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THE BLADE ITSELF

THE FIRST LAW
TRILOGY: BOOK 1

JOE

NEW YORK TIMES

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

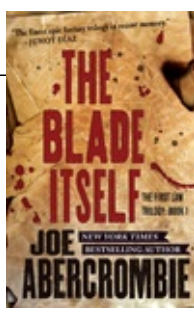
ABERCROMBIE

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 on his side, nearly cut his chest open with his own axe, lay there panting, peering through the shadow 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 the Flathead 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. He

hands scabbled at the wet earth. Only dirt and brown pine needles. His fingers clutched, clutched 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 he’d 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. He 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, Shankas, men and beasts. Soaking wet and flat on his back, he started to chuckle. Reedy, gurgling laughter. Said 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 Shankas 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 toward 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. For Leg 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 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 on 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, slapping

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 on 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. *As well he should be.*

Glokta limped over to the other chair, leaned his cane carefully against the edge of the table to the left 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. *He has made my life almost bearable.*

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 Rev 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

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. "Sale 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 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. *Upper right side, 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 by Practical Frost's beautiful, careful script, awaiting only the signature. *I'll get him right here 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 and whispered in Glokta's ear.~~

"Ith Theverar," came the half-tongued mumble, by which Glokta understood that Severard was 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 me 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 want you to think about me, thinking about your tooth. And I also want you to think, very carefully, about signing your confession."

Glokta got awkwardly to his feet, shaking out his aching leg. "I think you may respond well to straightforward beating however, so I'm going to leave you in the company of Practical Frost for half an hour." Rews' mouth became a silent circle of surprise. The albino picked up the chair, fat man and all, and turned it slowly around. "He's absolutely the best there is at this kind of thing." Frost took off a pair of battered leather gloves and began to pull them carefully onto his big white hands, one finger at a time. "You always did like to have the very best of everything, eh, Rews?" Glokta made for the door.

"Wait! Glokta!" wailed Rews over his shoulder. "Wait I—"

Practical Frost clamped a gloved hand over the fat man's mouth and held a finger to his mask. "Thhhhhhh," he said. The door clicked shut.

Severard was leaning against the wall in the corridor, one foot propped on the plaster behind him, whistling tunelessly beneath his mask and running a hand through his long, lanky hair. As Glokta came through the door he straightened up and gave a little bow, and it was plain by his eyes that he was smiling. *He's always smiling.*

"Superior Kalyne wants to see you," he said in his broad, common accent, "and I'm of the opinion that I never saw him angrier."

"Severard, you poor thing, you must be terrified. Do you have the box?"

"I do."

"And you took something out for Frost?"

"I did."

"And something for your wife too, I hope?"

"Oh yes," said Severard, his eyes smiling more than ever. "My wife will be well taken care of. If she ever get one."

"Good. I hasten to answer the call of the Superior. When I have been with him for five minutes, come in with the box."

"Just barge into his office?"

“Barge in and stab him in the face for all I care.”

“I’d consider that done, Inquisitor.”

Glokta nodded, turned away, then turned back. “Don’t really stab him, eh, Severard?”

The Practical smiled with his eyes and sheathed his vicious-looking knife. Glokta rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, then limped off, his cane tapping on the tiles, his leg throbbing. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The Superior’s office was a large and richly appointed room high up in the House of Questions, a room in which everything was too big and too fancy. A huge, intricate window dominated one wood-panelled wall, offering a view over the well-tended gardens in the courtyard below. An equally huge and ornate desk stood in the centre of a richly coloured carpet from somewhere warm and exotic. The head of a fierce animal from somewhere cold and exotic was mounted above a magnificent stone fireplace with a tiny, mean fire close to burning out inside.

Superior Kalyne himself made his office look small and drab. A vast, florid man in his late fifties, he had over-compensated for his thinning hair with magnificent white side whiskers. He was considered a daunting presence even within the Inquisition, but Glokta was past scaring, and they both knew it.

There was a big, fancy chair behind the desk, but the Superior was pacing up and down while he screamed, his arms waving. Glokta was seated on something which, while doubtless expensive, had clearly been designed to make its occupant as uncomfortable as possible. *It doesn’t bother me much though. Uncomfortable is as good as I ever get.*

He amused himself with the thought of Kalyne’s head mounted above the fireplace instead of the fierce animal’s, while the Superior ranted at him. *He’s every bit like his fireplace, the big dolt. Look impressive, but there’s not much going on underneath. I wonder how he’d respond to an interrogation? I’d start with those ridiculous side whiskers.* But Glokta’s face was a mask of attention and respect.

