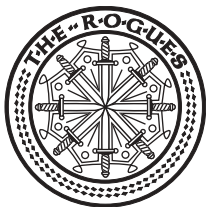




THE BLACK BOUQUET



RICHARD
LEE BYERS





CHAPTER 1

Aeron sar Randal grinned as the caravan came through the gate. He'd spent tendays preparing for that moment, and he could hardly wait to watch the trick unfold.

The travelers' cloaks were brown with dust, and their boots, caked with mud. They looked weary from tendays on the road. Or was it months? Aeron, who'd never in his life ventured more than two days' walk from Oeble, was vague on matters of geography.

No matter. The important thing was that the wayfarers had spent the journey watching for bandits, orcs, and all the other perils infesting the Border Kingdoms, finally swinging wide around Oeble itself, a notorious nest of robbers and slavers in its own right. Having finally reached the Paeradyne, a walled compound on the southern edge of town that was supposedly the city's only "safe" inn and marketplace, they were starting to relax. It was natural, inevitable, and he could see it in their faces.

Clad in a beggar's rags, vile-looking sores made of tallow and paint mottling his legs, Aeron sat on the ground near one of the horse troughs. From there, he could survey the entire bustling courtyard, and every member of his crew could see him. He turned toward the inn and nodded.

Slouching and scratching, Kerridi came through the door a moment later. She was a big, brawny woman, but pleasant of face, and possessed of a merry, generous nature. Aeron thoroughly enjoyed the occasional nights he spent in her bed.

Beholding her there, though, few would have envied him the experience. The brown stain on her teeth and layers of padding around her middle made her uglier than nature intended, but it was primarily her ferocious scowl that transformed her into the very image of a shrewish wife.

She cast about until she seemingly spotted Gavath sitting at one of the outdoor tables. The scrawny little man had mastered the art of looking like an ass, the better to cheat, swindle, and lift the purses of the unwary, and he'd exercised that peculiar knack to the utmost for the job at hand. His garish, straw-stuffed doublet proclaimed him a would-be fop devoid of any vestige of taste. Pomade plastered strands of black hair across his crown in a ridiculously inadequate attempt to hide his bald patch. Gems of paste and glass twinkled on his fingers. Smirking, he was chatting up a pretty, flaxen-haired serving maid young enough to be his daughter. She was no doubt enduring the clumsy flirtation only for the sake of a generous tip. Gavath had paid the lass a great deal of attention over the course of the past few days, much to his supposed spouse's displeasure, the two of them making sure that everyone staying or working at the Paer noticed.

Thus, few but the newly arrived travelers were particularly startled when Kerridi started screaming invective

and abuse. Most of the folk in the courtyard merely grinned and settled back to watch the next scene in the ongoing domestic farce. Kerridi advanced on Gavath, who quailed and goggled in dread. The serving maid scurried for safety.

Gavath attempted to stammer out some sort of excuse, or perhaps simply a plea for mercy. Kerridi lashed him with the back of her hand, a meaty smack that knocked him off his bench. She kicked him until he rolled away and scrambled to his feet. Then, still shrieking, swinging wildly, she chased him about.

Everyone began to laugh, and though the scene truly was comical, that wasn't the entire reason. Dal, who was loitering near the well munching on a pear, deserved some of the credit. Clad in a simple brown laborer's smock and breeches, his nose and cheeks ruddy with broken veins, the old tosspot didn't look like most people's notion of a wizard, but when sober, he was a halfway decent one, able enough to use his magic to influence the emotions of a crowd.

Kerridi connected with another solid buffet, or so it appeared. Gavath hurtled backward and crashed through the side of the pen containing the inn's population of goats, whose flesh and milk served to feed the patrons. At that same instant, Dal, his timing impeccable, surreptitiously cast a spell to alarm the animals. Bleating, they bolted from the enclosure and raced madly about, bumping into people and tables, frightening the horses and ponies, reducing the entire courtyard to chaos and confusion. Except for those unfortunates who were knocked off their feet, drenched in spilled beer, struggling to control fractious mounts, or scrambling to catch the escapees, everyone laughed even harder.

Aeron glanced around. Nobody was looking at him, so he pulled a small pewter vial from inside his shirt and quaffed the bitter, lukewarm contents. It was the last

swallow of the potion, and he rather regretted the final expenditure of a resource that had extricated him from several tight spots. But Kesk Turnskull was paying him enough to make using the draught worthwhile.

Sorcerous power tingled through his veins. He could still see his lower body as clearly as before, but from past experience he trusted that he truly had become invisible to the eyes of others. Dodging the scurrying goats, he rose and stalked toward the caravan.

Kesk had told him who to look for, and he spotted her easily enough. She was a female scout or guide, slender, long legged, sun bronzed, clad in leather armor dyed forest green. A broadsword hung at her hip, and she had a bow and quiver of arrows strapped to her saddle. Even with her curly chestnut hair cropped short, she was comely in a stern sort of way. She was smiling at the commotion in the yard but not laughing outright, and didn't look as if she'd entirely relaxed her vigilance.

Well, that was all right. Aeron was confident she wasn't as able a guard as he was a thief. He'd been surprised when Kesk hired him for that particular job. He'd thought the tanarukk still disliked him for his refusal to join the Red Axes. But really, it made perfect sense. The outlaw chieftain knew that no one in his own crude gang of cut-throats possessed the finesse to snatch a prize from within the confines of the Paeraddyn.

Suppressing an idiot impulse to kiss her or tweak her nose, Aeron crept by the ranger. Her head didn't turn, reassuring proof that she didn't hear or otherwise sense him. He examined the baggage lashed to her sorrel mare.

