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ABERCROMBIE

LAST

THE FIRST LAW
TRILOGY: BOOK 3

**ARGUMENT
OF KINGS**

LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS

Book Three of the First Law Trilogy

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*For the Four Readers
You know who you are*

Part I

“Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.”

—*Paul Gauguin*

The Poison Trade

Superior Gloкта stood in the hall, and waited. He stretched his twisted neck out to one side and then to the other, hearing the familiar clicks, feeling the familiar cords of pain stretching out through the tangled muscles between his shoulder blades. *Why do I do it, when it always hurts me? Why must we test the pain? Tongue the ulcer, rub the blister, pick the scab?*

“Well?” he snapped.

The marble bust at the foot of the stairs offered only its silent contempt. *And I get more than enough of that already.* Gloкта shuffled away, his useless foot scraping over the tiles behind him, the tapping of his cane echoing amongst the mouldings on the faraway ceiling.

When it came to the great noblemen on the Open Council, Lord Ingelstad, the owner of this oversized hall, was an undersized man indeed. The head of a family whose fortunes had declined with the passing years, whose wealth and influence had shrivelled to almost nothing. *And the more shrivelled the man, the more swollen his pretensions must become. Why do they never realise? Small things only seem smaller in large spaces* .

Somewhere in the shadows a clock vomited up a few sluggish chimes. *Good and late already. The more shrivelled the man, the longer the wait on his pleasure. But I can be patient, when I must. I have no dazzling banquets, no ecstatic crowds, no beautiful women waiting breathlessly for my arrival, after all. Not any more. The Gurkish saw to that, in the darkness beneath the Emperor's prisons.* He pressed his tongue into his empty gums and grunted as he shifted his leg, needles from it shooting up

his back and making his eyelid flicker. *I can be patient. The one good thing about every step being an ordeal. You soon learn how to tread carefully* .

The door beside him opened sharply and Glokta snapped his head round, doing his best to hide a grimace as his neck bones crunched. Lord Ingelstad stood in the doorway: a big, fatherly man with a ruddy complexion. He offered up a friendly smile as he beckoned Glokta into the room. *Quite as though this were a social call, and a welcome one at that* .

“I must apologise for keeping you waiting, Superior. I have had so many visitors since I arrived in Adua, my head is in quite a spin!” *Let us hope it doesn’t spin right off. “So very many visitors!” Visitors with offers, no doubt. Offers for your vote. Offers for your help in choosing our next king. But my offer, I think, you will find painful to refuse* . “Will you take wine, Superior?”

“No, my Lord, thank you.” Glokta hobbled over the threshold. “I will not stay long. I, too, have a great deal of business to attend to.” *Elections don’t rig themselves, you know* .

“Of course, of course. Please be seated.” Ingelstad dropped happily into one of his chairs and gestured to another. It took Glokta a moment to get settled, lowering himself carefully, then shifting his hips until he discovered a position in which his back did not give him constant pain. “And what did you wish to discuss with me?”

“I have come on behalf of Arch Lector Sult. I hope you will not be offended if I am blunt, but his Eminence wants your vote.”

The nobleman’s heavy features twisted in feigned puzzlement. *Very badly feigned, as it goes.* “I am not sure that I understand. My vote on what issue?”

Glokta wiped some wet from beneath his leaking eye. *Must we engage in such undignified dancing? You have not the build for it, and I have not the legs.* “On the issue of who will next occupy the throne, Lord Ingelstad.”

“Ah. That.” *Yes, that. Idiot.* “Superior Glokta, I hope I will not disappoint you, or his Eminence, a man for whom I have nothing but the highest respect,” and he bowed his head with an exaggerated show of humility, “when I say that I could not, in all good conscience, allow myself to be

influenced in any one direction. I feel that I, and all the members of the Open Council, have been given a sacred trust. I am duty bound to vote for the man who seems to me to be the very finest candidate, from the many excellent men available.” And he assumed a grin of the greatest self-satisfaction.

A fine speech. A village dunce might have even believed it. How often have I heard it, or its like, the past few weeks? Traditionally, the bargaining would come next. The discussion of how much, exactly, a sacred trust is worth. How much silver outweighs a good conscience. How much gold cuts through the bindings of duty. But I am not in a bargaining mood today.

