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# Sharp Ends

Stories from the World of the First Law

Written by Joe Abercrombie

Published by Gollancz

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# SHARP ENDS

*Stories from the World of the First Law*

**JOE ABERCROMBIE**

GOLLANCZ

LONDON

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For Mum and Dad,  
Couldn't have done it without  
Your genetic material.

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**A  
BEAUTIFUL  
BASTARD**

# Kadir, Spring 566

**Y**es!' shrieked Salem Rews, quartermaster of his August Majesty's First Regiment. 'Give 'em hell!'

Hell was what Colonel Glokta always gave his opponents, whether in the fencing circle, on the battlefield, or in the far more savage context of a social engagement.

His three hapless sparring partners lumbered after him as ineffectually as the cuckolded husbands, ignored creditors and spurned companions did wherever he passed. Glokta smirked as he danced around them, fully living up to his twin reputations as the Union's most celebrated swordsman and show-off. He pranced and prowled, switched and swaggered, nimble as a mayfly, unpredictable as a butterfly and, when he chose, vindictive as an offended wasp.

'Put some effort in!' he called, spinning clear of an inept lunge then administering a smart thwack across the buttocks of its perpetrator that made the crowd convulse with mocking laughter.

'Good show!' called Lord Marshal Varuz, rocking with enjoyment in his folding field chair.

'*Damn* good show!' snapped Colonel Kroy at his right hand.

'Excellent work!' chuckled Colonel Poulder, on the left, the two of them competing to agree the most with their commander. Quite as if there could be no enterprise more noble than humiliating three recruits who had scarcely held a sword before in their lives.

Salem Rews, with outward delight and secret shame, cheered as loudly as any of them. But he couldn't prevent his eyes occasionally wandering from the fascinating, nauseating exhibition. Over to the valley, and the wretched example of military disorganisation it contained.

While its commanders sunned themselves up here on the ridge

– quaffing wine, chortling away at Glokta’s self-indulgent display, relishing the priceless luxury of a breath of breeze – down in the sun-baked crucible below, partly obscured in a choking fog of dust, the greater part of the Union army struggled on.

It had taken them all day to squeeze soldiers, horses and the steadily degrading wagons that carried their supplies over the narrow bridge, taunted by the trickle of water in the deep-cut creek below. Now the men were strung out in sluggish shreds and tatters, more sleepwalking than marching. Any hint of a road had long ago been stomped away and all semblance of shape, discipline or morale was a distant memory, red jackets, polished breastplates, drooping golden standards all turned the ubiquitous beige of the sun-parched Gurkish dust.

Rews hooked a finger into his collar and tried to get a little air onto his sweaty neck, wondering again if someone should be doing more to bring order to the chaos down there. Surely it would be a damned bad thing for them if the Gurkish turned up now? And the Gurkish had a habit of turning up at the worst moments.

But Rews was only a quartermaster. Among the officers of the First he was considered the lowest of the low and no one bothered to try and hide the fact, not even him. He shrugged his prickling shoulders and decided – as he so often did – that it was simply someone else’s problem. He let his eyes be drawn back, as if by magnetic attraction, to the peerless athleticism of Colonel Glokta.

The man would, no doubt, have looked handsome in a portrait, but it was the way he stood, the way he grinned, sneered, cocked a mocking eyebrow, the way he *moved*, that truly set him apart. He had the poise of a dancer, the stance of a hero, the strength of a wrestler, the speed of a snake.

Two summers ago, in the considerably more civilised surroundings of Adua, Rews had watched Glokta win the Contest without conceding a single touch. He had watched from the cheap seats, of course, so high above the Circle that the fencers were tiny in the distance, but even so his heart had pounded and his hands twitched in time to their movements. Observing his idol at close quarters had only intensified his admiration. Honestly, it had intensified it beyond the point a reasonable judge would have called love. But it had also tempered that admiration with a bitter, spiteful and carefully concealed hatred.