“Well you’ve outdone yourself this time, Glokta, you mad cripple! When the Mercers find out about this they’ll have you flayed!”

“I’ve tried flaying, it tickles.” *Damn it, keep your mouth shut and smile. Where’s that whistling fool Severard? I’ll have him flayed when I get out of here.*

“Oh yes, that’s good, that’s very good, Glokta, look at me laugh! And evasion of the King’s taxes?” The Superior glowered down, whiskers bristling. “The King’s taxes?” he screamed, spraying Glokta with spit. “They’re all at it! The Mercers, the Spicers, all of them! Every damn fool with a boat!”

“But this was so open, Superior. It was an insult to us. I felt we had to—”

“You felt?” Kalyne was red-faced and vibrating with rage. “You were explicitly told to keep away from the Mercers, away from the Spicers, away from all the big guilds!” He strode up and down with ever greater speed. *You’ll wear your carpet out at this rate. The big guilds will have to buy you a new one.*

“You felt, did you? Well he’ll have to go back! We’ll have to release him and you’ll have to fee your way to a grovelling apology! It’s a damn disgrace! You’ve made me look ridiculous! Where is he now?”

“I left him in the company of Practical Frost.”

“With that mumbling animal?” The Superior tore at his hair in desperation. “Well that’s it then isn’t it? He’ll be a ruin now! We can’t send him back in that condition! You’re finished here, Glokta”

Finished! I'm going straight to the Arch Lector! Straight to the Arch Lector!"

~~The huge door was kicked open and Severard sauntered in carrying a wooden box. *And not moment too soon.*~~ The Superior stared, speechless, open-mouthed with wrath, as Severard dropped on the desk with a thump and a jingle.

"What the hell is the meaning of..." Severard pulled open the lid, and Kalyne saw the money. *A that lovely money.* He stopped in mid-rant, mouth stuck forming the next sound. He looked surprised then he looked puzzled, then he looked cautious. He pursed his lips and slowly sat down.

"Thank you, Practical Severard," said Glokta. "You may go." The Superior was stroking thoughtfully at his side whiskers as Severard strolled out, his face returning gradually to its usual shade of pink. "Confiscated from Rews. The property of the Crown now, of course. I thought that should give it to you, as my direct superior, so that you could pass it on to the Treasury." *Or buy bigger desk, you leech.*

Glokta leaned forward, hands on his knees. "You could say, perhaps, that Rews went too far, that questions had been asked, that an example had to be made. We can't be seen to do nothing, after all. It'll make the big guilds nervous, keep them in line." *It'll make them nervous and you can screw more out of them.* "Or you could always tell them that I'm a mad cripple, and blame me for it."

The Superior was starting to like it now, Glokta could tell. He was trying not to show it, but his whiskers were quivering at the sight of all that money. "Alright, Glokta. Alright. Very well." He reached out and carefully shut the lid of the box. "But if you ever think of doing something like that again... talk to me first, would you? I don't like surprises."

Glokta struggled to his feet, limped towards the door. "Oh, and one more thing!" He turned stiffly back. Kalyne was staring at him severely from beneath his big, fancy brows. "When I go to see the Mercers, I'll need to take Rews' confession."

Glokta smiled broadly, showing the yawning gap in his front teeth. "That shouldn't be a problem, Superior."

Kalyne had been right. There was no way that Rews could have gone back in this condition. His lips were split and bloody, his sides covered in darkening bruises, his head lolled sideways, face swollen almost past recognition. *In short, he looks like a man ready to confess.*

"I don't imagine you enjoyed the last half hour, Rews, I don't imagine you enjoyed it much at all. Perhaps it was the worst half hour of your life, I really couldn't say. I'm thinking about what we have for you here, though, and the sad fact is... that's about as good as it gets. That's the high life." Glokta leaned forward, his face just inches from the bloody pulp of Rews' nose. "Practical Frost's a little gentler compared to me," he whispered. "He's a kitten. Once I get started with you, Rews, you'll be looking back on this with nostalgia. You'll be begging me to give you half an hour with the Practical. Do you understand?" Rews was silent, except for the air whistling through his broken nose.

"Show him the instruments," whispered Glokta.