Glokta raised his eyebrows very high. “I must congratulate you on a noble stand, Lord Ingelstad. If everyone had your character we would be living in a better world. A noble stand indeed . . . especially when you have so much to lose. No less than everything, I suppose.” He winced as he took his cane in one hand and rocked himself painfully forward towards the edge of the chair. “But I see you will not be swayed, and so I take my leave— ”

“What can you refer to, Superior?” The nobleman’s unease was written plainly across his plump face.

“Why, Lord Ingelstad, to your corrupt business dealings.”

The ruddy cheeks had lost much of their glow. “There must be some mistake.”

“Oh no, I assure you.” Glokta slid the papers of confession from the inside pocket of his coat. “You are mentioned often in the confessions of senior Mercers, you see? Very often.” And he held the crackling pages out so they both could see them. “Here you are referred to as— and not my choice of words, you understand— an ‘accomplice.’ Here as the ‘prime beneficiary’ of a most unsavoury smuggling operation. And here, you will note— and I almost blush to mention it— your name and the word ‘treason’ appear in close proximity.”

Ingelstad sagged back into his chair and set his glass rattling down on the table beside him, a quantity of wine sloshing out onto the polished wood. *Oh,*

we really should wipe that up. It could leave an awful stain, and some stains are impossible to remove .

“His Eminence,” continued Glokta, “counting you as a friend, was able to keep your name out of the initial enquiries, for everybody’s sake. He understands that you were merely trying to reverse the failing fortunes of your family, and is not without sympathy. If you were to disappoint him in this business of votes, however, his sympathy would be quickly exhausted. Do you take my meaning?” *I feel that I have made it abundantly clear .*

“I do,” croaked Ingelstad.

“And the bonds of duty? Do they feel any looser, now?”

The nobleman swallowed, the flush quite vanished from his face. “I am eager to assist his Eminence in any way possible, of course, but . . . the thing is— ” *What now? A desperate offer? A despairing bribe? An appeal to my conscience, even?* “A representative of High Justice Marovia came to me yesterday. A man called Harlen Morrow. He made very similar representations . . . and not dissimilar threats.” Glokta frowned. *Did he now? Marovia, and his little worm. Always just one step ahead, or just one step behind. But never far away.* A shrill note crept into Ingelstad’s voice. “What am I to do? I cannot support you both! I will leave Adua, Superior, and never return! I will . . . I will abstain from voting— ”

“You’ll do no such fucking thing!” hissed Glokta. “You’ll vote the way I tell you and Marovia be damned!” *More prodding? Distasteful, but so be it. Are my hands not filthy to the elbow? Rummaging through another sewer or two will scarcely make the difference.* He let his voice soften to an oily purr. “I observed your daughters in the park yesterday.” The nobleman’s face lost its last vestige of colour. “Three young innocents on the very cusp of womanhood, dressed all in the height of fashion, and each one lovelier than the last. The youngest would be . . . fifteen?”

“Thirteen,” croaked Ingelstad.

“Ah.” And Glokta let his lips curl back to display his toothless smile. “She blooms early. They have never before visited Adua, am I correct?”

“They have not,” he nearly whispered.

“I thought not. Their excitement and delight as they toured the gardens of the Agriont were perfectly charming. I swear, they must have caught the eye of every eligible suitor in the capital.” He allowed his smile slowly to fade. “It would break my heart, Lord Ingelstad, to see three such delicate creatures snatched suddenly away to one of Angland’s harshest penal institutions. Places where beauty, and breeding, and a gentle disposition attract an entirely different and far less enjoyable kind of attention.” Glokta gave a carefully orchestrated shudder of dismay as he leaned slowly forward to whisper. “I would not wish that life on a dog. And all on account of the indiscretions of a father who had the means of reparation well within his grasp.”

“But my daughters, they were not involved— ”

“We are electing a new king! Everyone is involved!” *Harsh, perhaps. But harsh times demand harsh actions.* Glokta struggled to his feet, hand wobbling on his cane with the effort. “I will tell his Eminence that he can count on your vote.”