Glokta had everything, and what he didn’t have, no one could stop



## A Beautiful Bastard

him from taking. Women adored him, men envied him. Women envied him and men adored him, for that matter. One would have thought, with all the good fortune showered upon him, he would have to be the most pleasant man alive.

But Glokta was an utter bastard. A beautiful, spiteful, masterful, horrible bastard, simultaneously the best and worst man in the Union. He was a tower of self-centred self-obsession. An impenetrable fortress of arrogance. His ability was exceeded only by his belief in his own ability. Other people were pieces to be played with, points to be scored, props to be arranged in the glorious tableaux of which he made himself the centrepiece. Glokta was a veritable tornado of bastardy, leaving a trail of flattened friendships, crushed careers and mangled reputations in his heedless wake.

His ego was so powerful it shone from him like a strange light, distorting the personalities of everyone around him at least halfway into being bastards themselves. Superiors became snivelling accomplices. Experts deferred to his ignorance. Decent men were reduced to sycophantic shits. Ladies of judgement to giggling cyphers.

Rews once heard the most committed followers of the Gurkish religion were expected to make the pilgrimage to Sarkant. In the same way, the most committed bastards might be expected to make a pilgrimage to Glokta. Bastards swarmed to him like ants to a half-eaten pastry. He had acquired a constantly shifting coterie of bastards, a backstabbing gaggle, a self-aggrandising entourage. He had bastards streaming after him like the tail after a comet.

And Rews knew he was no better than the rest. When Glokta mocked others he laughed along, desperate to have his pandering collaboration noticed. When, with sick inevitability, Glokta's ruthless tongue was turned on him, he laughed even louder, delighted to receive even that much attention.

'Teach 'em a lesson!' he screeched as Glokta doubled one of his sparring partners up with a savage poke of the short steel in his gut. Even as he did it, Rews wondered what lesson they were supposed to be learning. That life was cruel, horrible and unfair, presumably.

Glokta caught a man's sword scraping on his long steel, in an instant sheathed his short and slapped him across the face, one way then the other, pushed him bleating over with a snort of derision. The civilians who had come to observe the progress of the war spluttered

their admiration while the ladies who accompanied them cooed and swished their fans in the shade of their flapping awning. Rews stood in a paralysis of guilt and joy, only wishing he'd been the one slapped.

'Rews.' Lieutenant West pushed in beside him and wedged one dusty boot up on the fence.

West was one of the very few under Glokta's command who seemed immune to the bastardising effect, expressing unpopular dismay at his worst excesses. Paradoxically he was also one of the very few for whom Glokta appeared to have a genuine respect, in spite of his low birth. Rews saw this, even entirely understood it, but found himself unable to follow West's example. Perhaps it was because he was fat. Or perhaps he simply lacked the moral courage. He lacked every other kind of courage, after all.

'West,' Rews muttered from the side of his mouth, not wanting to miss a moment of the display.

'I've been over by the bridge.'

'Oh?'

'The rearguard are in a shambles. Insofar as there's a rearguard at all. Captain Lasky's laid out with that foot of his. They say he might lose it.'

'Been wrong-footed, has he?' Rews chuckled at his own joke, congratulating himself on it being just the sort of thing Glokta might have said.

'His company's a mess without him.'

'Well, I suppose that's their problem— Jab! Jab! Ooooooh!' As Glokta neatly dodged, kicked a man's foot away and sent him rolling in the dirt.

'It could turn into everyone's problem pretty damn quickly,' West was saying. 'The men are exhausted. Moving slowly. And the supply train's all tangled up—'

'The supply train's always tangled, it's practically a standing order for them— Oh!' Rews gasped with everyone else as Glokta dodged a thrust with consummate speed and kicked the man – he was hardly more than a boy, honestly – in the groin, folding him up with eyes bulging.

'But if the Gurkish come now . . .' West was saying, still frowning at the parched landscape beyond the river.

'The Gurkish are miles away. Honestly, West, you're always worried about something.'

