

Advance Praise

"You should always end with the best. . . . *Last Argument of Kings* is the textbook example of this theory in practice. The third in Joe Abercrombie's debut fantasy series, *The First Law*, reveals everything a finale should: conveys some answers, ties together the loose ends from various plot strands, knocks over pieces painstakingly set up in the preceding stories, and in the aftermath delivers the character development that surprises as well as delights. This series was always a swords-and-sorcery sequence that rejected the overwrought Tolkienesque myth building in favor of wry dialogue and tough, interweaving plotlines. Although it's never a comedy, the author's tongue lurks inside his cheek as he reenergizes the fantasy staples."

SFX, five-star review

"*Last Argument of Kings* delivers exactly what this trilogy needed: a no-holds-barred war story in which secrets are exposed, mysteries are explained, and the author resolutely refuses to pull any punches. . . . The ending is superb."

The Wertzone, 4.5/5

"The *First Law* is, I strongly believe, a seminal work of modern fantasy. It is a benchmark sequence that should be regarded as an example of all that is truly great in today's genre fiction. It stands way above the vast majority of the marketplace, tainted as so many fantasy works are with the lofty and portentous myth cycles bequeathed to us by Tolkien. Instead Abercrombie's work reflects today's harsher world within its pages. This is fantasy come of age. . . . Very highly recommended."

John Berlyne, *SF Revu*

"Each book in this trilogy has shown a distinct improvement, and with this fantastic concluding volume, I'd even go as far as to say it's become one of my favorite series. . . . There are some unexpected promotions, unexpected betrayals, and unexpected deaths, and overall there are plenty of fantasy conventions beaten bloody and sent packing."

Sandstorm Reviews, 9.5/10

“Joe delivers his normal dose of intrigue, action, and black humor but ramps it all up a gear and smacks you in the gut with some stuff that I guarantee you will not see coming. And then (while you’re gasping for breath) he does it all over again, rendering some of the most powerful battles I’ve seen in fantasy literature almost pointless with the revelations that follow.”

Graeme’s Fantasy Book Review, 9.75/10

“*Last Argument of Kings* has everything you could ask for: huge battles, political intrigue, masterly characterization, and surprises by the bucket-load. This book will by turns shock you, excite you, make you laugh, and above all entertain you.”

Speculative Horizons, 9.75/10

“*Last Argument of Kings* ends the First Law trilogy with a mordant brilliance that recalls K. J. Parker’s Engineer trilogy. . . . Despite the apparent medievalism of its courts and tribes, this is industrial-strength, politically savvy fantasy reworked for our own times.”

Locus magazine

“For those jaded by the genre’s predictability yet hopeful about revisiting the elements that encouraged them to read fantasy in the first place, this might be the series. A trilogy that justifies being a trilogy, produced in three years. (Note that: a book a year.) Lou Anders of Pyr once claimed that Joe could be mentioned (albeit quietly) alongside George R. R. Martin. After this, I can only agree. For those who have stuck the course, this trilogy shows an amazing development and progression, not only in scope but also in writing style. And the man’s only three books into what, I hope, will be a lengthy publishing career. How do you top this? Recommended very highly.”

SFF World

“*Last Argument of Kings* is an excellent conclusion to what turned out to be a very entertaining series. And by demonstrating that he can close the show with a bang, Joe Abercrombie now holds the pole position as far as ‘the bright new voices of the fantasy genre’ are concerned.”

Pat’s Fantasy Hotlist

LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS

Also by Joe Abercrombie:

The Blade Itself

(The First Law—Book One)

Before They Are Hanged

(The First Law—Book Two)

LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS

Joe Abercrombie



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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 Glokta 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.* Glokta 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 painfully 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 England'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 wine-skin.* 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 Isber, 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 and 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 idiots of 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!"