Ingelstad collapsed, suddenly and completely. *Like a stabbed wineskin.* His shoulders sagged, his face hung loose with horror and hopelessness. “But the High Justice. . .” he whispered. “Have you no pity?”

Glokta could only shrug. “I did have. As a boy I was soft-hearted beyond the point of foolishness. I swear, I would cry at a fly caught in a spider’s web.” He grimaced at a brutal spasm through his leg as he turned for the door. “Constant pain has cured me of that.”

It was an intimate little gathering. *But the company hardly inspires warmth.* Superior Goyle glared at Glokta from across the huge, round table in the huge, round office, his beady eyes staring from his bony face. *And not with tender feelings, I rather think .*

The attention of his Eminence the Arch Lector, the head of his Majesty’s Inquisition, was fixed elsewhere. Pinned to the curving wall, taking up perhaps half of the entire chamber, were three hundred and twenty sheets of

paper. *One for every great heart on our noble Open Council.* They crackled gently in the breeze from the great windows. *Fluttering little papers for fluttering little votes.* Each one was marked with a name. *Lord this, Lord that, Lord someone of wherever. Big men and little men. Men whose opinions, on the whole, no one cared a damn for until Prince Raynault fell out of his bed and into his grave* .

Many of the pages had a blob of coloured wax on their corner. Some had two, or even three. *Allegiances. Which way will they vote? Blue for Lord Brock, red for Lord Isher, black for Marovia, white for Sult, and so on. All subject to change, of course, depending which way the wind blows them.* Below were written lines of small, dense script. Too small for Glokta to read from where he was sitting, but he knew what they said. *Wife was once a whore. Partial to young men. Drinks too much for his good. Murdered a servant in a rage. Gambling debts he cannot cover. Secrets. Rumours. Lies. The tools of this noble trade. Three hundred and twenty names, and just as many sordid little stories, each one to be picked at, and dug out, and jabbed our way. Politics. Truly, the work of the righteous* .

So why do I do this? Why?

The Arch Lector had more pressing concerns. “Brock still leads,” he murmured in a dour drone, staring at the shifting papers with his white gloved hands clasped behind his back. “He has some fifty votes, more or less certain.” *As certain as we can be in these uncertain times.* “Isher is not far behind, with forty or more to his name. Skald has made some recent gains, as far as we can tell. An unexpectedly ruthless man. He has the Starikland delegation more or less in his hand, which gives him thirty votes, perhaps, and Barezin about the same. They are the four main contenders, as things stand.”

But who knows? Perhaps the king will live another year, and by the time it comes to a vote we'll all have killed each other. Glokta had to stifle a grin at the thought. The Lords' Round heaped with richly dressed corpses, every great nobleman in the Union and all twelve members of the Closed Council. *Each stabbed in the back by the man beside. The ugly truth of*

government...

“Did you speak to Heugen?” snapped Sult.

Goyle tossed his balding head and sneered at Glokta with seething annoyance. “Lord Heugen is still struggling under the delusion that he could be our next king, though he cannot certainly control more than a dozen chairs. He barely had time to hear our offer he was so busy scrabbling to coax out more votes. Perhaps in a week, or two, he will see reason. Then he might be encouraged to lean our way, but I wouldn’t bet on it. More likely he’ll throw in his lot with Isher. The two of them have always been close, I understand.”

“Good for them,” hissed Sult. “What about Ingelstad?”

Glokta stirred in his seat. “I presented him with your ultimatum in very blunt terms, your Eminence.”

“Then we can count on his vote?”

How to put this? “I could not say so with absolute certainty. High Justice Marovia was able to make threats almost identical to our own, through his man Harlen Morrow.”

“Morrow? Isn’t he some lickspittle of Hoff’s?”

