Further Praise for *Before They Are Hanged*

“Marvelously self-aware, character-driven stuff.”
*SFX*

“The story is by turns darkly humorous and incredibly well observed. The sheer number of brilliantly drawn characters is a joy to read, and Abercrombie once again proves he is deft at changing voice as he changes point of view.”
*Dreamwatch*

“Dark, deeply ironic, and full of character gems that will appeal to your cynical side, *Before They Are Hanged* is as brilliant as its predecessor. Highly recommended.”
*SFRevu*

“Abercrombie injects his sense of humor throughout, but these laugh-out-loud moments do not detract from the fact that Joe has an incredible insight into the human condition. . . . *Before They Are Hanged* is an excellent sequel from an author writing compelling, character-driven, adult fantasy, for readers who want to be entertained as well as challenged.”
*SFFWorld.com*

“A tight little piece of fiction. *Before They Are Hanged* grabs you and drags you along.”
*SF Site*

“This is a brisk tale and well told. . . . These are some of the most cynical people ever to appear in fantasy-fiction, and they spend a great deal of time striking sparks off each other with their doubts and skepticism, to great narrative effect.”
*Infinity Plus*

“It’s the fascinating figures populating these books that make them compulsive reading, and I can’t wait to get my hands on the last in the series.”
*SF Crowsnest*
“A rewarding read with the main strength of the book being development of the protagonists. . . . So far these novels are most rewarding.”

*Concatenation*

“In my opinion, Joe Abercrombie possesses all the qualities that made David Eddings such a powerhouse during the eighties and nineties. *Before They Are Hanged* is a satisfying sequel which should establish Joe Abercrombie as one of the bright new voices of the genre.”

Pat’s Fantasy Hotlist
BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED
Also by Joe Abercrombie:

*The Blade Itself*
(The First Law—Book One)
BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED
Joe Abercrombie
For the Four Readers

You know who you are
PART I

“We should forgive our enemies, but not before they are hanged.”

Heinrich Heine
Damn mist. It gets in your eyes, so you can’t see no more than a few strides ahead. It gets in your ears, so you can’t hear nothing, and when you do you can’t tell where it’s coming from. It gets up your nose, so you can’t smell naught but wet and damp. Damn mist. It’s a curse on a scout.

They’d crossed the Whiteflow a few days before, out of the North and into Angland, and the Dogman had been nervy all the way. Scouting out strange land, in the midst of a war that weren’t really their business. All the lads were jumpy. Aside from Threetrees, none of ’em had ever been out of the North. Except for Grim maybe. He weren’t saying where he’d been.

They’d passed a few farms burned out, a village all empty of people. Union buildings, big and square. They’d seen the tracks of horses and men. Lots of tracks, but never the men themselves. Dogman knew Bethod weren’t far away, though, his army spread out across the land, looking for towns to burn, food to steal, people to kill. All manner o’ mischief. He’d have scouts everywhere. If he caught Dogman or any of the rest, they’d be back to the mud, and not quickly. Bloody cross and heads on spikes and all the rest of it, Dogman didn’t wonder.

If the Union caught ’em they’d be dead too, most likely. It was a war, after all, and folk don’t think too clearly in a war. Dogman could hardly expect ’em to waste time telling a friendly Northman from an unfriendly one. Life was fraught with dangers, alright. It was enough to make anyone nervy, and he was a nervy sort at the best of times.

So it was easy to see how the mist might have been salt in the cut, so to speak.
All this creeping around in the murk had got him thirsty, so he picked his way through the greasy brush, over to where he could hear the river chattering. He knelt down at the water’s edge. Slimy down there, with rot and dead leaves, but Dogman didn’t reckon a little slime would make the difference, he was about as dirty as a man could be already. He scooped up water in his hands and drank. There was a breath of wind down there, out beyond the trees, pushing the mist in close one minute, dragging it out the next. That’s when the Dogman saw him.

He was lying on his front, legs in the river, top half up on the bank. They stared at each other a while, both fully shocked and amazed. He’d got a long stick coming out of his back. A broken spear. That’s when the Dogman realised he was dead.

He spat the water out and crept over, checking careful all around to make sure no one was waiting to give him a blade in the back. The corpse was a man of about two dozen years. Yellow hair, brown blood on his grey lips. He’d got a padded jacket on, bloated up with wet, the kind a man might wear under a coat of mail. A fighting man, then. A straggler maybe, lost his crew and been picked off. A Union man, no doubt, but he didn’t look so different to Dogman or to anyone else, now he was dead. One corpse looks much like another.