Frost stepped forward and opened the polished case with a theatrical flourish. It was a masterpiece of craftsmanship. As the lid was pulled back, the many trays inside lifted and fanned out displaying Glokta's tools in all their gruesome glory. There were blades of every size and shape, needles curved and straight, bottles of oil and acid, nails and screws, clamps and pliers, saws, hammers, chisels. Metal, wood and glass glittered in the bright lamplight, all polished to mirror-brightness and honed to a murderous sharpness. A big purple swelling under Rews' left eye had closed it completely, but the other darted over the instruments: terrified, fascinated. The functions of some

were horribly obvious, the functions of others were horribly obscure. *Which scare him more, wonder?*

“We were talking about your tooth, I think,” murmured Glokta. Rews’ eye flicked up to look at him. “Or would you like to confess?” *I have him, here he comes. Confess, confess, confess, confess...*

There was a sharp knock at the door. *Damn it again!* Frost opened it a crack and there was a bribe whispering. Rews licked at his bloated lip. The door shut, the albino leaned to whisper in Glokta’s ear.

“Ith the Arth Ector.” Glokta froze. *The money was not enough. While I was shuffling back from Kalyne’s office, the old bastard was reporting me to the Arch Lector. Am I finished then?* He felt a guilty thrill at the thought. *Well, I’ll see to this fat pig first.*

“Tell Severard I’m on my way.” Glokta turned back to talk to his prisoner, but Frost put a big white hand on his shoulder.

“O. The Arth Ector,” Frost pointed to the door, “he’th ere. Ow.”

Here? Glokta could feel his eyelid twitching. *Why?* He pushed himself up using the edge of the table. *Will they find me in the canal tomorrow? Dead and bloated, far... far beyond recognition?* The only emotion that he felt at the idea was a flutter of mild relief. *No more stairs.*

The Arch Lector of His Majesty’s Inquisition was standing outside in the corridor. The grimy wall looked almost brown behind him, so brilliantly spotless were his long white coat, his white gloves, his shock of white hair. He was past sixty, but showed none of the infirmity of age. Every tall, clear shaven, fine-boned inch of him was immaculately turned out. *He looks like a man who has never once in his life been surprised by anything.*

They had met once before, six years earlier when Glokta joined the Inquisition, and he hardly seemed to have changed. Arch Lector Sult. One of the most powerful men in the Union. *One of the most powerful men in the world, come to that.* Behind him, almost like outsized shadows, loomed two enormous, silent, black-masked Practicals.

The Arch Lector gave a thin smile when he saw Glokta shuffle out of his door. It said a lot, the smile. *Mild scorn, mild pity, the very slightest touch of menace. Anything but amusement.* “Inquisition Glokta,” he said, holding out one white-gloved hand, palm down. A ring with a huge purple stone flashed on his finger.

“I serve and obey, your Eminence.” Glokta could not help grimacing as he bent slowly forward to touch his lips to the ring. A difficult and painful manoeuvre, it seemed to take forever. When he finally hoisted himself back upright, Sult was gazing at him calmly with his cool blue eyes. A look that implied he already understood Glokta completely, and was unimpressed.

“Come with me.” The Arch Lector turned and swept away down the corridor. Glokta limped along after him, the silent Practicals marching close behind. Sult moved with an effortless, languid confidence, coat tails flapping gracefully out behind him. *Bastard.* Soon they reached a door, much like his own. The Arch Lector unlocked it and went inside, the Practicals took up positions on either side of the doorway, arms folded. *A private interview then. One which I, perhaps, will never leave.* Glokta stepped over the threshold.

A box of grubby white plaster too brightly lit and with a ceiling too low for comfort. It had a bulge crack instead of a damp patch, but was otherwise identical to his own room. It had the scarred table, the cheap chairs, it even had a poorly cleaned bloodstain. *I wonder if they’re painted on, for the effect.* One of the Practicals suddenly pulled the door shut with a loud bang. Glokta was intended to jump, but he couldn’t be bothered.

Arch Lector Sult lowered himself gracefully into one of the seats, drew a heavy sheaf of yellowing papers across the table towards him. He waved his hand at the other chair, the one that would be used

by the prisoner. The implications were not lost on Glokta.

“I prefer to stand, your Eminence.”

Sult smiled at him. He had lovely, pointy teeth, all shiny white. “No, you don’t.”

