

Only one can take the crown.



FIVE



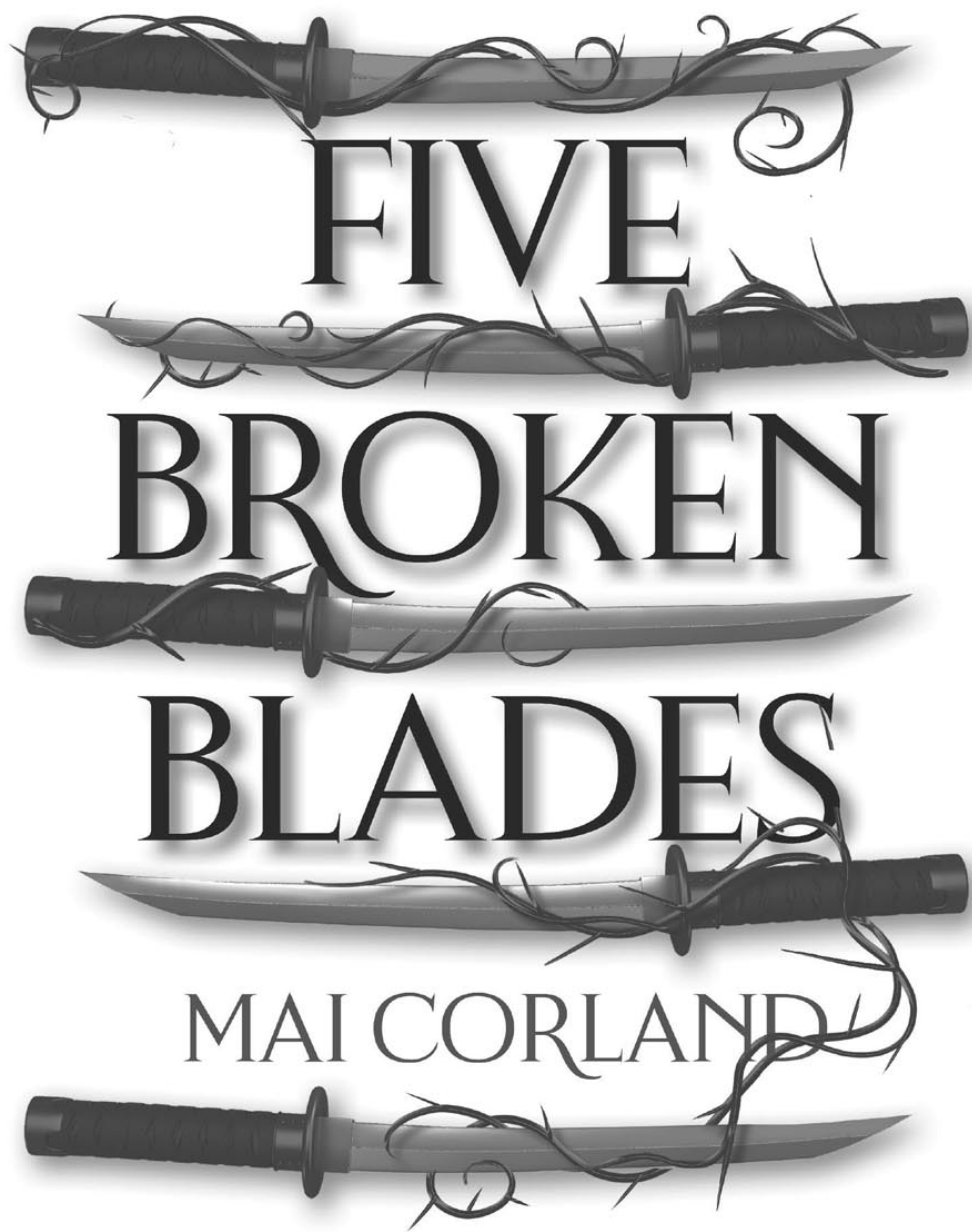
BROKEN



BLADES



MAI CORLAND



ZAFFRE

*For my heart and my sunshine
and my man of steel*

CONTENTS

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Fifty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven
Chapter Fifty-Eight
Chapter Fifty-Nine
Chapter Sixty
Chapter Sixty-One
Chapter Sixty-Two
Chapter Sixty-Three

