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THE BLADE ITSELF

THE FIRST LAW
TRILOGY: BOOK 1

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NEW YORK TIMES

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ABERCROMBIE

THE BLADE ITSELF

Book One of the First Law Trilogy

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*For the Four Readers
You know who you are*

The End

Logen plunged through the trees, bare feet slipping and sliding on the wet earth, the slush, the wet pine needles, breath rasping in his chest, blood thumping in his head. He stumbled and sprawled onto his side, nearly cut his chest open with his own axe, lay there panting, peering through the shadowy forest.

The Dogman had been with him until a moment before, he was sure, but there wasn't any sign of him now. As for the others, there was no telling. Some leader, getting split up from his boys like that. He should've been trying to get back, but the Shanka were all around. He could feel them moving between the trees, his nose was full of the smell of them. Sounded as if there was some shouting somewhere on his left, fighting maybe. Logen crept slowly to his feet, trying to stay quiet. A twig snapped and he whipped round.

There was a spear coming at him. A cruel-looking spear, coming at him fast with a Shanka on the other end of it.

"Shit," said Logen. He threw himself to one side, slipped and fell on his face, rolled away thrashing through the brush, expecting the spear through his back at any moment. He scrambled up, breathing hard. He saw the bright point poking at him again, dodged out of the way, slithered behind a big tree trunk. He peered out and the Flathead hissed and stabbed at him. He showed himself on the other side, just for a moment, then ducked away, jumped round the tree and swung the axe down, roaring loud as he could. There was a crack as the blade buried itself deep in the Shanka's skull. Lucky

that, but then Logen reckoned he was due a little luck.

The Flathead stood there, blinking at him. Then it started to sway from side to side, blood dribbling down its face. Then it dropped like a stone, dragging the axe from Logen's fingers, thrashing around on the ground at his feet. He tried to grab hold of his axe-handle but the Shanka still somehow had a grip on its spear and the point was flailing around in the air.

"Gah!" squawked Logen as the spear cut a nick in his arm. He felt a shadow fall across his face. Another Flathead. A damn big one. Already in the air, arms outstretched. No time to get the axe. No time to get out of the way. Logen's mouth opened, but there was no time to say anything. What do you say at a time like that?

They crashed to the wet ground together, rolled together through the dirt and the thorns and the broken branches, tearing and punching and growling at each other. A tree root hit Logen in the head, hard, and made his ears ring. He had a knife somewhere, but he couldn't remember where. They rolled on, and on, downhill, the world flipping and flipping around, Logen trying to shake the fuzz out of his head and throttle the big Flathead at the same time. There was no stopping.

It had seemed a clever notion to pitch camp near the gorge. No chance of anyone sneaking up behind. Now, as Logen slid over the edge of the cliff on his belly, the idea lost much of its appeal. His hands scrabbled at the wet earth. Only dirt and brown pine needles. His fingers clutched, clutched at nothing. He was beginning to fall. He let go a little whimper.

His hands closed around something. A tree root, sticking out from the earth at the very edge of the gorge. He swung in space, gasping, but his grip was firm.

"Hah!" he shouted. "Hah!" He was still alive. It would take more than a few Flatheads to put an end to Logen Ninefingers. He started to pull himself up onto the bank but couldn't manage it. There was some great weight around his legs. He peered down.

The gorge was deep. Very deep with sheer, rocky sides. Here and there a tree clung to a crack, growing out into the empty air and spreading its leaves

into space. The river hissed away far below, fast and angry, foaming white water fringed by jagged black stone. That was all bad, for sure, but the real problem was closer to hand. The big Shanka was still with him, swinging gently back and forth with its dirty hands clamped tight around his left ankle.

“Shit,” muttered Logen. It was quite a scrape he was in. He’d been in some bad ones alright, and lived to sing the songs, but it was hard to see how this could get much worse. That got him thinking about his life. It seemed a bitter, pointless sort of a life now. No one was any better off because of it. Full of violence and pain, with not much but disappointment and hardship in between. His hands were starting to tire now, his forearms were burning. The big Flathead didn’t look like it was going to fall off any time soon. In fact, it had dragged itself up his leg a way. It paused, glaring up at him.

If Logen had been the one clinging to the Shanka’s foot, he would most likely have thought, “My life depends on this leg I’m hanging from—best not take any chances.” A man would rather save himself than kill his enemy. Trouble was that the Shanka didn’t think that way, and Logen knew it. So it wasn’t much of a surprise when it opened its big mouth and sank its teeth into his calf.