He has me there. Glokta lowered himself ungracefully into the prisoner’s chair while the Arch Lector turned over the first page of his wedge of documents, frowned and shook his head gently though horribly disappointed by what he saw. *The details of my illustrious career, perhaps?*

“I had a visit from Superior Kalyne not long ago. He was most upset.” Sult’s hard blue eyes came up from his papers. “Upset with you, Glokta. He was quite vocal on the subject. He told me that you are an uncontrollable menace, that you act without a thought for the consequences, that you are a maimed cripple. He demanded that you be removed from his department.” The Arch Lector smiled, a cold, nasty smile, the kind Glokta used on his prisoners. *But with more teeth.* “I think he had it in mind that you be removed... altogether.” They stared at each other across the table.

Is this where I beg for mercy? Is this where I crawl on the ground and kiss your feet? Well, I don’t care enough to beg and I’m far too stiff to crawl. Your Practicals will have to kill me sitting down. Cut my throat. Bash my head in. Whatever. As long as they get on with it.

But Sult was in no rush. The white-gloved hands moved neatly, precisely, the pages hissed and crackled. “We have few men like you in the Inquisition, Glokta. A nobleman, from an excellent family. A champion swordsman, a dashing cavalry officer. A man once groomed for the very top.” Sult looked him up and down as though he could hardly believe it.

“That was before the war, Arch Lector.”

“Obviously. There was much dismay at your capture, and little hope that you would be returned alive. As the war dragged on and the months passed, hope diminished to nothing, but when the treaty was signed, you were among those prisoners returned to the Union.” He peered at Glokta through narrowed eyes. “Did you talk?”

Glokta couldn’t help himself, he spluttered with shrill laughter. It echoed strangely in the courtroom. Not a sound you often heard down here. “Did I talk? I talked until my throat was raw. I told them everything I could think of. I screamed every secret I’d ever heard. I babbled like a fool. When I ran out of things to tell them I made things up. I pissed myself and cried like a girl. Everyone does.”

“But not everyone survives. Two years in the Emperor’s prisons. No one else lasted half that long. The physicians were sure you would never leave your bed again, but a year later you made your application to the Inquisition.” *We both know it. We were both there. What do you want from me, and why not get on with it? I suppose some men just love the sound of their own voices.*

“I was told that you were crippled, that you were broken, that you could never be mended, that you could never be trusted. But I was inclined to give you a chance. Some fool wins the Contest every year, and wars produce many promising soldiers, but your achievement in surviving those two years was unique. So you were sent to the North, and put in charge of one of our mines there. What did you make of England?”

A filthy sink of violence and corruption. A prison where we have made slaves of the innocent and guilty alike in the name of freedom. A stinking hole where we send those we hate and those we are ashamed of to die of hunger, and disease, and hard labour. “It was cold,” said Glokta.

“And so were you. You made few friends in England. Precious few among the Inquisition, and none among the exiles.” He plucked a tattered letter from among the papers and cast a critical eye over it. “Superior Goyle told me that you were a cold fish, had no blood in you at all. He thought you’d never amount to anything, that he could make no use of you.” *Goyle. That bastard. The butcher. I’d rather have no blood than no brains.*

“But after three years, production was up. It was doubled in fact. So you were brought back Adua, to work under Superior Kalyne. I thought perhaps you would learn discipline with him, but seems I was wrong. You insist on going your own way.” The Arch Lector frowned up at him. “To be frank, I think that Kalyne is afraid of you. I think they all are. They don’t like your arrogance, they don’t like your methods, they don’t like your... special insight into our work.”

“And what do you think, Arch Lector?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure I like your methods much either, and I doubt that your arrogance entirely deserved. But I like your results. I like your results very much.” He slapped the bundle of papers closed and rested one hand on top of it, leaning across the table towards Glokta. *As I might lean towards my prisoners when I ask them to confess.* “I have a task for you. A task that should make better use of your talents than chasing around after petty smugglers. A task that may allow you to redeem yourself in the eyes of the Inquisition.” The Arch Lector paused for a long moment. “I want you to arrest Sepp dan Teufel.”

Glokta frowned. *Teufel?* “The Master of the Mints, your Eminence?”

“The very same.”

The Master of the Royal Mints. An important man from an important family. A very big fish, to be hooked in my little tank. A fish with powerful friends. It could be dangerous, arresting a man like that. It could be fatal. “May I ask why?”

“You may not. Let me worry about the whys. You concentrate on obtaining a confession.”

“A confession to what, Arch Lector?”

“Why, to corruption and high treason! It seems our friend the Master of the Mints has been most indiscreet in some of his personal dealings. It seems he has been taking bribes, conspiring with the Guild of Mercers to defraud the King. As such, it would be very useful if a ranking Mercer were to name him, in some unfortunate connection.”