“It would seem he has moved up in the world.” *Or down, depending on how you look at it.*

“He could be taken care of.” Goyle wore a most unsavoury expression. “Quite easily—”

“No!” snapped Sult. “Why is it, Goyle, that no sooner does a problem appear than you want to kill it! We must tread carefully for now, and show ourselves to be reasonable men, open to negotiation.” He strode to the window, the bright sunlight glittering purple through the great stone on his ring of office. “Meanwhile the business of actually running the country is ignored. Taxes go uncollected. Crimes go unpunished. This bastard they call the Tanner, this demagogue, this traitor, speaks in public at village fairs, urging open rebellion! Daily now, peasants leave their farms and turn to banditry, perpetrating untold theft and damage. Chaos spreads, and we have not the resources to stamp it out. There are only two regiments of the King’s

Own left in Adua, scarcely enough to maintain order in the city. Who knows if one of our noble Lords will tire of waiting and decide to try to seize the crown prematurely? I would not put it past them!”

“Will the army return from the North soon?” asked Goyle.

“Unlikely. That oaf Marshal Burr has spent three months squatting outside Dunbrec, and given Bethod ample time to regroup beyond the Whiteflow. Who knows when he’ll finally get the job done, if ever!” *Months spent destroying our own fortress. It almost makes one wish we’d put less effort into building the place .*

“Twenty-five votes.” The Arch Lector scowled at the crackling papers. “Twenty-five, and Marovia has eighteen? We’re scarcely making progress! For every vote we gain we lose one somewhere else!”

Goyle leaned forwards in his chair. “Perhaps, your Eminence, the time has come to call again on our friend at the University— ”

The Arch Lector hissed furiously, and Goyle snapped his mouth shut. Glokta looked out the great window, pretending that he had heard nothing out of the ordinary. The six crumbling spires of the University dominated the view. *But what help could anyone possibly find there? Amongst the decay, and the dust, from those old idiotsof Adepti?*

Sult did not give him long to consider it. “I will speak to Heugen myself.” And he jabbed one of the papers with a finger. “Goyle, write to Lord Governor Meed and try to elicit his support. Glokta, arrange an interview with Lord Wetterlant. He has yet to declare himself one way or the other. Get out there, the pair of you.” Sult turned from his sheets full of secrets and fixed on Glokta with his hard blue eyes. “Get out there and get . . . me . . . votes!”

Being Chief

Cold night!” shouted the Dogman. “Thought it was meant to be summer!” The three of ’em looked up. The nearest was an old man with grey hair and a face that looked like it had seen some weather. Just past him was a younger man, missing his left arm above the elbow. The third was no more’n a boy, stood down the end of the quay and frowning out at the dark sea.

Dogman faked a nasty limp as he walked over, dragging one leg behind him and wincing like he was in pain. He shuffled under the lamp, dangling on its high pole with the warning bell beside it, and held up the jar so they could all see.

The old man grinned, and leaned his spear against the wall. “Always cold, down by the water.” He came up, rubbing his hands together. “Just as well we got you to keep us warm, eh?”

“Aye. Good luck all round.” Dogman pulled out the stopper and let it dangle, lifted one of the mugs and poured out a slosh.

“No need to be shy, eh, lad?”

“I guess there ain’t at that.” Dogman sloshed out some more. The man with one arm had to set his spear down when he got handed his mug. The boy came up last, and looked Dogman over, wary.

The old one nudged him with an elbow. “You sure your mother’d care for you drinking, boy?”

“Who cares what she’d say?” he growled, trying to make his high voice sound gruff.

Dogman handed him a mug. “You’re old enough to hold a spear, you’re

old enough to hold a cup, I reckon.”

“I’m old enough!” he snapped, snatching it out o’ Dogman’s hand, but he shuddered when he drank from it. Dogman remembered his first drink, feeling mighty sick and wondering what all the fuss was about, and he smiled to himself. The boy thought he was being laughed at, most likely. “Who are you anyway?”

The old man tutted. “Don’t mind him. He’s still young enough to think that rudeness wins respect.”

“S alright,” said Dogman, pouring himself a mug then setting the jar down on the stones, taking time to think out what to say, make sure he didn’t make no mistakes. “My name’s Cregg.” He’d known a man called Cregg once, got killed in a scrap up in the hills. Dogman hadn’t liked him much, and he’d no idea why that name came to mind, but one was about as good as another right then, he reckoned. He slapped his thigh. “Got poked in the leg up at Dunbrec and it ain’t healed right. Can’t march no more. Reckon my days at holding a line are over, so my chief sent me down here, to watch the water with you lot.” He looked out at the sea, flapping and sparkling under the moon like a thing alive. “Can’t say I’m too sorry about it, though. Being honest, I had a skin full o’ fighting.” That last bit was no lie, at least.

