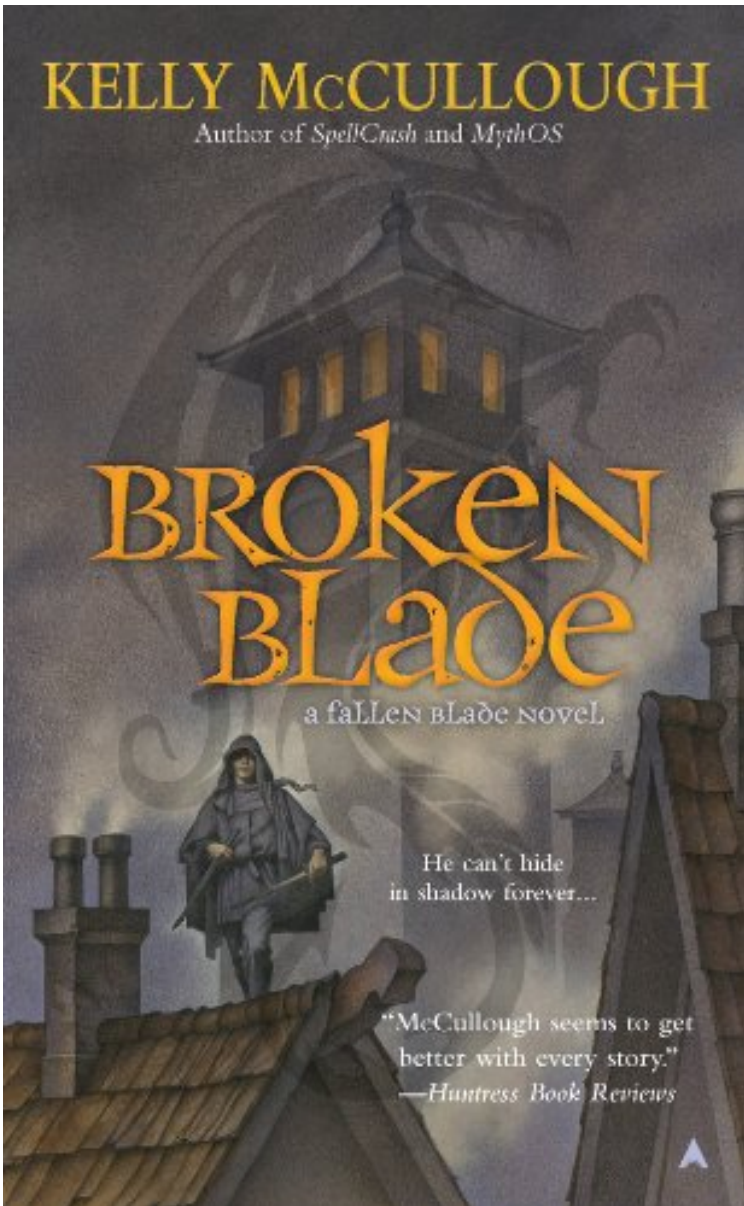


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# Broken Blade



*Par Kelly McCullough*  
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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #171954 dans eBooksPubli le: 2011-11-29Sorti le: 2011-11-29Format: Ebook Kindle

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**Par Kelly McCullough : Broken Blade** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Broken Blade:

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAral the Jack, formerly the noble Aral Kingslayer, is the best kind of hero: damaged, cynical and despondent, yet needing only the right cause to rise from his own ashes.Alex BledsoeOnce a fabled Blade of Namara, Aral Kingslayer fought for justice and his goddess alongside his familiar, a living shadow called Triss. Now with their goddess murdered and her temple destroyed, they are among the last of their kind. Surviving on the fringes of society, Aral becomes a drunken, broken, and wanted man, working whatever shadowy deal comes his way. Until a mysterious woman hires him to deliver a secret message-one that can either redeem him or doom him.From the Paperback edition.Extrait l Trouble wore a red dress. That

was my first thought when the girl walked into the Gryphons Head. My second was that the dress didnt fit as well as it should for a ladys maid. It was cut for someone both bustier and broader across the hip than the current occupant. Not that she looked bad. The wrapping didnt fit right, but the contents of the package more than made up for any lack in presentation. The poor fit of the dress was a definite puzzler. Red was the coming fashion for servants in the great houses of Tien, and while your average duchess might not give a cracked cup whether her servants clothes fit comfortably, she cared enormously whether their looks reflected poorly on her. The fashion was too new for handmedowns, which meant the dress had to belong to someone other than the girl wearing it. She turned my way and marched across the room without so much as a glance at the filthy straw covering the floor of the Gryphons common room. Jerik, the taverns owner, changed it out once a year whether it needed it or not, much to the annoyance of the rats and their more exotic magical playmates, the slinks and nipperkins. When I added her indifference to the awful things in the straw to the length of her stride and the set of her features, I had to revise that girl to woman though she was quite young. Are you the jack? she asked when she reached my table. She leaned down toward me as she spoke, silhouetting herself against the only light in the room a dim and badly scarred magelight chandelier. Im a jack, and open to hire if youre looking for one. A jack of shadows, the underworlds allpurpose freelancer how very far Id fallen from the old days. I was told to look for Aral . . . She drew the word out almost into a question, as if hoping I might supply something more than my first name. It was a tactic I recognized from long, personal use and one I didnt much like having turned back on me. But if I wanted to keep paying my bar tab, I needed to work, so I nodded. Arals a name Ill answer to, among others. Why do you need a jack? First, lets find out whether youre the right sort for the job I have in mind. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my shadow shifting slowly leftward as if seeking a better view of the young woman. I leaned that way as well, to cover the shadows movements, and accidentally elbowed my whiskey bottle off the table. It thudded into the straw but didnt break. Not that it mattered. Id finished the last of the contents twenty minutes ago. Which, in all honesty, might have had something to do with my knocking it over. Hang on a tick, I said, and bent to pick the bottle out the moldering straw. I took the opportunity offered by the cover of the table to make a sharp no signal to Triss with my left hand. I couldnt afford to let anyone notice my shadow moving of its own accord, not with the price on our heads prices, really, as there was more than one interested party. And even this darkest corner of a seedy tavern had light enough for a trained eye to make a potentially fatal connection. I swore silently at my shadow familiar while I returned the bottle to the table. Cut it the hell out, Triss! That was just frustration. If I didnt say it out loud, Triss couldnt hear me, and if I did, I might as well just cut my own throat and get it over with. The Shade did stop moving, but whether that was because of my hand signal or simply because hed gotten an adequate eyeful, I didnt know. I did give the woman