It can hardly be a coincidence that I have a ranking Mercer in my interrogation room, even as you speak. Glokta shrugged. “Once people start talking, it’s shocking the names that tumble out.”

“Good.” The Arch Lector waved his hand. “You may go, Inquisitor. I will come for Teufel’s confession this time tomorrow. You had better have it.”

Glokta breathed slowly as he laboured back along the corridor. *Breath in, breath out. Calm.* He had not expected to leave that room alive. *And now I find myself moving in powerful circles. A person on a task for the Arch Lector, squeezing a confession to high treason from one of the Union’s most trusted officials. The most powerful of circles, but for how long? Why me? Because of my results?*

Or because I won’t be missed?

I apologise for all the interruptions today, really I do, it’s like a brothel in here with all the coming and going.” Rew’s twisted his cracked and swollen lips into a sad smile. *Smiling at a time like this, he is a marvel. But all things must end.* “Let us be honest, Rew. No one is coming to help you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. You will confess. The only choices you have are when, and the state you’ll be in when you do. There’s really nothing to be gained by putting it off. Except pain. We’ve got lots of that for you.”

It was hard to read the expression on Rew’s bloody face, but his shoulders sagged. He dipped the pen in the ink with a trembling hand, wrote his name, slightly slanted, across the bottom of the paper of confession. *I win again. Does my leg hurt any less? Do I have my teeth back? Has it helped me destroy this man, who I once called a friend? Then why do I do this?* The scratching of the nib on the

paper was the only reply.

“Excellent,” said Glokta. Practical Frost turned the document over. “And this is the list of your accomplices?” He let his eye scan lazily over the names. *A handful of junior Mercers, three ship captains, an officer of the city watch, a pair of minor customs officials. A tedious recipe indeed. Let us see if we can add some spice.* Glokta turned it around and pushed it back across the table. “Add Sepp dan Teufel’s name to the list, Rews.”

The fat man looked confused. “The Master of the Mints?” he mumbled, through his thick lips.

“That’s the one.”

“But I never met the man.”

“So?” snapped Glokta. “Do as I tell you.” Rews paused, mouth a little open. “Write, you fat pig!” Practical Frost cracked his knuckles.

Rews licked his lips. “Sepp... dan... Teufel,” he mumbled to himself as he wrote.

“Excellent.” Glokta carefully shut the lid on his horrible, beautiful instruments. “I’m glad for both our sakes that we won’t be needing these today.”

Frost snapped the manacles shut on the prisoner’s wrists and dragged him to his feet, started to march him towards the door at the back of the room. “What now?” shouted Rews over his shoulder.

“England, Rews, England. Don’t forget to pack something warm.” The door cracked shut behind him. Glokta looked at the list of names in his hands. Sepp dan Teufel’s sat at the bottom. *One name. On the face of it, just like the others. Teufel. Just one more name. But such a perilous one.*

Severard was waiting outside in the corridor, smiling as always. “Shall I put the fat man in the canal?”

“No, Severard. Put him in the next boat to England.”

“You’re in a merciful mood today, Inquisitor.”

Glokta snorted. “Mercy would be the canal. That swine won’t last six weeks in the North. Forget him. We have to arrest Sepp dan Teufel tonight.”

Severard’s eyebrows rose. “Not the Master of the Mints?”

“None other. On the express orders of his Eminence the Arch Lector. It seems he’s been taking money from the Mercers.”

“Oh, for shame.”

“We’ll leave as soon as it gets dark. Tell Frost to be ready.”

The thin Practical nodded, his long hair swaying. Glokta turned and hobbled up the corridor, cane tapping on the grimy tiles, left leg burning.

Why do I do this? He asked himself again.

Why do I do this?

No Choice at All

Logen woke with a painful jolt. He was lying awkwardly, head twisted against something hard, knees drawn up towards his chest. He opened his eyes a bleary crack. It was dark, but there was a faint glow coming from somewhere. Light through snow.

Panic stabbed at him. He knew where he was now. He'd piled some snow in the entrance to the tiny cave, to try and keep in the warmth, such as it was. It must have snowed while he was sleeping, and sealed him in. If the fall had been a heavy one there could be a lot of snow out there. Drifts deeper than a man was tall. He might never get out. He could have climbed all the way up out of the high valleys just to die in a hole in the rock, too cramped for him to even stretch out his legs.

