopped from one meal to the next. It was a good day for the crows. It had been a while since Dogman saw a proper battlefield, and it brought back some sour memories. Horrible sour.

“Shit,” he said again. Couldn’t think of aught else to say.

“Reckon the Union were marching up this road.” Threetrees was frowning hard. “Reckon they were hurrying. Trying to catch Bethod unawares.”

“Seems they weren’t scouting too careful,” rumbled Tul Duru. “Seems like it was Bethod caught them out.”

“Maybe it was misty,” said Dogman, “like today.”

Threetrees shrugged. “Maybe. It’s the time of year for it. Either way they were on the road, in column, tired from a long day’s tramp. Bethod came on ’em from here, and from up there, on the ridge. Arrows first, to break ’em up, then the Carls, coming down from the tall ground, screaming and ready to go. The Union broke quick, I reckon.”

“Real quick,” said Dow.

“And then it was a slaughter. Spread out on the road. Trapped against the water. Nowhere much to run to. Men trying to pull their armour off, men trying to swim the river with their armour on. Packing in and climbing one on top o’ the other, with arrows falling down all round. Some of ’em might’ve got as far as those woods down there, but knowing Bethod, he’d have had a few horsemen tucked away, ready to lick the plate.”

“Shit,” said Dogman, feeling more than a bit sick. He’d been on the wrong end of a rout himself, and the memory weren’t at all a happy one.

“Neat as good stitching,” said Threetrees. “You got to give Bethod his due, the bastard. He knows his work, none better.”

“This the end of it then, chief?” asked Dogman. “Bethod won already?”

Threetrees shook his head, nice and slow. “There’s a lot of Southerners out there. An awful lot. Most of ’em live across the sea. They say there’s more of ’em down there than you can count. More men than there are trees in the North. Might take ’em a while to get here, but they’ll be coming. This is just the beginning.”

The Dogman looked out at the wet valley, at all them dead men, huddled and sprawled and twisted across the ground, no more ’n food for crows. “Not much of a beginning for them.”

Dow curled his tongue and spat, as noisy as he could. “Penned up and slaughtered like a bunch o’ sheep! You want to die like that, Threetrees? Eh? You want to side with the likes of these? Fucking Union! They don’t know anything about war!”

Threetrees nodded. “Then I reckon we’ll have to teach ’em.”

There was a great press round the gate. There were women, gaunt and hungry-looking. There were children, ragged and dirty. There were men, old and young, stooped under heavy packs or clutching gear. Some had mules, or carts they were pushing, loaded up with all kinds of useless-looking stuff. Wooden chairs, tin pots, tools for farming. A lot had nothing at all, besides misery. The Dogman reckoned there was plenty of that to go round.

They were choking up the road with their bodies and their rubbish. They were choking up the air with their pleading and their threatening. Dogman could smell the fear, thick as soup in his nose. All running from Bethod.

They were shouldering each other pretty good, some pushing in, some pushed out, here and there one falling in the mud, all desperate for that gate like it was their mother’s tit. But as a crowd, they were going nowhere. Dogman could see spear tips glinting over the heads of the press, could hear hard voices shouting. There were soldiers up ahead, keeping everyone out of the city.

Dogman leaned over to Threetrees. “Looks like they don’t want their own kind,” he whispered. “You reckon they’ll want us, chief?”

“They need us, and that’s a fact. We’ll talk to ’em, and then we’ll see, or you got some better notion?”

“Going home and staying out of it?” muttered Dogman under his breath, but he followed Threetrees into the crowd anyway.

The Southerners all gawped as they stepped on through. There was a little girl among ’em, looked at Dogman as he passed with great staring eyes, clutching some old rag to her. Dogman tried a smile but it had been a long time since he’d dealt with aught but hard men and hard metal, and it can’t

have come out too pleasing. The girl screamed and ran off, and she wasn't the only one scared. The crowd split open, wary and silent when they saw Dogman and Threetrees coming, even though they'd left their weapons back with the others.