a more thorough looking over myself at that point. Triss never pulled anything that obvious without a damned good reason. He owned the cautious half of our partnership. Besides, as noted earlier, the lady merited plenty of eye time on her own account. Tall for a woman, perhaps matching my own five feet and eleven, and built and muscled more like a Zhani warrior noble than the ladys maid her dress proclaimed as her station. Hair a few shades darker than my own middling brown and nearly twice as long, with a luxurious braid that reached just shy of her waist. Her eyes were dark though I couldnt tell the exact shade in the dimness that had originally drawn me to the Gryphon. More telling still, she had sword calluses on the inside of her left thumb. That made the dress a lie for sure. It more likely belonged to her girl than to her. Which left me with an interesting question: Why, if she really was a minor noble of some sort herself, hadnt she simply had her seamstress do her up one that fit properly? But that was more a matter for idle curiosity than any real concern. I didnt much care where my jobs came from. Not anymore. Not if they paid enough to cover my bills. Besides, in the jack business, the client always lies. The whole point of coming to a jack is that we dont belong to anyone and so dont answer to anyone. A sunside jack might find your stolen necklace for you without asking any of the inconvenient questions that the watch would be obliged to because of their allegiance to the law and the Duke of Tien. Questions like: Where did you get the necklace in the first place? Or why does it look so much like a necklace that was reported stolen by someone else last year? On the shadowside, the questions we dont ask have even sketchier answers. Why do you want me to steal that? Whats in this box that needs to be delivered to a dockside location at four in the morning? How come Taurik Longknife isnt getting his cut of this little deal of yours? What did they do that you need them roughed up? Or, for a black jack, why do you want him dead? Sometimes the client supplied an answer anyway, but it was rarely an honest one. Not that it mattered. Mostly, I just dont want to know. Thats part of why I became a jack in the first place. A jack doesnt have to care. I did wonder about a couple of interesting little scars showing where my potential new

clients neck met her right shoulder but it was an idle sort of wondering. While I was studying her, she was doing the same with me. Judging by the slight crease between her eyebrows, she didnt think much of what she saw. She wasnt the first to make that judgment. She wouldnt be the last. Well, she said, after a moment, what sort of jack are you? Me? Im a shadow jack, of course, but never a black one. Ill take risks if the money looks right and Im not fussed about the law, but I wont ghost anyone for you. Not for anyone else either, for that matter. I was done with the blood trade. Triss and I had long since sent our share of souls to the lords of judgment and their great wheel of rebirth. More than our share. It was her turn to nod though the frown stayed. Im not looking for contract murder, just a bit of sensitive delivery service. That was good and, if true, probably why shed chosen me from among Tiens many shadow jacks. Courier work and its close cousin, smuggling, provided the bulk of my income these days. Shadowside, but not the deep dark. Few jacks anywhere could boast a better reputation for quiet deliveries, but then, I had Triss. And that was the sort of advantage that not more than a score of people in the whole wide world could boast. How much are you offering? I asked. Dont you want to know the where and the what? For the first time since shed come through the door, my lady of the red dress looked knocked off her stride. Not really, or at least not until I find out whether its worth hearing any secrets. Those always come with their own risks. She pulled a small but full silk pouch from the depths of her bodice and dropped it on the table with a clank, tipping its mouth toward me. I picked it up and flicked it open. It was full of silver Zhani riels still warm from her skin and smelling faintly of lavender perfume. A theft bit of cash, but not ridiculously so for the right job. I set the bag back on the table. Is this the whole payoff in advance, or the first bit of a halfnow, halflater sort of arrangement? Or is it simply by way of showing me whats to be paid on proof of delivery? This is a third down, with the rest on proof of delivery. Its dangerous, then? I asked. It had to be if she was willing to go so high before the haggling had even opened. Danger worked just fine for