Logen twisted round in the narrow space as best he could, dug away at the snow with his numb hands, floundering at it, grappling with it, hacking through it, mouthing breathless curses to himself. Light spilled in suddenly, searing bright. He shoved the last of the snow out of the way and dragged himself through into the open air.

The sky was a brilliant blue, the sun was blazing overhead. He turned his face towards it, closed his stinging eyes and let the light wash over him. The air was painful cold in his throat. Cutting cold. His mouth was dry as dust, his tongue a piece of wood, badly carved. He scooped up snow and shoved it into his mouth. It melted, he swallowed. Cold, it made his head hurt.

There was a graveyard stink coming from somewhere. Not just his own damp and sour sweat smell, though that was bad enough. It was the blanket, starting to rot. He had two pieces of it wrapped round his hands like mittens, tied round his wrists with twine, another round his head, like a dirty, foul-smelling hood. His boots were stuffed tight with it. The rest was wrapped round and round his body under his coat. It smelled bad, but it had saved his life last night, and that was a good trade to Logen's mind. It would stink a good deal more before he could afford to get rid of it.

He floundered to his feet and stared about. A narrow valley, steep-sided and choked with snow. Three great peaks surrounded it, piles of dark grey stone and white snow against the blue sky. He knew them. Old friends, in fact. The only ones he had left. He was up in the High Places. The roof of the world. He was safe.

"Safe," he croaked to himself, but without much joy. Safe from food, certainly. Safe from warmth without a doubt. Neither of those things would be troubling him up here. He'd escaped the Shanks maybe, but this was a place for the dead, and if he stayed he'd be joining them.

He was brutal hungry as it was. His belly was a great, painful hole that called to him with piercing cries. He fumbled in his pack for the last strip of meat. An old, brown, greasy thing like a dry twine. That would hardly fill the gap, but it was all he had. He tore at it with his teeth, tough as old boot leather, and choked it down with some snow.

Logen shielded his eyes with his arm and looked northward down the valley, the way he'd come to

day before. The ground dropped slowly away, snow and rock giving way to the pine-covered fells of the high valleys, trees giving way to a crinkled strip of grazing land, grassy hills giving way to the sea and a sparkling line on the far horizon. Home. The thought of it made Logen feel sick.

Home. That was where his family was. His father—wise and strong, a good man, a good leader for his people. His wife, his children. They were a good family. They deserved a better son, a better husband, a better father. His friends were there too. Old and new together. It would be good to see them all again, very good. To speak to his father in the long hall. To play with his children, to sit with his wife by the river. To talk of tactics with Threetrees. To hunt with the Dogman in the high valley, crashing through the forest with a spear, laughing like a fool.

Logen felt a sudden painful longing. He nearly choked on the pain of it. Trouble was, they were all dead. The hall was a ring of black splinters, the river a sewer. He'd never forget coming over the hills, seeing the burnt-out ruin in the valley below. Crawling through the ashes, fumbling for signs that someone got away, while the Dogman pulled at his shoulder and told him to give it up. Nothing but corpses, rotted past knowing. He was done looking for signs. They were all dead as the Shanka could make them, and that was dead for sure. He spat in the snow, brown spit from the dry meat. Dead and cold and rotted, or burned to ashes. Gone back to the mud.

Logen set his jaw and clenched his fists under the rotten shreds of blanket. He could go back to the ruins of the village by the sea, just one last time. He could charge down with a fighting roar in his throat, the way he had done at Carleon, when he'd lost a finger and won a reputation. He could put a few Shanka out of the world. Split them like he'd split Shama Heartless, shoulder to guts so his insides fell out. He could get vengeance for his father, his wife, his children, his friends. That would be a fitting end for the one they called the Bloody-Nine. To die killing. That might be a song worth the singing.

But at Carleon he'd been young and strong, and with his friends behind him. Now he was weak, and hungry, and alone as could be. He'd killed Shama Heartless with a long sword, sharp as anything. He looked down at his knife. It might be a good one, but he'd get precious little vengeance with it. And who'd sing the song anyway? The Shanka had poor singing voices and worse imaginations, if they even recognised the stinking beggar in the blanket after they'd shot him full of arrows. Perhaps the vengeance could wait, at least until he had a bigger blade to work with. You have to be realistic, after all.