“Know how you feel,” said One-Arm, waving his stump in Dogman’s face. “How’re things up there?”

“Alright. Union are still sat outside their own walls, trying everything to get in, and we’re on the other side o’ the river, waiting for ’em. Been that way for weeks.”

“I heard some boys have gone over to the Union. I heard old Threetrees was up there, got killed in that battle.”

“He was a great man, Rudd Threetrees,” said the old boy, “great man.”

“Aye.” Dogman nodded. “That he was.”

“Heard the Dogman took his place, though,” said One-Arm.

“That a fact?”

“So I heard. Mean bastard, that. Huge big lad. They call him Dogman ’cause he bit some woman’s teats off one time.”

Dogman blinked. "Do they now? Well, I never saw him."

"I heard the Bloody-Nine was up there," whispered the boy, eyes big like he was talking about a ghost.

The other two snorted at him. "The Bloody-Nine's dead, boy, and good riddance to that evil fucker." One-Arm shuddered. "Damn it but you get some fool notions!"

"Just what I heard, is all."

The old man swilled down some more grog and smacked his lips. "Don't much matter who's where. Union'll most likely get bored once they've got their fort back. Get bored and go home, across the sea, and everything back to normal. None of 'em will be coming down here to Uffrith, anyway."

"No," said One-Arm happily. "They'll not be coming here."

"Then why we out here watching for 'em?" whined the boy.

The old man rolled his eyes, like he'd heard it ten times before and always made the same answer. "Cause that's the task we been given, lad."

"And once you got a task, you best do it right." Dogman remembered Logen telling him the same thing, and Threetrees too. Both gone now, and back in the mud, but it was still as true as it ever was. "Even if it's a dull task, or a dangerous, or a dark one. Even if it's a task you'd rather not do." Damn it, but he needed to piss. Always did, at a time like this.

"True enough," said the old man, smiling down into his mug. "Things've got to get done."

"That they do. Shame, though. You seem a nice enough set o' lads." And the Dogman reached behind his back, just like he was scratching his arse.

"Shame?" The boy looked puzzled. "How d'you mean a—"

That was when Dow came up behind him and cut his neck open.

Same moment, almost, Grim's dirty hand clamped down on One-Arm's mouth and the bloody point of a blade slid out the gap in his cloak. Dogman jumped forward and gave the old man three quick stabs in the ribs. He wheezed, and stumbled, eyes wide, mug still hanging from his hand, groggy drool spilling out his open mouth. Then he fell down.

The boy crawled a little way. He had one hand to his neck, trying to keep

the blood in, the other reaching out towards the pole the warning bell was hung on. He had some bones, the Dogman reckoned, to be thinking of the bell with a slit throat, but he didn't drag himself more'n a stride before Dow stomped down hard on the back of his neck and squashed him flat.

Dogman winced as he heard the boy's neck bones crunch. He hadn't deserved to die like that, most likely. But that's what war is. A lot of folk getting killed that don't deserve it. The job had needed doing, and they'd done it, and were all three still alive. About as much as he could've hoped for from a piece of work like that, but somehow it still left a sour taste on him. He'd never found it easy, but it was harder than ever, now he was chief. Strange, how it's that much easier to kill folk when you've got someone telling you to do it. Hard business, killing. Harder than you'd think.

Unless your name's Black Dow, of course. That bastard would kill a man as easy as he'd take a piss. That was what made him so damn good at it. Dogman watched him bend down, strip the cloak from One-Arm's limp body and pull it round his own shoulders, then roll the corpse off into the sea, careless as dumping rubbish.

"You got two arms," said Grim, already with the old man's cloak on.

Dow looked down at himself. "What're you saying exactly? I ain't cutting my arm off to make for a better disguise, y'idiot!"