## A Beautiful Bastard

‘Someone needs to be—’

‘Then complain to the Lord Marshal!’ Rews nodded at Varuz, who was almost tipping from his folding chair, so engrossed was he in the heady combination of swordsmanship and bullying. ‘I’ve no idea what you think I can do about it. Send in an order for more horse feed?’

There was a sharp snapping sound as Glokta caught the last man across the face with the flat of his sword and sent him reeling back with an agonised shriek, hand to his cheek.

‘Is that really your best?’ Glokta stepped forward and gave one of the others a resounding kick in the arse as he tried to get up, sending him face down in the dust to peels of merriment. Glokta soaked up the applause like some parasitic jungle flower absorbing the sap of its host, bowing, beaming, blowing kisses, and Rews smashed his palms together until they hurt.

What a bastard Colonel Glokta was. What a beautiful bastard.

As his three sparring partners hobbled from the enclosure, nursing injuries that would soon heal and humiliations that would accompany them to the grave, Glokta draped himself across the fence behind which the ladies were gathered. He gave particular attention to Lady Wetterlant – young, rich, beautiful if considerably over-powdered, and dressed in the elaborate height of fashion despite the heat. Recently married, but to an older husband kept in Adua by the politics of the Open Council. Rumour had it he fulfilled her financial needs but was otherwise not terribly interested in women.

Colonel Glokta’s interest in women, on the other hand, was infamous.

‘Might I borrow your handkerchief?’ he asked.

Rews had observed a special manner he had when speaking to a woman who interested him. A slight roughening of the voice. A loitering just that fraction closer than was strictly appropriate. A tunnel-like attentiveness, as though his eyes were stuck to them with glue. It hardly needed to be said that the moment he got what he wanted from his conquests, their setting themselves on fire could not persuade him to glance their way again.

And yet new objects of affection fell over themselves to be incinerated by the flames of scandal with the breathless buzzing of moths around a candle, unable to resist the challenge of being the special one to buck the trend.

Lady Wetterlant raised one carefully plucked brow. ‘Why ever not,

Colonel?’ And she reached to take the handkerchief from her bodice. ‘I—’

She and her attendants gasped as, quick as lightning, Glokta flicked it from her dress with the blunted point of his long steel. The gauzy fabric floated gently through the air and straight into his waiting hand with all the assurance of a magic trick.

One of the ladies gave a croaky cough. Another fluttered her eyelashes. Lady Wetterlant was perfectly still, eyes wide, lips parted, hand frozen halfway to her chest. Perhaps they were wondering whether the colonel could have flicked the hooks and eyes of her bodice open as easily, had he so desired.

Rews never doubted that he could have.

‘My thanks,’ said Glokta, dabbing at his forehead.

‘By all means keep it,’ murmured Lady Wetterlant in a voice slightly hoarse. ‘Consider it a gift.’

Glokta smiled as he slipped it into his shirt, a waft of purple fabric still showing. ‘I shall keep it close to my heart.’ Rews snorted. As if he had one. Glokta dropped his voice, though still perfectly audible to everyone present. ‘And perhaps return it later?’

‘Whenever you have a moment,’ she whispered, and Rews was forced to wonder, once again, what was so damnably attractive about things that were obviously so very, very bad for you.

Glokta had already turned back to his audience, spreading his arms wide as though to give them all a crushing, dominating, loveless hug. ‘Is there no one among you clumsy dogs who can give our visitors a better show?’ Rews felt a breathless leaping in his chest as Glokta’s eyes met his. ‘Rews, how about you?’

There was a smattering of laughter and Rews joined in, loudest of all. ‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly!’ he squeaked out. ‘I’d hate to embarrass you!’

He instantly realised he had gone too far. Glokta’s left eye faintly twitched. ‘I’m embarrassed whenever I find myself in a room with you. You’re supposed to be a soldier, aren’t you? How the hell do you stay so fat when the food is so bloody awful?’

More laughter, and Rews swallowed, plastering the smile to his face and feeling sweat tickle his spine beneath his uniform. ‘Well, sir, I’ve always been fat, I suppose. Even as a boy.’ His words plummeted into the sudden silence with the awful finality of victims into a mass grave.