South then, and become a wanderer. There was always work for a man with his skills. Hard work, perhaps, and dark, but work all the same. There was an appeal in it, he had to admit. To have no one depending on him but himself, for his decisions to hold no importance, for no one's life or death to be in his hands. He had enemies in the south, that was a fact. But the Bloody-Nine had dealt with enemies before.

He spat again. Now that he had some spit he thought he might make the most of it. It was about all he did have—spit, an old pot, and some stinking bits of blanket. Dead in the north or alive in the south. That was what it came down to, and that was no choice at all.

You carry on. That's what he'd always done. That's the task that comes with surviving, whether you deserve to live or not. You remember the dead as best you can. You say some words for them. Then you carry on, and you hope for better.

Logen took in a long, cold breath, and blew it out. "Fare you well, my friends," he muttered. "Fare you well." Then he threw his pack over his shoulder, turned, and began to flounder through the deep snow. Downwards, southwards, out of the mountains.

It was raining, still. A soft rain that coated everything in cold dew, collected on the branches, on the leaves, on the needles, and dripped off in great fat drops that soaked through Logen's wet clothes and onto his wet skin.

He squatted, still and silent, in the damp brush, water running down his face, the bright blade of his knife glistening with wet. He felt the great motion of the forest and heard all its thousand sounds. The countless crawling of the insects, the blind scuttling of the moles, the timid rustling of the deer, the slow pulsing of the sap in the old tree trunks. Each thing alive in the forest was in search of its own kind of food, and he was the same. He let his mind settle on an animal close to him, moving cautiously through the woods to his right. Delicious. The forest grew silent but for the endless dripping of water from the branches. The world shrank down to Logen and his next meal.

When he reckoned it was close enough, he sprang forward and bore it down onto the wet ground. A young deer. It kicked and struggled but he was strong and quick, and he stabbed his knife into its neck and chopped the throat out. Hot blood surged from the wound, spilled out across Logen's hands, onto the wet earth.

He picked up the carcass and slung it over his shoulders. That would be good in a stew, maybe with some mushrooms. Very good. Then, once he'd eaten, he would ask the spirits for guidance. The guidance was pretty useless, but the company would be welcome.

When he reached his camp it was close to sunset. It was a dwelling fit for a hero of Logen's stature—two big sticks holding a load of damp branches over a hollow in the dirt. Still, it was halfway dry there, and the rain had stopped. He would have a fire tonight. It was a long time since he'd had a tree like that. A fire, and all his own.

Later, well fed and rested, Logen pressed a lump of chagga into his pipe. He'd found it growing a few days before at the base of a tree, big moist yellow discs of it. He'd broken off a good chunk for himself, but it hadn't dried out enough to smoke until today. Now he took a burning twig from the fire and stuck it in the bowl, puffing away hard until the fungus caught and began to burn, giving off its familiar earthy-sweet smell.

Logen coughed, blew out brown smoke and stared into the shifting flames. His mind went back to other times and other campfires. The Dogman was there, grinning, the light gleaming on his pointed teeth. Tul Duru was sitting opposite, big as a mountain, laughing like thunder. Forley the Weakest too, with those nervous eyes darting around, always a little scared. Rudd Threetrees was there, and Hardin Grim, saying nothing. He never did say anything. That was why they called him Grim.

They were all there. Only they weren't. They were all dead, gone back to the mud. Logen tapped the pipe out into the fire and shoved it away. He had no taste for it now. His father had been right. You should never smoke alone.

He unscrewed the cap of the battered flask, took a mouthful, and blew it out in a spray of tiny drops. A gout of flame went up into the cold air. Logen wiped his lips, savouring the hot, bitter taste. Then he sat back against the knotted trunk of a pine, and waited.

It was a while before they came. Three of them. They came silently from the dancing shadows among the trees and made slowly for the fire, taking shape as they moved into the light.

"Ninefingers," said the first.

"Ninefingers," the second.

"Ninefingers," the third, voices like the thousand sounds of the forest.

"You're right welcome to my fire," said Logen. The spirits squatted and stared at him without expression. "Only three tonight?"

The one on the right spoke first. "Every year fewer of us wake from the winter. We are all that remain. A few more winters will pass, and we will sleep also. There will be none of us left to answer your call."

Logen nodded sadly. "Any news from the world?"

"We heard a man fell off a cliff but washed up alive, then crossed the High Places at the start of spring, wrapped in a rotten blanket, but we put no faith in such rumours."

"Very wise."

"Bethod has been making war," said the spirit in the centre.