Chapter Sixty-Four
Chapter Sixty-Five
Chapter Sixty-Six
Chapter Sixty-Seven
Chapter Sixty-Eight
Chapter Sixty-Nine
Chapter Seventy
Chapter Seventy-One
Chapter Seventy-Two
Chapter Seventy-Three
Chapter Seventy-Four
Chapter Seventy-Five
Chapter Seventy-Six
Chapter Seventy-Seven
Chapter Seventy-Eight
Chapter Seventy-Nine
Chapter Eighty
Chapter Eighty-One
Chapter Eighty-Two
Chapter Eighty-Three
Chapter Eighty-Four
Chapter Eighty-Five
Chapter Eighty-Six

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Author's Note
Copyright



CHAPTER ONE



ROYO

CITY OF UMBRIA, YUSAN

Gold for blood—that’s my advertisement and the words I live by. The merchant slowly counts out gold mun, his gloved hands shaking as each coin lands in his palm. He’s a little taller than me, but my shoulders are twice as wide.

“Hurry it up. I don’t got all night,” I say.

My deep voice startles him, and two bronze mun clatter onto the ground. He lets the coins roll away but pauses to consider chasing them down. Ten Hells. This is gonna take two lifetimes.

Finally, he slips the money into my hand, paying for the broken nose and leg. Then he darts away, fur-lined cape flapping in the night breeze. It’s not a noble living, being muscle for hire, but the upper class ain’t great neither.

I count my gold as I lumber between the soot-covered buildings. All there. I put the money in my coin purse and tuck it into my inner jacket pocket. Behind me, my latest victim whimpers in the darkness of the alley. If he keeps up that noise, the hael birds will peck him clean before morning. And the rich merchant prick didn’t pay for a kill.

“Can you stop that racket?” I say.

The whimpering dies down.

“Thank you,” I say. He’s silent—shut up by my manners or his pain.

I think about going back to help. I always think about it. But it’s none of my business. It’s not my problem, what happens after my jobs are done. Or why the merchant wanted to send a message in the first place.

Those are roads that lead nowhere. And I’ve got somewhere to be.

I blow a warm breath in my gnarled hands. This fucking cold. Frost shines on the cobbled streets, and the runoff has already started to freeze. What trees there are in this cramped city are long bare. Winter comes quick in Umbria. But then, death always does.

I should probably buy some warm gloves, but my stomach tightens at the thought of parting with even one silver mun. Every coin counts, and I don’t really need posh shit anyhow.

When I get to Inch Street, two well-dressed couples split around me. They’re all fur muffs and expensive, feathered hats. Swells. They give me a wide berth, then scurry away like I’m contagious or something. I guess if my size don’t intimidate people, the scar dividing my face does the trick. People stay away.

Good.

With a grunt, I shoulder open the heavy wooden door of Butcher & Ale. I’ve been in cleaner, nicer places with better grub, but those pubs don’t fit me. The tavern is warm without being hot and noisy, without being loud, and that’s all I need. Butcher & Ale is home. It’s where I started doing business ten years ago. Right after I turned fifteen, I set up shop in the corner—forty pounds less muscle with no scar on my face. They know what I do here, but I keep the place safe, so they look the other way.

I sit on my usual stool at the end of the bar. Yuri sees me and pours me a pint. He could be forty; he could be sixty. Who knows with that bald head. But he’s not the chatty type, and I like that.

He slides a beer across the worn wood. The glass is mostly clean. “Someone’s been looking for you.”

I raise my eyebrows and chug a gulp of ale. Somebody’s always looking for me—to fight, to hurt, to kill. This ain’t news. “Why should

I care?"

Yuri puts the bar towel over his shoulder and leans forward. "It was a girl."

I stop drinking. My heart thuds and then lodges in my throat. I will it back down and play it cool. "What'd she look like?"

"Pretty," Yuri says. Not the most helpful description. I curl my hand into a fist and stare. His eyes widen, and he rubs his nose somebody else broke a while ago. Then he starts yammering. "About my height, big brown eyes, kinda short black hair. Around your age—like mid-twenties. Red velvet cloak."

I swallow, digesting his words. A tall, twenty-something girl asking about me is unusual. And I guess "pretty" makes a difference—can't remember the last time a pretty girl looked for me. Maybe she wants an old boyfriend taught a lesson or revenge on another girl. I don't hurt girls, though.