They made it through to the gate alright, only having to give the odd shove to one man or another, just to start him moving. Dogman saw the soldiers now, a dozen of 'em, stood in a line across the gate, each one just the same as the one next door. He'd rarely seen such heavy armour as they had on, great plates from head to toe, polished to a blinding shine, helmets over their faces, stock-still like metal pillars. He wondered how you'd fight one, if you had to. He couldn't imagine an arrow doing much, or a sword even, 'less it got lucky and found a joint.

"You'd need a pickaxe for that, or something."

"What?" hissed Threetrees.

"Nothing." It was plain they had some strange ideas about fighting down in the Union. If wars were won by the shinier side, they'd have had Bethod well licked, the Dogman reckoned. Shame they weren't.

Their chief was sat in the midst of them, behind a little table with some scraps of paper on it, and he was the strangest of the lot. He'd got some jacket on, bright red. An odd sort of cloth for a leader to wear, Dogman thought. You'd have picked him out with an arrow easy enough. He was mighty young for the job an' all. Scarcely had a beard on him yet, though he looked proud enough of himself all the same.

There was a big man in a dirty coat arguing with him. Dogman strained to listen, trying to make sense of their Union words. "I've five children out here," the farmer was saying, "and nothing to feed them with. What do you suggest I do?"

An old man got in first. "I'm a personal friend of the Lord Governor, I demand you admit me to the—"

The lad didn't let either one finish. "I don't give a damn who your friends are, and I don't care if you have a hundred children! The city of Ostenhorm is full. Lord Marshal Burr has decreed that only two hundred refugees be

admitted each day, and we have already reached our limit for this morning. I suggest you come back tomorrow. Early.”

The two men stood there staring. “Your limit?” growled the farmer.

“But the Lord Governor—”

“Damn you!” screamed the lad, thumping at the table in a fit. “Only push me further! I’ll let you in alright! I’ll have you dragged in, and hung as traitors!”

That was enough for those two, they backed off quick. Dogman was starting to think he should do the same, but Threetrees was already making for the table. The boy scowled up at ’em as though they stank worse than a pair of fresh turds. Dogman wouldn’t have been so bothered, except he’d washed specially for the occasion. Hadn’t been this clean in months. “What the hell do you want? We’ve no need of spies or beggars!”

“Good,” said Threetrees, clear and patient. “We’re neither. My name is Rudd Threetrees. This here is the Dogman. We’re come to speak to whoever’s in charge. We’re come to offer our services to your King.”

“Offer your services?” The lad started to smile. Not a friendly smile at all. “‘Dogman,’ you say? What an interesting name. I can’t imagine how he came by it.” He had himself a little snigger at that piece of cleverness, and Dogman could hear chuckles from the others. A right set of arseholes, he reckoned, stitched up tight in their fancy clothes and their shiny armour. A right set of arseholes, but there was nothing to be gained by telling ’em so. It was a good thing they’d left Dow behind. He’d most likely have gutted this fool already, and got them all killed.

The lad leaned forward and spoke real slow, as if to children. “No Northmen are allowed within the city, not without special permission.”

Seemed that Bethod crossing their borders, slaughtering their armies, making war across their lands weren’t special enough. Threetrees ploughed on, but the Dogman reckoned he was ploughing in stony ground, alright. “We’re not asking much. Only food and a place to sleep. There’s five of us, each one a Named Man, veterans all.”

“His Majesty is more than well supplied with soldiers. We are a little

short of mules, however. Perhaps you'd care to carry some supplies for us?"

Threetrees was known for his patience, but there was a limit to it, and Dogman reckoned they were awful close. This prick of a boy had no idea what he was stepping on. He weren't a man to be toyed with, Rudd Threetrees. It was a famous name where they came from. A name to put fear in men, or courage, depending where they stood. There was a limit to his patience alright, but they weren't quite at it yet. Luckily for all concerned.

"Mules, eh?" growled Threetrees. "Mules can kick. Best make sure one don't kick your head off, boy." And he turned around and stalked off, down the road the way they came, the scared folks shuffling out the way then crowding back in behind, all shouting at once, pleading with the soldiers why they should be the ones to get let in while the others were left out in the cold.

"That weren't quite the welcome we was hoping for," Dogman muttered. Threetrees said nothing, just marched away in front, head down. "What now, chief?"