me. The longer the odds, the better you got paid and the less you had to work. And if someone ghosted you along the way, well, then you got out of working entirely. Nobody expects anything of the dead. She shrugged at my question, then flipped her braid back over her shoulder when it fell forward. Its only dangerous if things go wrong. Her eyes narrowed. Do you object to all killing or just when its the point of a job? I try to avoid ghosting anyone when I can avoid it, but Im no renunciate. My shadow moved again, and so, perforce, did I, leaning back this time, though mercifully without knocking anything over. Dammit Triss, stop dancing around! It wasnt a big move, but even half an inch was half an inch too much. Too many people wanted to see my head nailed up over the traitors gate or sent off to the Son of Heaven in a jar of rice wine. To distract from my little shadow twostep, I gestured for the woman to take the other seat. Id offer you a drink, but . . . I sadly flicked the empty bottle Kyles fifteenyear, the rather expensive Aveni whiskey I favored when I could afford it. It rang emptily and rocked, giving off a tantalizing little whiff of peat and honey. So unless youre buying the round youll just have to settle for going dry while you tell me what you want done, Lady . . . ? I gave her the courtesy title that might belong to a duchesss first maid in hopes of getting her to give up more information. She ignored the bait and shook her head impatiently. Call me Maylien. But she did not yet sit. You will take my commission then? She smiled a smug little smile. That made me want to turn her down flat. Unfortunately, sending her away would leave my purse even flatter. If I wanted to keep drinking the good stuff, I had to work. And I wanted to keep drinking the good stuff. It was one of the few things left in my life that gave me any pleasure. Lets just say that Im open to the idea, I said. The fee looks adequate for some things, less so for others. I cant tell you more without some surety . . . of silence at the very least. I raised an eyebrow at her. If youve learned enough of my reputation to find me here, youve learned enough to know I dont discuss my clients. Not even my offers. May I presume that constitutes your word? If you want to; though why youd accept the oath of a jack of the shadow trades, I dont know. She smiled like a woman holding a secret. Most jacks I would not, but Ive reason to believe I can trust yours. Have you ever heard of the Baroness Marchon? It took an effort not to start at that name, though perhaps a wasted one, since my shadow jerked a good inch on his own. I had, of course, heard of the Marchon, but I rather doubted that the person Id chosen to become would have. Thinking daggers at Triss and his sudden tendency to jerk and start, I pasted a confused look on my face and shook my head. The gesture made the world bob and twista not wholly unpleasant side effect of the empty bottle. Is this Marchon a city noble? Or country? I asked. More the latter than the former, but she does maintain a city house a big estate right on the north edge of town, just off the royal preserve. Thats where I need the delivery made. I knew it well. The Marchon place had once housed the old kings last mistress, the younger sister of the then Baron Marchon. I had slipped into the house on no less than three occasions while trying to catch a quiet moment alone with the king. Thats a neighborhood with an ugly reputation for the

shadow trades, heavy security on all the estates plus the occasional royal patrol in the streets, I said. Not to mention the fact that the Elite had a clandestine chapter house near there and watchers in the park most nights, but I certainly wasn't supposed to know that, nor how to slip past them. I pushed the purse back toward her. I think you'll have to find another jack. She bit her lip in a quite convincing and quite fetching imitation of worry. I wondered how often she practiced. How about a bigger fee? she asked. I think I could come up with half again more if I had to. I had just opened my mouth to tell her no, when I felt a tugging all along my back, sort of like peeling away a sweatsoaked shirt. Triss again, letting me know he wanted me to take the job for some reason. I didn't like the smell of the thing, or Triss's pressuring me on it, but I really did need money. I decided to push Maylien a bit and see how she responded. Half again might do, I told her. But indulge me for a moment by biding here, won't you? I have an urgent matter that I need to attend to. I flicked my eyes in the direction of the back door and the sign marking the privies beyond and gave her a what-can-you-do sort of