## A Beautiful Bastard

‘Very . . . fat. Hugely fat. I’m a very fat man.’ He cleared his throat, praying that the ground would swallow him.

Glokta’s eyes drifted on, seeking a worthier adversary. His face brightened. ‘Lieutenant West!’ he called, with a flashing flourish of his practice steel. ‘How about you?’

West winced. ‘Me?’

‘Come now, you’re probably the best swordsman in the whole damn regiment.’ Glokta beamed even wider. ‘The best but one, that is.’

West blinked about at what might easily have been several hundred expectant faces. ‘But . . . I have no blunted steel with me—’

‘By all means use your battle steel.’

Lieutenant West looked down at the hilt of his sword. ‘That could be rather dangerous.’

The edge on Colonel Glokta’s smile was positively ferocious. ‘Only if you touch me with it.’ More laughter, more applause, a couple of whoops from the enlisted men, a couple of gasps from the ladies. When it came to making ladies gasp, Colonel Glokta was unmatched.

‘West!’ someone shouted. ‘West!’ And gradually it became a chant: ‘West! West! West!’ The ladies laughed as they joined in, clapping in time.

‘Go on!’ shouted Rews along with the others, a kind of bullying mania upon them all. ‘Go on!’

If anyone thought this was a bad idea, they kept it to themselves. Some men you simply don’t argue with. Some men you’d simply like to see run through. Glokta fell into both camps.

West took a long breath, then, to a smattering of applause, smoothly vaulted the fence, unbuttoned his jacket and draped it over the rail. With the faintest ringing of metal, and the faintest unhappy look, West drew his battle steel. It did not boast the jewelled quillons, gilded basketwork or engraved ricasso that many of the splendid young officers of his Majesty’s First affected. No man there would have called it a beautiful sword.

And yet there was a beautiful economy in the way West presented it, a studied precision in his stance, an elegant control in the twitch of the wrist that brought the blade as perfectly level as the surface of a still pool, the sun glinting on a point polished to murderous sharpness.

A breathless silence settled on the crowd. Commoner he might have been, but even the most ignorant observer could have told that the

young Lieutenant West was no bumpkin when it came to handling a sword.

'You've been practising,' said Glokta, tossing his short steel to his servant, Corporal Tunny, leaving him with just the long.

'Lord Marshal Varuz has been good enough to give me a few pointers,' said West.

Glokta raised a brow at his old fencing master. 'You never told me we were seeing other people, sir.'

The Lord Marshal smiled. 'You won a Contest already, Glokta. It is the tragedy of the fencing master that he must always find new pupils to lead to victory.'

'So nice that you're sniffing at my crown, West. But you may find I'm not quite ready to abdicate.' Glokta sprang forward with lightning quickness, jabbed, jabbed. West parried, steel scraping, flickering in the sun. He gave ground, but carefully, watchfully, eyes fixed on Glokta's. Again Glokta came on, cut, cut, thrust, almost too fast for Rews to follow. But West followed well enough, turning the slashes efficiently away, shuffling cautiously back, the crowd giving 'oohs' and 'aahs' with every contact.

Glokta grinned. 'You really have been practising. When will you learn, West, that work is no substitute for talent!' And he laid into West faster and more ferociously than ever, steel ringing, clattering. He came close and dealt the young lieutenant a savage knee in the ribs, made him wince and stumble, but West found his balance instantly, parried once, twice, reeled away and was ready once more, breathing hard.

And Rews found himself wishing with a painful longing that West would stab Glokta right through his horrible, beautiful face, and make the ladies gasp for very different reasons.

'Hah!' Glokta sprang forward, jabbing, and West dodged the first but to everyone's surprise came on to meet the second, steered it aside with a shrieking of steel, stepped inside Glokta's guard and barged him heavily with his shoulder. For an instant Glokta lurched off balance and West growled, teeth bared, steel flashing as it darted out.