The old boy shot a grim look over his shoulder. "You know me. You think I'm taking that fucking answer?" Somehow, the Dogman reckoned not.

Best Laid Plans

It was cold in the hall of the Lord Governor of Angland. The high walls were of plain, cold render, the wide floor was of cold stone flags, the gaping fireplace held nothing but cold ashes. The only decoration was a great tapestry hanging at one end, the golden sun of the Union stitched into it, the crossed hammers of Angland in its centre.

Lord Governor Meed was slumped in a hard chair before a huge, bare table, staring at nothing, his right hand slack around the stem of a wine cup. His face was pale and hollow, his robes of state were crumpled and stained, his thin white hair was in disarray. Major West, born and raised in Angland, had often heard Meed spoken of as a strong leader, a great presence, a tireless champion of the province and its people. He looked a shell of a man now, crushed under the weight of his great chain of office, as empty and cold as his yawning fireplace.

The temperature might have been icy, but the mood was cooler still. Lord Marshal Burr stood in the middle of the floor, feet placed wide apart, big hands clasped white-knuckle tight behind his back. Major West stood at his shoulder, stiff as a log, head lowered, wishing that he had not given up his coat. It was colder in here than outside, if anything, and the weather was bitter, even for autumn.

“Will you take wine, Lord Marshal?” murmured Meed, not even looking up. His voice seemed weak and reedy thin in the great space. West fancied he could almost see the old man’s breath smoking.

“No, Your Grace. I will not.” Burr was frowning. He had been frowning constantly, as far as West could tell, for the last month or two. The man

seemed to have no other expressions. He had a frown for hope, a frown for satisfaction, a frown for surprise. This was a frown of the most intense anger. West shifted nervously from one numb foot to the other, trying to get the blood flowing, wishing he was anywhere but here.

“What about you, Major West?” whispered the Lord Governor. “Will you take wine?” West opened his mouth to decline, but Burr got in first.

“What happened?” he growled, the hard words grating off the cold walls, echoing in the chilly rafters.

“What happened?” The Lord Governor shook himself, turned his sunken eyes slowly towards Burr, as though seeing him for the first time. “I lost my sons.” He snatched up his cup with a trembling hand and drained it to the dregs.

West saw Marshal Burr’s hands clench tighter still behind his back. “I am sorry for your loss, Your Grace, but I was referring to the broader situation. I am talking of Black Well.”

Meed seemed to flinch at the mere mention of the place. “There was a battle.”

“There was a massacre!” barked Burr. “What is your explanation? Did you not receive the King’s orders? To raise every soldier you could, to man your defences, to await reinforcements? Under no circumstances to risk battle with Bethod!”

“The King’s orders?” The Lord Governor’s lip curled. “The Closed Council’s orders, do you mean? I received them. I read them. I considered them.”

“And then?”

“I tore them up.”

West could hear the Lord Marshal breathing hard through his nose. “You tore... them up?”

“For a hundred years, I and my family have governed Angland. When we came here there was nothing.” Meed raised his chin proudly as he spoke, puffing out his chest. “We tamed the wilderness. We cleared the forests, and laid the roads, and built the farms, and the mines, and the towns that have

enriched the whole Union!”

The old man’s eyes had brightened considerably. He seemed taller, bolder, stronger. “The people of this land look first to me for protection, before they look across the sea! Was I to allow these Northmen, these barbarians, these animals to raid across my lands with impunity? To undo the great work of my forefathers? To rob, and burn, and rape, and kill as they pleased? To sit behind my walls while they put Angland to the sword? No, Marshal Burr! Not I! I gathered every man, and I armed them, and I sent them to meet the savages in battle, and my three sons went at their head. What else should I have done?”

“Followed your fucking orders!” screamed Burr at the very top of his voice. West started with shock, the thunderous echoes still ringing in his ears.

Meed twitched, then gaped, then his lip began to quiver. Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes and his body sagged again. “I lost my sons,” he whispered, staring down at the cold floor. “I lost my sons.”

“I pity your sons, and all those others whose lives were wasted, but I do not pity you. You alone brought this upon yourself.” Burr winced, then swallowed and rubbed at his stomach. He walked slowly to the window and looked out over the cold, grey city. “You have wasted all your strength, and now I must dilute my own to garrison your towns, your fortresses. Such survivors as there are from Black Well, and such others as are armed and can fight you will transfer to my command. We will need every man.”