look. It was a rude request under the circumstance, and she had every right to take offense, but I actually did have something that needed my private attention. Also, if she chose to see it as an insult and walk away, I would have solved my dilemma over whether to take the job. Before she could answer, or do much more than blush angrily, I pulled myself to my feet and tipped her a ragged tradesman's bow. It wouldn't do at all to deliver the proper Zhani highcourt version. Besides, I'd put enough whiskey away over the past two or three hours that I might not have been able to manage the more formal one if I'd tried. Back as soon as ever I am able, my lady. A couple of lanterns filled with the cheapest oil money could buy guttered and sputtered in the yard. There was no risk of fire out on the cobbles, so no need for a magelight, which meant it was as dark out there as old King Ashvik's heart had been. Some of the noble neighborhoods could afford to use magelight to illuminate the main streets, but the Stumbles was about as far away from being a noble neighborhood as it got. On nights like this, with the moon near her nadir, even night-trained eyes like mine had trouble, and Jerik's lamps provided just enough illumination to find the privies. I slipped inside, trading the stink of one sort of shit for the stink of another. Given a choice, I preferred the yard and the horse; but I needed the privacy. I closed the door behind me and wedged it shut with a thin knife pulled from the sheath on my left wrist. The light inside was better than the yards, provided by a fading magelight nailed firmly to the ceiling. Nightmarket certainly, but still costly. I presume the more expensive choice had been made because Jerik didn't like what happened when the drunks couldn't find the holes, and so, wanted to give them as much help as possible. I turned a stern eye on my now much clearer shadow, and demanded, What are you trying to pull? Though my arms remained tight to my sides, the shadow's arms lifted and broadened into wings at the same time its legs fused themselves together into something much longer and narrower. Combine that with the way the head and neck respectively flattened and lengthened, and you no longer had a shape that looked even remotely human. In fact, were you to go by the form and movement of my shadow alone, you could be forgiven for making the assumption that I had become a rather small and agitated dragon. My shadow, or rather the Shade that inhabited it, tilted his head to one side and shot out a long slender shadow of a forked tongue to touch my cheek. And that was Triss. I want you to take the job, he said. I say his and he, because Triss lives in my shadow, and I'm a man, though it's and it would probably be more accurate, for what is sex to a shadow? His smoke-and-syrup voice reinforces the ambiguity, lying as it does midway between tenor and contralto. Why? I asked him. Because you're broke and you're bored, and when you're working, you drink less. I shook my head. I'm not buying it, Triss. That's been true of the last dozen job offers, none of which made you break cover like you did with this one. That's dangerous. What if someone had seen you? Triss reared up. Since when did you care if something was dangerous? I can't even count the number of times your frankly reckless attitude about the kinds of work we take has nearly gotten us killed in the last five years! That's different. Killed in action on a job is a risk I've always been willing to take. Getting tumbled in a tavern and nailed to the traitors gate or sent off to provide amusement for the Son of Heaven is a fucking amateur's death! Do you want that to be our legacy? As opposed to what? demanded Triss, his wings vibrating with agitation. Killed while delivering a stolen painting to its buyer? You're not seriously comparing the risks of the last five years to dying on a mission from the goddess. At least if someone sells us to the King of Zhan or the so-called Son of Heaven, we'll be dying for what we used to be. Back before the fall of the temple, what we did mattered. We worked for a cause bigger than just getting paid. In case you hadn't noticed, Triss, the goddess is dead, murdered by her heavenly peers, and most of her servants followed her into the grave. The Son of Heaven pronounced the ban on our entire order. Nothing we do matters anymore and it never will again. The fucking gods themselves have decreed it through their official human mouthpiece. May he rot from within, snapped Triss. I