“The Great Leveller,” Dogman whispered to himself, since he was in a thoughtful frame of mind. That’s what the hillmen call him. Death, that is. He levels all differences. Named Men and nobodies, south or north. He catches everyone in the end, and he treats each man the same.

Seemed like this one had been dead no more ’n a couple of days. That meant whoever killed him might still be close, and that got the Dogman worried. The mist seemed full of sounds now. Might’ve been a hundred Carls, waiting just out of sight. Might’ve been no more than the river slapping at its banks. Dogman left the corpse lying and slunk off into the trees, ducking from one trunk to another as they loomed up out of the grey.

He nearly stumbled on another body, half buried in a heap of leaves, lying on his back with his arms spread out. He passed one on his knees, a couple of arrows in his side, face in the dirt, arse in the air. There’s no dignity in death, and that’s a fact. The Dogman was starting to hurry along, too
keen to get back to the others, tell them what he’d seen. Too keen to get away from them corpses.

He’d seen plenty, of course, more than his share, but he’d never quite got comfortable around ‘em. It’s an easy thing to make a man a carcass. He knew a thousand ways to do it. But once you’ve done it, there’s no going back. One minute he’s a man, all full up with hopes, and thoughts, and dreams. A man with friends, and family, and a place where he’s from. Next minute he’s mud. Made the Dogman think on all the scrapes he’d been in, all the battles and the fights he’d been a part of. Made him think he was lucky still to be breathing. Stupid lucky. Made him think his luck might not last.

He was halfway running now. Careless. Blundering about in the mist like an untried boy. Not taking his time, not sniffing the air, not listening out. A Named Man like him, a scout who’d been all over the North, should’ve known better, but you can’t stay sharp all the time. He never saw it coming.

Something knocked him in the side, hard, ditched him right on his face. He scrambled up but someone kicked him down. Dogman fought, but whoever this bastard was he was fearsome strong. Before he knew it he was down on his back in the dirt, and he’d only himself to blame. Himself, and the corpses, and the mist. A hand grabbed him round his neck, started squeezing his windpipe shut.

“Gurgh,” he croaked, fiddling at the hand, thinking his last moment was on him. Thinking all his hopes were turned to mud. The Great Leveller, come for him at last . . .

Then the fingers stopped squeezing.

“Dogman?” said someone in his ear, “that you?”

“Gurgh.”

The hand let go his throat and he sucked in a breath. Felt himself pulled up by his coat. “Shit on it, Dogman! I could ha’ killed you!” He knew the voice now, well enough. Black Dow, the bastard. Dogman was half annoyed at being throttled near to dying, half stupid-happy at still being alive. He could hear Dow laughing at him. Hard laughter, like a crow calling. “You alright?”

“I’ve had warmer greetings,” croaked Dogman, still doing his best to get the air in.
“Count yourself lucky, I could’ve given you a colder one. Much colder. I took you for one of Bethod’s scouts. Thought you was out over yonder, up the valley.”

“As you can see,” he whispered, “no. Where’s the others at?”

“Up on a hill, above this fucking mist. Taking a look around.”

Dogman nodded back the way he’d come. “There’s corpses over there. Loads of ’em.”

“Loads of ’em is it?” asked Dow, as though he didn’t think Dogman knew what a load of corpses looked like. “Hah!”

“Aye, a good few anyway. Union dead, I reckon. Looks like there was a fight here.”


“Shit,” he said.

They were standing up on the hill, the five of them. The mist had cleared up, but the Dogman almost wished it hadn’t. He saw what Dow had been saying now, well enough. The whole valley was full of dead. They were dotted high up on the slopes, wedged between the rocks, stretched out in the gorse. They were scattered out across the grass in the valley bottom like nails spilled from a sack, twisted and broken on the brown dirt road. They were heaped up beside the river, heaped on the banks in a pile. Arms and legs and broken gear sticking up from the last shreds of mist. They were everywhere. Stuck with arrows, stabbed with swords, hacked with axes. Crows called as they hopped from one meal to the next. It was a good day for the crows. It had been a while since Dogman saw a proper battlefield, and it brought back some sour memories. Horrible sour.

“Shit,” he said again. Couldn’t think of aught else to say.

“Reckon the Union were marching up this road.” Threetrees was frowning hard. “Reckon they were hurrying. Trying to catch Bethod unawares.”