'Gah!' Glokta reeled back and Rews caught a delicious flash of his face stricken with shock. Glokta's practice steel tumbled from his hand and skittered in the dirt, and Rews found that he was bunching his fists painfully tight in delight.

West started forward at once. 'Are you all right, sir?'

## A Beautiful Bastard

Glokta touched one hand to his neck, stared down at his bloody fingertips in profound puzzlement. As if he could hardly believe that he could have been caught. As if he could hardly believe that, having been caught, he might bleed like other men.

‘Fancy that,’ he grunted.

‘I’m so sorry, Colonel,’ stammered West, lowering his steel.

‘For what?’ Glokta’s twisted grin looked as if it took every grain of effort he possessed. ‘A very fine touch. You’ve got a great deal better, West.’

And the crowd began to clap, and then to whoop, and Rews noticed the muscles of Glokta’s jaw working, and his left eye twitching, and he held out one hand and sharply snapped his fingers.

‘Corporal Tunny, do you have my battle steel with you?’

The young corporal, promoted only the day before, blinked. ‘Of course, sir.’

‘Bring it here, would you?’

With shocking speed the atmosphere had turned decidedly ugly. The atmosphere around Glokta often did. Rews looked nervously for Varuz to put a stop to this deadly nonsense, but the Lord Marshal had left his seat and wandered off to stare down into the valley, Poulder and Kroy with him. There was to be no help from the grown-ups.

With eyes on the ground, West carefully sheathed his own sword. ‘I think I’ve played with knives enough for one day, sir.’

‘But you really must give me the chance to pay you back in kind. Honour demands it, West, really it does.’ As if Glokta had the slightest idea what honour was, beyond a tool for manipulating people into doing stupid, dangerous things. ‘Surely you understand that, nobleman or no?’

West’s jaw tightened. ‘Fighting one’s friends with sharpened steels while there is an enemy to face seems foolish rather than honourable, sir.’

‘Are you calling me a fool?’ whispered Glokta, whipping his battle steel from the sheath with an angry hiss as Corporal Tunny nervously offered it out.

West stubbornly folded his arms. ‘No, sir.’

The crowd were struck entirely silent, but there was some sort of hubbub rising just beyond them. Rews picked out muttered calls of,

‘Over there,’ and ‘The bridge,’ but was too fixed on the drama before him to pay much attention.

‘I advise you to defend yourself, Lieutenant West,’ snarled Glokta as he worked his heels into the dusty ground, baring his teeth and levelling his shining steel.

And at that moment there was an ear-splitting scream, guttering away into a ragged moan.

‘She’s fainted!’ someone called.

‘Get her some air!’

‘Where from? I swear there isn’t a breath of air in the whole bloody country,’ followed by braying laughter.

Rews hastened over to the civilian’s enclosure on the pretext of offering assistance. He knew even less about helping people from a faint than he did about being a quartermaster but there was always the possibility of catching a glimpse up the woman’s skirts while she was insensible. It was a sad fact that Rews was rarely if ever offered glimpses up the skirts of conscious ladies.

But he froze before he came near the knot of well-wishers, the sight beyond them causing Rews the unpleasant sensation of his ample guts dropping right out of his arse. There, in the distant sweep of beige beyond the bridge, an infestation of black dots was gathering, plumes of dust rising from the swarm. He might not have been good for much, but Rews had always possessed an unerring sense for danger.

He lifted a trembling arm. ‘The Gurkish!’ he wailed.

‘What?’ Someone laughed uncertainly.

‘There, to the west!’

‘That’s east, fool!’

‘Wait, you’re serious?’

‘We’ll be slaughtered in our beds!’

‘We’re not in our beds!’

‘Silence!’ roared Varuz. ‘This isn’t a damn finishing school.’ The hubbub died, the officers brought instantly to guilty quiet. ‘Major Mitterick, I want you to get down there now and hurry the men along.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Lieutenant Vallimir, would you be good enough to conduct the ladies and our civilian guests to safety?’

‘Of course, sir.’