threw up my hands. There is no cause anymore, just you and me and the work and getting paid. So we might as well hold on to our professionalism because we sure as hell don't have anything else left. Which is why I'd really rather not get taken down for the kind of mistake a rank amateur would make. Triss's wings sagged. Dead is dead, Aral. How doesn't really matter. Before I could answer, Triss contracted briefly his version of an embarrassed shrug. But I am sorry about moving around like that. I hadn't intended to be so obvious. It's just that this Maylien is more than she seems, possibly much more. It made me curious. I sighed and accepted the peace offering. I'm sorry, too, Triss. I know it's harder for you, always hiding in my shadow, having to pretend you don't even exist. I hated fighting with Triss. Far more than the work, he was what I had left. His friendship and love were what made me keep getting up and going on even when I no longer saw much point. If you want me to take this job, I'll do it. Thank you. I'll go tell Maylien now. I reached for the dagger I'd used to wedge the door. It's wrong, said Triss, his voice barely above a whisper, what the gods did to us, to the whole order. Their ban is wrong, and so is the Son of Heaven, even if he is the head of the high church of the eleven kingdoms. We should be free to return to the duties laid upon us by the goddess. I will never concede otherwise. Why have you? I looked away from a certainty I could no longer bear. Because the unblinking eye of justice has closed, Triss. The goddess has gone into the grave, and the rest of heaven and all its priests are against us. If the gods truly approve of the actions of the Son of Heaven, they're wrong, too. You've done nothing to earn such a ban. I've done nothing to earn such a ban. None of the Blades or the Shades who companioned them did anything beyond what was needful and just. That doesn't change the fact that every last one of us is under religious sentence of death and meat for any man's hand. Nor that the Emperor of Heaven himself struck down our goddess. Triss closed his wings sadly. If you cared so very much about living, I do not think you would have started to drink as you do. I wanted to argue with him, but nothing I could say would make him any less right. Just then, something banged into the door from the outside. A moment later, the handle began to rattle. What the hell's wrong with the door? asked a slurred voice. Nothing, I replied, just finishing up. Triss sank back into a reasonable semblance of my shape, and, a moment later, I stepped out into the night, pretending to fumble with the buttons of my pants as I went. I was actually glad of the interruption and glad of an excuse to return to the common room as well. If Maylien hadn't walked out yet, she'd certainly be getting suspicious about what was taking so very long. Well? she asked when I got back to the table. Her lips were tightly compressed, and her tone was freezing. Did your business go as it ought? Near as needs be, I replied. I am sorry about that, but it was a most urgent transaction. She snorted, then, much to my surprise, smiled. I suppose that we've all had to face such a need for haste on occasion. Now that it's passed, though, what do you say to the job? Is the package small? I intended to take the job but not before I'd gotten all the information I needed. Two sheets of folded parchment. Where does it have to be delivered? There's a large balcony on the third floor of the Marchon great house, around the back of the main building. You'll need to wait beside one of the windows. I'll tell you which. You'll meet the person the message is intended for there. And that's all you need to know until you accept the commission. I still wanted to turn her down, but I had promised Triss. Besides, the money was very good, and Triss had it right. I was bored and I was broke. Two conditions. I tapped the pouch, which lay right where I'd left it. Double the fee, and tell me where you got that dress. For the first, done. She reached into her bodice and pulled forth a second identical pouch along with two sheets of tightly folded and sealed parchment. It made me wonder what other treasures she might have tucked away in there. The delivery has to happen tomorrow night, five minutes past the tenth hour bell. Wait by the fifth window from the right on the back balcony. The recipient will be there. At the Marchon city house? I wanted us clear on terms. She nodded and rose from her chair with a smile. And the dress? Why, I stole it, of course. Then she turned and walked away. Presentation de l'diteur Aral the Jack, formerly the noble Aral Kingslayer, is the best kind of hero: damaged, cynical and despondent, yet needing only the right cause to rise from his own ashes. 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