“Aaaargh!” Logen grunted, and squealed and kicked out as hard as he could with his bare heel, kicked a bloody gash in the Shanka’s head, but it wouldn’t stop biting, and the harder he kicked, the more his hands slipped on the greasy root above. There wasn’t much root left to hold on to, now, and what there was looked like snapping off any moment. He tried to think past the pain in his hands, the pain in his arms, the Flathead’s teeth in his leg. He was going to fall. The only choice was between falling on rocks or falling on water, and that was a choice that more or less made itself.

Once you’ve got a task to do, it’s better to do it than to live with the fear of it. That’s what Logen’s father would have said. So he planted his free foot firmly on the rock face, took one last deep breath, and flung himself out into empty space with all the strength he had left. He felt the biting teeth let go of him, then the grasping hands, and for a moment he was free.

Then he began to fall. Fast. The sides of the gorge flashed past—grey rock, green moss, patches of white snow, all tumbling around him.

Logen turned over slowly in the air, limbs flailing pointlessly, too scared to scream. The rushing wind whipped at his eyes, tugged at his clothes, plucked the breath out of his mouth. He saw the big Shanka hit the rock face beside him. He saw it break and bounce and flop off, dead for sure. That was a pleasing sight, but Logen's satisfaction was short-lived.

The water came up to meet him. It hit him in the side like a charging bull, punched the air out of his lungs, knocked the sense out of his head, sucked him in and down into the cold darkness...

Part I

“The blade itself incites to deeds of violence.”

—*Homer*

The Survivors

The lapping of water in his ears. That was the first thing. The lapping of water, the rustling of trees, the odd click and twitter of a bird.

Logen opened his eyes a crack. Light, blurry bright through leaves. This was death? Then why did it hurt so much? His whole left side was throbbing. He tried to take a proper breath, choked, coughed up water, spat out mud. He groaned, flopped over onto his hands and knees, dragged himself up out of the river, gasping through clenched teeth, rolled onto his back in the moss and slime and rotten sticks at the water's edge.

He lay there for a moment, staring up at the grey sky beyond the black branches, breath wheezing in his raw throat.

"I am still alive," he croaked to himself. Still alive, in spite of the best efforts of nature, Shanka, men and beasts. Soaking wet and flat on his back, he started to chuckle. Reedy, gurgling laughter. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a survivor.

A cold wind blew across the rotting river bank, and Logen's laughter slowly died. Alive he might be, but staying alive, that was another question. He sat up, wincing at the pain. He tottered to his feet, leaning against the nearest tree trunk. He scraped the dirt out of his nose, his eyes, his ears. He pulled up his wet shirt to take a look at the damage.

His side was covered in bruises from the fall. Blue and purple stains all up his ribs. Tender to the touch, and no mistake, but it didn't feel like anything was broken. His leg was a mess. Torn and bloody from the Shanka's teeth. It hurt bad, but his foot still moved well enough, and that was the

main thing. He'd need his foot, if he was going to get out of this.

He still had his knife in the sheath at his belt, and he was mightily glad to see it. You could never have too many knives in Logen's experience, and this was a good one, but the outlook was still bleak. He was on his own, in woods crawling with Flatheads. He had no idea where he was, but he could follow the river. The rivers all flowed north, from the mountains to the cold sea. Follow the river southwards, against the current. Follow the river and climb up, into the High Places where the Shanka couldn't find him. That was his only chance.

It would be cold up there, this time of year. Deadly cold. He looked down at his bare feet. It was just his luck that the Shanka had come while he had his boots off, trimming his blisters. No coat either—he'd been sitting near the fire. Like this, he wouldn't last a day in the mountains. His hands and feet would turn black in the night, and he'd die bit by bit before he even reached the passes. If he didn't starve first.

"Shit," he muttered. He had to go back to the camp. He had to hope the Flatheads had moved on, hope they'd left something behind. Something he could use to survive. That was an awful lot of hoping, but he had no choice. He never had any choices.

It had started to rain by the time Logen found the place. Spitting drops that plastered his hair to his skull, kept his clothes wet through. He pressed himself against a mossy trunk and peered out towards the camp, heart pounding, fingers of his right hand curled painful tight around the slippery grip of his knife.