“And me?” murmured Meed. “I daresay those dogs on the Closed Council are howling for my blood?”

“Let them howl. I need you here. Refugees are coming southwards, fleeing from Bethod, or from the fear of him. Have you looked out of your window lately? Ostenhorm is full of them. They crowd around the walls in their thousands, and this is only the beginning. You will see to their well-being, and their evacuation to Midderland. For thirty years your people have looked to you for protection. They have need of you still.”

Burr turned back into the room. “You will provide Major West with a list

of those units still fit for action. As for the refugees, they are in need of food, and clothing, and shelter. Preparations for their evacuation should begin at once.”

“At once,” whispered Meed. “At once, of course.”

Burr flashed West a quick glance from under his thick eyebrows, took a deep breath, then strode for the door. West looked back as he left. The Lord Governor of Angland still sat hunched in his chair in his empty, freezing hall, head in his hands.

“This is Angland,” said West, gesturing at the great map. He turned to look at the assembly. Few of the officers were showing the slightest interest in what he had to say. Hardly a surprise, but it still rankled.

General Kroy was sitting on the right-hand side of the long table, stiff upright and motionless in his chair. He was tall, gaunt, hard, grey hair cropped close to his angular skull, black uniform simple and spotless. His enormous staff were similarly clipped, shaved, polished, as dour as a bevy of mourners. Opposite, on the left, lounged General Poulder, round-faced, ruddy-skinned, possessed of a tremendous set of moustaches. His great collar, stiff with gold thread, came almost to his large, pink ears. His retinue sat their chairs like saddles, crimson uniforms dripping with braid, top buttons carelessly undone, spatters of mud from the road worn like medals.

On Kroy’s side of the room, war was all about cleanliness, self-denial, and strict obedience to the rules. On Poulder’s it was a matter of flamboyance and carefully organised hair. Each group glared across the table at the other with haughty contempt, as though only they held the secrets of good soldiering, and the other crowd, try as they might, would never be more than a hindrance.

Either were hindrance enough to West’s mind, but neither one was half the obstacle that the third lot presented, clustered around the far end of the table. Their leader was none other than the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Ladisla himself. It was not so much a uniform that he was wearing as a kind

of purple dressing gown with epaulettes. Bedwear with a military motif. The lace on his cuffs alone could have made a good-sized tablecloth, and his staff were little less remarkable in their finery. Some of the richest, most handsome, most elegant, most useless young men in the whole Union were sprawled in their chairs around the Prince. If the measure of a man was the size of his hat, these were great men indeed.

West turned back to the map, his throat uncomfortably dry. He knew what he had to say, he needed only to say it, as clearly as possible, and sit down. Never mind that some of the most senior men in the army were behind him. Not to mention the heir to the throne. Men who West knew despised him. Hated him for his high position and his low birth. For the fact that he had earned his place.

“This is England,” said West again, in what he hoped was a voice of calm authority. “The River Cumnur”—and the end of his stick traced the twisting blue line of the river—“splits the province into two parts. The southern part is much the smaller, but contains the great majority of the population and almost all the significant towns, including the capital, Ostenhorm. The roads here are reasonably good, the country relatively open. As far as we know, the Northmen have yet to set foot across the river.”

West heard a loud yawning behind him, clearly audible even from the far end of the table. He felt a sudden pang of fury and spun round. Prince Ladisla himself appeared, at least, to be listening attentively. The culprit was one of his staff, the young Lord Smund, a man of impeccable lineage and immense fortune, a little over twenty but with all the talents of a precocious ten-year-old. He was slouched in his chair, staring into space, mouth extravagantly gaping.

It was the most West could do to stop himself from leaping over and thrashing the man with his stick. “Am I boring you?” he hissed.

Smund actually seemed surprised to be picked on. He stared left and right, as though West might have been talking to one of his neighbours. “What, me? No, no, Major West, not in the least. Boring? No! The River Cumnur splits the province in two, and so forth. Thrilling stuff! Thrilling! I