"He means keep it out o' sight." Dogman watched Dow wipe out a mug with a dirty finger, pour himself a slug and knock it back. "How can you drink at a time like this?" he asked, pulling the boy's bloody cloak off his corpse.

Dow shrugged as he poured himself another. "Shame to waste it. And like you said. Cold night." He broke a nasty grin. "Damn it, but you can talk, Dogman. Name's Cregg." He took a couple of limping steps. "Stabbed in me arse up at Dunbrec! Where d'you get it from?" He slapped Grim's shoulder with the back of his hand. "Fucking lovely, eh? They got a word for it, don't they? What's that word, now?"

"Plausible," said Grim.

Dow's eyes lit up. "Plausible. That's what y'are, Dogman. You're one

plausible bastard. I swear, you could've told 'em you was Skarling Hoodless his own self and they'd have believed it. Don't know how you can keep a straight face!"

Dogman didn't feel too much like laughing. He didn't like looking at them two corpses, still laid out on the stones. Kept worrying that the boy'd get cold without his cloak. Damn fool thing to think about, given he was lying in a pool of his own blood a stride across.

"Never mind about that," he grunted. "Dump these two here and get over by the gate. Don't know when there'll be others coming."

"Right y'are, chief, right y'are, whatever you say." Dow heaved the two of them off into the water, then he unhooked the clapper from inside the bell and tossed that into the sea for good measure.

"Shame," said Grim.

"What is?"

"Waste of a bell."

Dow blinked at him. "Waste of a bell, I swear! You got yourself a lot to say all of a sudden, and you know what? I think I liked you better before. Waste of a bell? You lost your mind, boy?"

Grim shrugged. "Southerners might want one, when they get here."

"They can fucking take a dive for the clapper then, can't they!" And Dow snatched up One-Arm's spear and strode over to the open gate, one hand stuffed inside his stolen cloak, grumbling to himself. "Waste of a bell... by the fucking dead..."

The Dogman stretched up on his toes and unhooked the lamp, held it up, facing the sea, then he lifted one side of his cloak to cover it, brought it down again. Lifted it up, brought it down. One more time and he hooked it flickering back on the pole. Seemed a tiny little flame right then, to warm all their hopes at. A tiny little flame, to be seen all the way out there on the water, but the only one they had.

He was waiting all the time for the whole business to go wrong, for the clamour to go up in the town, for five dozen Carls to come pouring out that open gate and give the three o' them the killing they deserved. He was

bursting to piss, thinking about it. But they didn't come. No sound but the empty bell creaking on its pole, the cold waves slapping on stone and wood. It was just the way they'd planned it.

The first boat came gliding out the darkness, Shivers grinning in the prow. A score of Carls were pressed into the boat behind him, working the oars real careful, white faces tensed up, teeth gritted with the effort of keeping quiet. Still, every click and clank of wood and metal set the Dogman's nerves to jumping.

Shivers and his boys hung some sacks of straw over the side as they brought the boat in close, stopping the wood scraping on the stones, all thought out the week before. They tossed up ropes and Dogman and Grim caught 'em, dragged the boat up tight and tied it off. Dogman looked over at Dow, leaning still and easy against the wall by the gate, and he shook his head gently, to say no one was moving in the town. Then Shivers was up the steps, smooth and quiet, squatting down in the darkness.

"Nice work, chief," he whispered, smiling right across his face. "Nice and neat."

"There'll be time to slap each other's backs later. Get the rest o' them boats tied off."

"Right y'are." There were more boats coming now, more Carls, more sacks of straw. Shivers' boys pulled them in, started dragging men up onto the quay. All kinds of men who'd come over the last few weeks. Men who didn't care for Bethod's new way of doing things. Soon there was a good crowd of 'em down by the water. So many Dogman could hardly believe they weren't seen.

They formed up into groups, just the way they'd planned, each one with their own chief and their own task. A couple of the lads knew Uffrith and they'd made a plan of the place in the dirt, the way Threetrees used to. Dogman had every one of 'em learn it. He grinned when he thought of how much Black Dow had carped about that, but it was worth it now. He squatted by the gate, and they came past, one dark and silent group at a time.

Tul was first up, a dozen Carls behind him. "Alright, Thunderhead," said