He saw the blackened circle where the fire had been, half-burned sticks and ash trampled round it. He saw the big log Threetrees and Dow had been sitting on when the Flatheads came. He saw odd bits of torn and broken gear scattered across the clearing. He counted three dead Shanka crumpled on the ground, one with an arrow poking out of its chest. Three dead ones, but no sign of any alive. That was lucky. Just lucky enough to survive, as always.

Still, they might be back at any moment. He had to be quick.

Logen scuttled out from the trees, casting about on the ground. His boots were still there where he'd left them. He snatched them up and dragged them onto his freezing feet, hopping around, almost slipping in his haste. His coat was there too, wedged under the log, battered and scarred from ten years of weather and war, torn and stitched back together, missing half a sleeve. His pack was lying shapeless in the brush nearby, its contents strewn out down the slope. He crouched, breathless, throwing it all back inside. A length of rope, his old clay pipe, some strips of dried meat, needle and twine, a dented flask with some liquor still sloshing inside. All good. All useful.

There was a tattered blanket snagged on a branch, wet and half caked in grime. Logen pulled it up, and grinned. His old, battered cookpot was underneath. Lying on its side, kicked off the fire in the fight maybe. He grabbed hold of it with both hands. It felt safe, familiar, dented and blackened from years of hard use. He'd had that pot a long time. It had followed him all through the wars, across the North and back again. They had all cooked in it together, out on the trail, all eaten out of it. Forley, Grim, the Dogman, all of them.

Logen looked over the campsite again. Three dead Shanka, but none of his people. Maybe they were still out there. Maybe if he took a risk, tried to look—

"No." He said it quietly, under his breath. He knew better than that. There had been a lot of Flatheads. An awful lot. He had no idea how long he'd lain on the river bank. Even if a couple of the boys had got away, the Shanka would be hunting them, hunting them down in the forests. They were nothing but corpses now, for sure, scattered across the high valleys. All Logen could do was make for the mountains, and try to save his own sorry life. You have to be realistic. Have to be, however much it hurts.

"It's just you and me now," said Logen as he stuffed the pot into his pack and threw it over his shoulder. He started to limp off, as fast as he could. Uphill, towards the river, towards the mountains.

Just the two of them. Him and the pot.

They were the only survivors.

Questions

Why do I do this? Inquisitor Glokta asked himself for the thousandth time as he limped down the corridor. The walls were rendered and whitewashed, though none too recently. There was a seedy feel to the place and a smell of damp. There were no windows, as the hallway was deep beneath the ground, and the lanterns cast slow flowing shadows into every corner.

Why would anyone want to do this? Glokta's walking made a steady rhythm on the grimy tiles of the floor. First the confident click of his right heel, then the tap of his cane, then the endless sliding of his left foot, with the familiar stabbing pains in the ankle, knee, arse and back. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The dirty monotony of the corridor was broken from time to time by a heavy door, bound and studded with pitted iron. On one occasion, Glokta thought he heard a muffled cry of pain from behind one. *I wonder what poor fool is being questioned in there? What crime they are guilty, or innocent of? What secrets are being picked at, what lies cut through, what treasons laid bare?* He didn't wonder long though. He was interrupted by the steps.

If Glokta had been given the opportunity to torture any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of steps. When he was young and widely admired, before his misfortunes, he had never really noticed them. He had sprung down them two at a time and gone blithely on his way. No more. *They're everywhere. You really can't change floors without them. And down is worse than up, that's the thing people never realise. Going up,*

you usually don't fall that far.

He knew this flight well. Sixteen steps, cut from smooth stone, a little worn towards the centre, slightly damp, like everything down here. There was no banister, nothing to cling to. *Sixteen enemies. A challenge indeed.* It had taken Glokta a long time to develop the least painful method of descending stairs. He went sideways like a crab. Cane first, then left foot, then right, with more than the usual agony as his left leg took his weight, joined by a persistent stabbing in the neck. *Why should it hurt in my neck when I go down stairs? Does my neck take my weight? Does it?* Yet the pain could not be denied.