“Seems they weren’t scouting too careful,” rumbled Tul Duru. “Seems like it was Bethod caught them out.”

“Maybe it was misty,” said Dogman, “like today.”

Threetrees shrugged. “Maybe. It’s the time of year for it. Either way they were on the road, in column, tired from a long day’s tramp. Bethod came on ’em from here, and from up there, on the ridge. Arrows first, to break ’em up,
then the Carls, coming down from the tall ground, screaming and ready to go. The Union broke quick, I reckon.”

“Real quick,” said Dow.

“And then it was a slaughter. Spread out on the road. Trapped against the water. Nowhere much to run to. Men trying to pull their armour off, men trying to swim the river with their armour on. Packing in and climbing one on top o’ the other, with arrows falling down all round. Some of ’em might’ve got as far as those woods down there, but knowing Bethod he’d have had a few horsemen tucked away, ready to lick the plate.”

“Shit,” said Dogman, feeling more than a bit sick. He’d been on the wrong end of a rout himself, and the memory weren’t at all a happy one.

“Neat as good stitching,” said Threetrees. “You got to give Bethod his due, the bastard. He knows his work, none better.”

“This the end of it then, chief?” asked Dogman. “Bethod won already?”

Threetrees shook his head, nice and slow. “There’s a lot of Southerners out there. An awful lot. Most of ’em live across the sea. They say there’s more of ’em down there than you can count. More men than there are trees in the North. Might take ’em a while to get here, but they’ll be coming. This is just the beginning.”

The Dogman looked out at the wet valley, at all them dead men, huddled and sprawled and twisted across the ground, no more ’n food for crows. “Not much of a beginning for them.”

Dow curled his tongue and spat, as noisy as he could. “Penned up and slaughtered like a bunch o’ sheep! You want to die like that, Threetrees? Eh? You want to side with the likes of these? Fucking Union! They don’t know anything about war!”

Threetrees nodded. “Then I reckon we’ll have to teach ’em.”

There was a great press round the gate. There were women, gaunt and hungry-looking. There were children, ragged and dirty. There were men, old and young, stooped under heavy packs or clutching gear. Some had mules, or carts they were pushing, loaded up with all kinds of useless looking stuff. Wooden chairs, tin pots, tools for farming. A lot had nothing at all, besides misery. The Dogman reckoned there was plenty of that to go round.
They were choking up the road with their bodies and their rubbish. They were choking up the air with their pleading and their threatening. Dogman could smell the fear, thick as soup in his nose. All running from Bethod.

They were shouldering each other pretty good, some pushing in, some pushed out, here and there one falling in the mud, all desperate for that gate like it was their mother’s tit. But as a crowd, they were going nowhere. Dogman could see spear tips glinting over the heads of the press, could hear hard voices shouting. There were soldiers up ahead, keeping everyone out of the city.

Dogman leaned over to Threetrees. “Looks like they don’t want their own kind,” he whispered. “You reckon they’ll want us, chief?”

“They need us, and that’s a fact. We’ll talk to ’em, and then we’ll see, or you got some better notion?”

“Going home and staying out of it?” muttered Dogman under his breath, but he followed Threetrees into the crowd anyway.

The Southerners all gawped as they stepped on through. There was a little girl among ’em, looked at Dogman as he passed with great staring eyes, clutching some old rag to her. Dogman tried a smile but it had been a long time since he’d dealt with aught but hard men and hard metal, and it can’t have come out too pleasing. The girl screamed and ran off, and she wasn’t the only one scared. The crowd split open, wary and silent when they saw Dogman and Threetrees coming, even though they’d left their weapons back with the others.

They made it through to the gate alright, only having to give the odd shove to one man or another, just to start him moving. Dogman saw the soldiers now, a dozen of ’em, stood in a line across the gate, each one just the same as the one next door. He’d rarely seen such heavy armour as they had on, great plates from head to toe, polished to a blinding shine, helmets over their faces, stock-still like metal pillars. He wondered how you’d fight one, if you had to. He couldn’t imagine an arrow doing much, or a sword even, less it got lucky and found a joint.

“You’d need a pickaxe for that, or something.”

“What?” hissed Threetrees.

“Nothing.” It was plain they had some strange ideas about fighting down in the Union. If wars were won by the shinier side, they’d have had Bethod well licked, the Dogman reckoned. Shame they weren’t.