Logen frowned. "Bethod is always making war. That's what he does."

"Yes. He has won so many fights now, with your help, he has given himself a golden hat."

"Shit on that bastard," said Logen, spitting into the fire. "What else?"

"North of the mountains, the Shanka run around and burn things."

"They love the fire," said the spirit in the centre.

"They do," said the one on the left, "even more than your kind, Ninefingers. They love and fear it. The spirit leaned forwards. "We heard there is a man seeking for you in the moors to the south."

"A powerful man," said the one in the centre.

"A Magus of the Old Time." The one on the left.

Logen frowned. He'd heard of these Magi. He met a sorcerer once, but he'd been easy to kill. Not unnatural powers in particular, not that Logen had noticed. But a Magus was something else.

"We heard that the Magi are wise and strong," said the spirit in the centre, "and that such a one could take a man far and show him many things. But they are crafty too, and have their own purposes."

"What does he want?"

"Ask him." Spirits cared little for the business of men, they were always weak on the details. Still, this was better than the usual talk about trees.

"What will you do, Ninefingers?"

Logen considered a moment. "I will go south and find this Magus, and ask him what he wants from me."

The spirits nodded. They didn't show whether they thought it was a good idea or bad. They didn't care.

"Farewell then, Ninefingers," said the spirit on the right, "perhaps for the last time."

"I'll try to struggle on without you."

Logen's wit was wasted on them. They rose and moved away from the fire, fading gradually into the darkness. Soon they were gone, but Logen had to admit they had been more use than he dared hope. They had given him a purpose.

He would head south in the morning, head south and find this Magus. Who knew? He might be a good talker. Had to be better than being shot full of arrows for nothing, at least. Logen looked into the flames, nodding slowly to himself.

He remembered other times and other campfires, when he had not been alone.

Playing with Knives

It was a beautiful spring day in Adua, and the sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the aromatic cedar, casting a dappled shade on the players beneath. A pleasing breeze fluttered through the courtyard, so the cards were clutched tightly or weighted down with glasses or coins. Birds twittered from the trees, and the shears of a gardener clacked across from the far side of the lawn, making faint, agreeable echoes against the tall white buildings of the quadrangle. Whether or not the players found the large sum of money in the centre of the table pleasant depended, of course, on the cards they held.

Captain Jezal dan Luthar certainly liked it. He had discovered an uncanny talent for the game since he gained his commission in the King's Own, a talent which he had used to win large sums of money from his comrades. He didn't really need the money, of course, coming from such a wealthy family, but it had allowed him to maintain an illusion of thrift while spending like a sailor. Whenever Jezal went home, his father bored everyone on the subject of his good fiscal planning, and had rewarded him by buying his Captaincy just six months ago. His brothers had not been happy. Yes, the money was certainly useful, and there's nothing half so amusing as humiliating one's closest friends.

Jezal half sat, half lay back on his bench with one leg stretched out, and allowed his eyes to wander over the other players. Major West had rocked his chair so far onto its back legs that he looked in imminent danger of tipping over entirely. He was holding his glass up to the sun, admiring the way that the light filtered through the amber spirit inside. He had a faint, mysterious smile which seemed to say, "I am not a nobleman, and may be your social inferior, but I won a Contest and the King's favour on the battlefield and that makes me the better man, so you children will damn well do as I say." He was out of this hand though, and, in Jezal's opinion, far too cautious with his money anyway.

Lieutenant Kaspas was sitting forward, frowning and scratching his sandy beard, staring intently at his cards as though they were sums he didn't understand. He was a good-humoured young man but a bit of a fool as a card player, and was always most appreciative when Jezal bought him drinks with his own money. Still, he could well afford to lose it: his father was one of the biggest landowners in the Union.

Jezal had often observed that the ever so slightly stupid will act more stupidly in clever company. Having lost the high ground already they scramble eagerly for the position of likeable idiot, stay out of arguments they will only lose, and can hence be everyone's friend. Kaspas's look of baffled concentration seemed to say, "I am not clever, but honest and likeable, which is much more important. Cleverness is overrated. Oh, and I'm very, very rich, so everyone likes me regardless."

"I believe I'll stay with you," said Kaspas, and tossed a small stack of silver coins onto the table. They broke and flashed in the sun with a cheerful jingle. Jezal absently added up the total in his head. A new uniform perhaps? Kaspas always got a little quiver when he really held good cards, and he was not trembling now. To say that he was bluffing was to give him far too much credit; more likely he

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