Glokta paused four steps from the bottom. He had nearly beaten them. His hand was trembling on the handle of his cane, his left leg aching like fury. He tongued his gums where his front teeth used to be, took a deep breath and stepped forward. His ankle gave way with a horrifying wrench and he plunged into space, twisting, lurching, his mind a cauldron of horror and despair. He stumbled onto the next step like a drunkard, fingernails scratching at the smooth wall, giving a squeal of terror. *You stupid, stupid bastard!* His cane clattered to the floor, his clumsy feet wrestled with the stones and he found himself at the bottom, by some miracle still standing.

And here it is. That horrible, beautiful, stretched out moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. How long do I have before the pain comes? How bad will it be when it does? Gasping, slack-jawed at the foot of the steps, Glokta felt a tingling of anticipation. *Here it comes...*

The agony was unspeakable, a searing spasm up his left side from foot to jaw. He squeezed his watering eyes tight shut, clamped his right hand over his mouth so hard that the knuckles clicked. His remaining teeth grated against each other as he locked his jaws together, but a high-pitched, jagged moan still whistled from him. *Am I screaming or laughing? How do I tell the difference?* He breathed in heaving gasps, through his nose, snot bubbling out onto his hand, his twisted body shaking with the effort of staying upright.

The spasm passed. Glokta moved his limbs cautiously, one by one, testing

the damage. His leg was on fire, his foot numb, his neck clicked with every movement, sending vicious little stings down his spine. *Pretty good, considering.* He bent down with an effort and snatched up his cane between two fingers, drew himself up once more, wiped the snot and tears on the back of his hand. *Truly a thrill. Did I enjoy it? For most people stairs are a mundane affair. For me, an adventure!* He limped off down the corridor, giggling quietly to himself. He was still smiling ever so faintly when he reached his own door and shuffled inside.

A grubby white box with two doors facing each other. The ceiling was too low for comfort, the room too brightly lit by blazing lamps. Damp was creeping out of one corner and the plaster had erupted with flaking blisters, speckled with black mould. Someone had tried to scrub a long bloodstain from one wall, but hadn't tried nearly hard enough.

Practical Frost was standing on the other side of the room, big arms folded across his big chest. He nodded to Glokta, with all the emotion of a stone, and Glokta nodded back. Between them stood a scarred, stained wooden table, bolted to the floor and flanked by two chairs. A naked fat man sat in one of them, hands tied tightly behind him and with a brown canvas bag over his head. His quick, muffled breathing was the only sound. It was cold down here, but he was sweating. *Aswellheshouldbe.*

Glokta limped over to the other chair, leaned his cane carefully against the edge of the table top and slowly, cautiously, painfully sat down. He stretched his neck to the left and right, then allowed his body to slump into a position approaching comfort. If Glokta had been given the opportunity to shake the hand of any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of chairs. *Hehasmademylifealmostbearable.*

Frost stepped silently out of the corner and took hold of the loose top of the bag between meaty, pale finger and heavy, white thumb. Glokta nodded and the Practical ripped it off, leaving Salem Rews blinking in the harsh light.

A mean, piggy, ugly little face. You mean, ugly pig, Rews. You disgusting swine. You're ready to confess right now, I'll bet, ready to talk

and talk without interruption, until we're all sick of it. There was a big dark bruise across his cheek and another on his jaw above his double chin. As his watering eyes adjusted to the brightness he recognised Glokta sitting opposite him, and his face suddenly filled with hope. *A sadly, sadly misplaced hope.*

"Glokta, you have to help me!" he squealed, leaning forward as far as his bonds would allow, words bubbling out in a desperate, mumbling mess. "I'm falsely accused, you know it, I'm innocent! You've come to help me, yes? You're my friend! You have influence here. We're friends, friends! You could say something for me! I'm an innocent man, falsely accused! I'm—"

Glokta held up his hand for silence. He stared at Rews' familiar face for a moment, as though he had never laid eyes on him before. Then he turned to Frost. "Am I supposed to know this man?"

The albino said nothing. The bottom part of his face was hidden by his Practical's mask, and the top half gave nothing away. He stared unblinking at the prisoner in the chair, pink eyes as dead as a corpse. He hadn't blinked once since Glokta came into the room. *How can he do that?*

"It's me, Rews!" hissed the fat man, the pitch of his voice rising steadily towards panic. "Salem Rews, you know me, Glokta! I was with you in the war, before... you know... we're friends! We—"

Glokta held up his hand again and sat back, tapping one of his few remaining teeth with a fingernail as though deep in thought. "Rews. The name is familiar. A merchant, a member of the Guild of Mercers. A rich man by all accounts. I remember now..." Glokta leaned forward, pausing for effect. "He was a traitor! He was taken by the Inquisition, his property confiscated. You see, he had conspired to avoid the King's taxes." Rews' mouth was hanging open. "The King's taxes!" screamed Glokta, smashing his hand down on the table. The fat man stared, wide-eyed, and licked at a tooth. *Upperrightside, second from the back* .