"She's staying at the Black Shoe Inn," Yuri adds.

The nicest joint in maybe all of Umbria. So she has money and she's not from here yet somehow knew to look for me. Here. This reeks of trouble.

"Not interested," I say.

Yuri shrugs. "Suit yourself."

He wanders down the bar to serve another customer. A guy looking old for his age sits on the stool four paces down from me. He only makes eye contact with Yuri, so he's also here to drink alone. Sometimes it feels less lonely to drown your sorrows in a shared barrel of ale. To vanish in the pub crowd. Even if you don't say a word to nobody. Most nights, that's me.

But I can't disappear tonight. I know in my guts it's going to be one of those times when I can't forget no matter how much I drink. So why give myself a headache that'll hit behind my eyes tomorrow?

I down my beer, leaving the dregs. I push back from the bar, the legs of the stool scraping the sticky floor. "I'm outta here."

Yuri's bushy eyebrows rise. It's like what he didn't get on his head went to his face instead. "Already?"

He's right to be surprised. I'm normally good for a few beers as I take up my corner and wait for my next job to come in. Trouble

always has a way of finding me. Usually it's quick, but sometimes it takes four beers. Tonight, it's just the one.

"Headache." I tap my temple like he don't know where my head is. But it's a lie. And from his beady eyes going side to side, Yuri doesn't believe it for a second.

But he nods. "Night, Royo."

I take a step to leave, and something strange happens. An off feeling hits me, like a heart skipping a beat. Out of the corner of my eye, I swear there's a blur of red. I blink hard, look around, then glance into the bar mirror. Nothing. Just my scarred face and shorn head looking back at me. Nothing red in sight. I shake my head. I'm real off tonight. Best I leave now.

I trudge my way out of Butcher & Ale and back onto the frigid street. I'll need to repair the laces of my boots soon, probably patch the leather again—they still got some wear left.

I swear it got colder when I was inside. My exhale now makes little fogs in the air. I blow a hot breath into my hands again as I walk.

Five blocks in the wrong direction later, I pass the Black Shoe Inn. I can't help but slow down and stare at the lamps glowing in the windows. I wonder...then shake my head.

What am I doing? What am I even looking for?

I walk double time to get away. It's too suspicious. Too off. My instincts are always right, and the scars I bear are reminders of the times I've ignored my gut. The last time cost me everything. I'm not doing it again.

It's about a fifteen-minute walk along Avalon Road to my shack on the cheap end of town. The buildings get more run-down, smaller, as I leave the business district. Umbria's been going downhill since King Joon rose to power back when I was a kid. The whole country has.

The road bends, and then I have the river on my left. You'd think being near the water would be nice, but not in Umbria. The only waterway we got is the dirty Sol River. People empty chamber pots and dump trash right into the thing. And it's even colder, the bone-

chilling kind, when you're close enough to hear the water lick the filthy shore.

I try to stay aware of my steps, my surroundings. There are too many dangers in Umbria from gangs, from men like me, from the hael birds, to be caught sleepwalking. But I'm off my game. Distracted.

I blame Yuri. He's a barkeep, not a messenger. He could've kept all that noise to himself.

But I'm not really mad at Yuri. Truth is, I'm thinking about *her*. When Yuri said it was a girl, I hoped. And hope is a jagged knife. Hope pieces together dreams out of broken glass only for reality to come and smash them all over again. Hope is the cruelest punishment of them all. Because without hope, I know: it's not her, you fool. It can't be. It can never be.

Because I killed her.

CHAPTER TWO



EUYN

CITY OF OUTTON, FALLOW

I'm being hunted.

I laugh quietly into my beard at this cruel twist of fate as I weave on light feet through the Outton marketplace. I was once a prized hunter—the best in Yusan, according to the king. And now here I am, in the badlands, in Fallow, and *I* am the prey.

I dart to the side, using timbers for cover to not give anyone a clean line of sight. I've spent the last three years trying to avoid someone collecting the twenty-thousand-gold-mun bounty on my head. At least this senseless warren called a market helps.

Outton market looks like it was hastily put together overnight, with timbers and whatever fabric they could salvage off a ship, and then the next morning they decided to leave it that way for a hundred years. I wonder if the markets in Yusan are the same—grimy and slapdash. I never stepped foot in one because we always had servants to shop for us. Servants to do anything we desired, actually. But that isn't the life I have anymore. It's just the one I can't forget.