"But where are our manners?" asked Glokta of no one in particular. "We may or may not have known each other once, but I don't think you and my assistant have been properly introduced. Practical Frost, say hello to this fat

man.”

It was an open-handed blow, but powerful enough to knock Rews clean out of his seat. The chair rattled but was otherwise unaffected. *How is that done? To knock him to the ground but leave the chair standing?* Rews sprawled gurgling across the floor, face flattened on the tiles.

“He reminds me of a beached whale,” said Glokta absently. The albino grabbed Rews under the arm and hauled him up, flung him back into the chair. Blood seeped from a cut on his cheek, but his piggy eyes were hard now. *Blows make most men soften up, but some men harden. I never would have taken this one for a tough man, but life is full of surprises.*

Rews spat blood onto the table top. “You’ve gone too far here, Glokta, oh yes! The Mercers are an honourable guild; we have influence! They won’t put up with this! I’m a known man! Even now my wife will be petitioning the King to hear my case!”

“Ah, your wife.” Glokta smiled sadly. “Your wife is a very beautiful woman. Beautiful, and young. I fear, perhaps, a little too young for you. I fear she took the opportunity to be rid of you. I fear she came forward with your books. All the books.” Rews’ face paled.

“We looked at those books,” Glokta indicated an imaginary pile of papers on his left, “we looked at the books in the treasury,” indicating another on his right. “Imagine our surprise when we could not make the numbers add up. And then there were the night-time visits by your employees to warehouses in the old quarter, the small unregistered boats, the payments to officials, the forged documentation. Must I go on?” asked Glokta, shaking his head in profound disapproval. The fat man swallowed and licked his lips.

Pen and ink were placed before the prisoner, and the paper of confession, filled out in detail in Frost’s beautiful, careful script, awaiting only the signature. *I’ll get him right there and now.*

“Confess, Rews,” Glokta whispered softly, “and put a painless end to this regrettable business. Confess and name your accomplices. We already know who they are. It will be easier on all of us. I don’t want to hurt you, believe me, it will give me no pleasure.” *Nothing will.* “Confess. Confess, and you

will be spared. Exile in Angland is not so bad as they would have you believe. There is still pleasure to be had from life there, and the satisfaction of a day of honest work, in the service of your King. Confess!" Rews stared at the floor, licking at his tooth. Glokta sat back and sighed.

"Or not," he said, "and I can come back with my instruments." Frost moved forward, his massive shadow falling across the fat man's face. "Body found floating by the docks," Glokta breathed, "bloated by seawater and horribly mutilated... far... far beyond recognition." *He's ready to talk. He's fat and ripe and ready to burst.* "Were the injuries inflicted before or after death?" he asked the ceiling breezily. "Was the mysterious deceased a man or a woman even?" Glokta shrugged. "Who can say?"

There was a sharp knock at the door. Rews' face jerked up, filled with hope again. *Not now, damn it!* Frost went to the door, opened it a crack. Something was said. The door shut, Frost leaned down to whisper in Glokta's ear.

"Ith Theverar," came the half-tongued mumble, by which Glokta understood that Severard was at the door.

Already? Glokta smiled and nodded, as if it was good news. Rews' face fell a little. *How could a man whose business has been concealment find it impossible to hide his emotions in this room?* But Glokta knew how. *It's hard to stay calm when you're terrified, helpless, alone, at the mercy of men with no mercy at all. Who could know that better than me?* He sighed, and using his most world-weary tone of voice asked, "Do you wish to confess?"

"No!" The defiance had returned to the prisoner's piggy eyes now. He stared back, silent and watchful, and sucked. *Surprising. Very surprising. But then we're just getting started.*

"Is that tooth bothering you, Rews?" There was nothing Glokta didn't know about teeth. His own mouth had been worked on by the very best. *Or the very worst, depending on how you look at it.* "It seems that I must leave you now, but while I'm away, I'll be thinking about that tooth. I'll be considering very carefully what to do with it." He took hold of his cane. "I