I pass a stall of tanned hides being sold by a gruff-looking fellow behind the counter. He nods to me, and I nod back. I've seen him before, but I don't know his name. I haven't asked lest he ask for mine.

When it's clear I won't be purchasing anything today, he ignores me and continues scanning for light fingers, a blade in his hand. Without a king, justice is meted out individually in Fallow.

The feeling of being watched prickles my skin. I toss a quick glance over my left shoulder to see if I'm being followed. Nothing.

I continue past noisy chickens and aromatic spices. The scents of clove and cardamom are overwhelming as my boots shuffle along the dusty earth. I pretend to consider dried dates as I look over my right shoulder. Still nothing. Nothing but the ordinary scene. It's all tired women in rough spun dresses carrying wares on their heads and bearded men looking for goods or for a good fight. Children are rare here, and the ones I have seen are dirty little pickpockets.

But I'm not worried about my purse today. I'm worried about my neck.

My heart pounds in my chest, and my mouth is as dry as the earth around me. But it's not the sun. It's that I'm a target outside in broad daylight like this. I want to blend in with the peasantry, but I've yet to master that trick. I walk with a hood covering my black hair and dusty sand encrusting my tunic and trousers, just like everyone else, but there's something about me that refuses to be common.

Two women stare up as I pass. I turn to see if there's a threat, scanning the rooftops of the baked-clay buildings, but they were just looking at me. Because my features, my manners are too fine, my head too tall. Three years stuck in Fallow, and I still don't walk hunched over the way they do. My shoulders refuse to slump from burden. When I try to fake it, the pretty little innkeeper always squints and asks if I'm "deep in my cups"—their term for drunk.

I should've stayed at the inn until dusk, when I can blend better. I'm safe there—as safe as I can be. I've checked every corner, plotted every escape route. There's a rope ladder stashed in the drapes in case I need a fast exit out of my second-story room. It's hotter on the higher floor, but a ground-floor window might provide access to me while I sleep. Not that I sleep much. My eyes are ringed with proof of that. When I do pass out, it's with a poisoned dagger under my pillow and my crossbow hidden under the bed.

There's a sword in the washroom. Loaded traps wait over the door and windows. I don't leave, especially during the day, if I can avoid it. But I couldn't ignore the red envelope at my door this morning.

Prince Euyn Hali Baejkin
The Stables, one bell
I have an offer for you

Prince Euyn. Prince. Euyn.

My eyes stuck on those words, and my stomach turned, spoiling my meager breakfast of cold sausage and stale biscuit. Someone knows who I am. And no one should know because Prince Euyn died from exposure three years ago. When powerful men try to kill you, it's best to let them think they succeeded. I go by the name of Donal now.

I crush the envelope in my pocket. I've been found. But by whom?

It's occurred to me more than once in the last six bells that this could be an ambush. I scan the crowd again, searching for the all blacks of royal assassins. Maybe it would be a gift from my dear big brother to finally put an end to this limbo. To kill me like a man. But the problem is, I want to live—or at least I refuse to die. And King Joon wouldn't directly order my execution—he didn't last time, relying on the elements to kill me instead.

So what is this?

Who sent this? I'm paranoid, but logically I know it's not palace assassins—they don't send calling cards. They like to slit your throat before you can scream.

Madness. It's madness to follow this invitation. My body aches to turn around. To go back. But there's only one direction I can go for answers: forward.

My boots kick up dust as I leave the sprawling market. Dust gets in everything here. There's no point in trying to keep tidy. What I wouldn't give for the perfumed baths of Qali Palace; the spotless, cold marble corridors; or even the shade trees of the royal garden,

where the servants spray a cooling mist in the summer and fan us with feathers. But I'm stuck with sun, dry serpents, and desert vultures circling overhead.

I check for tracks even though there are too many people going in and out of the market for them to be of much use. But our soldier boots leave distinct impressions, so I scan the road anyway.

The heat is oppressive as I cross to the stables, and I adjust my hood as I look back one more time. Nothing. Nothing but hazy air and commoners shopping. But nothing doesn't mean you're safe—it just means you haven't spotted the danger yet. I've hunted every creature in Yusan, and few saw me coming.

I'm almost inside the stables when I see it: another red envelope. And then I notice the hand holding it. And I know it's too late for me.