She had a couple scuffed old saddlebags, but only one that, from the distended shape of it, looked to contain a box like the one he was seeking. He started to unbuckle the flap, and everything went wrong.

The saddlebag shrieked like a thousand teakettles sounding at once. Green light pulsed around Aeron's

limbs, outlining them. He was sure the radiance was plainly visible to others as well, that he was a phantom no longer. The guide spun around and started to draw her sword.

One disadvantage of such a long blade was that it took a moment to clear the scabbard. Like many folk in Oeble, Aeron was a knife fighter, and could have used that second to throw one of his hidden daggers of fine Arthyn steel.

But he didn't. Though adept with a knife, he had little taste for bloodshed. It was one reason he'd always committed his thefts by dint of trickery, and perhaps it was why he tore the screeching saddlebag free and risked a desperate lunge forward.

He reached the woman in green a bare instant before she would have readied the broadsword. He punched at her jaw. The impact stabbed pain through his knuckles, but she fell backward. He kicked her in the head in hopes of keeping her down.

Aeron whirled and sprinted for the open gate. Spears leveled, two of the Paeraddyn's own guards scrambled to block his path. Another, stationed atop the wall-walk with its merlons, cocked a crossbow. Dal's enchantment had disposed the warriors to mirth, but only within limits. The deafening scream of the saddlebag sufficed to recall them to their duty.

Aeron cast frantically about for another way out, even though he knew none existed within easy reach. He wasn't supposed to need one. If the theft had gone as planned, he, in his guise as a humble beggar, would have limped out the front entrance before anyone realized aught was amiss.

The crossbowman pulled the trigger. Aeron twisted aside, and the quarrel just missed him. Half a dozen of the ranger's fellow wayfarers glided toward him, fanning out to flank him as they came.

Then two of them swayed and crumpled to the ground. Aeron surmised that Dal had surreptitiously thrown a spell of slumber. But why had the magic only affected a pair of them? Apparently they were seasoned warriors, strong in spirit, or else they carried talismans of protection. Either way, it was discouraging.

Aeron still had nowhere to run. He gave ground, trying to keep skittish goats, horses, and pack mules, all thoroughly spooked by the keening saddlebag, between himself and his pursuers. Meanwhile, he prayed for more magical assistance, a brilliant plan, or something that could extricate him from his fix, and he snatched a long, heavy, single-edged “Arthyn fang” from its sheath.

His prize finally stopped screaming, though his ears still rang from the clamor it had raised. The green light died, too, but it didn’t matter. Fighting, even if it was just a punch and a kick, had ended his invisibility. That was the way the cursed potion worked. Why, only mages knew.

An instant later, he discerned that he’d run out of animals to interpose between his pursuers and himself, which meant it no longer mattered that he didn’t like slicing and stabbing people. There was nothing to do but crouch and await the assault. He took a deep, slow breath to steady himself. Some of the Paer’s servants and patrons shouted encouragement to his foes.

The outlander in the lead swung his sword in a vicious head cut. Aeron twisted aside and sprang forward in a single motion, bringing himself so far inside his opponent’s reach that the long blade ceased to be a threat. The range, however, was exactly right for a knife, and he sent the traveler reeling backward with a slashed belly.

That was one man out of the fight, but Aeron had to keep moving, spinning, dodging, for if he faltered for even a heartbeat, one of the other three would kill him for certain. Most likely they would anyway, but at least he’d make them work for it. Glimpsing movement at the

corner of his vision, he pivoted and snapped the knife across his torso in a lateral parry. Fortunately, the Arthyn fang was heavy enough to brush aside even the thrust of a spear.

But for all its virtues, it couldn't block out two attacks at the same time, and when he saw a bushy-bearded guard in scale armor hacking at him, he felt a surge of terror. Remarkably, though, the stroke wobbled and flew wide, and the warrior collapsed. Kerridi had buried a falchion in his back. Gavath came running up behind her with his own fighting knife in hand.

Aeron was pleasantly surprised at their recklessness, and Dal's, too, come to that, though the latter was still doing his level best to make sure no one noticed he was the one casting spells, relying on magic that didn't burn any sort of trail on the air. Up until that point, no one had known they were Aeron's accomplices. They could have allowed him to fight and die alone, and had a good chance of stealing away unhindered, but evidently they were too fond of him to abandon him. Or else they were hungry enough for the payment Kesk had promised that they were willing to take a considerable risk to get it. Either way, Aeron was grateful for their aid.

The spearman started to pull his lance back for another jab. Aeron cut him across the face, then kicked him in the knee. Bone crunched, and the guard fell.

Aeron whirled to fight alongside his partners. Armed men rushed in at them, too many, but then three of them staggered and tripped as though sick or blind, victims of Dal's wizardry.

Aeron, Kerridi, and Gavath stood fast against the foes who did reach them. Steel flashed and rang, the thieves hurled the next wave of guards back, and for an instant, Aeron dared to hope that somehow they might all escape. Then, across the courtyard, the willowy scout dragged herself to her feet.

She lifted her fingers to her lips and gave a piercing whistle, and even though it was wide eyed with terror, the sorrel mare heeded the call. The steed trotted to her, and she snatched her yew bow from the saddle.

Aeron was sure that meant trouble, but another guard lunged at him, and that kept him from even trying to do anything about it. As he and his opponent shifted and feinted, he saw the ranger whip an arrow from her quiver, then stumble. Dal, bless him, had evidently assailed her with a spell.

Unfortunately, she didn't fall down. Shaking off the effect of the magic, she caught her balance and pivoted in the wizard's direction. Despite his efforts at stealth, she'd discerned he was the source of the unseen attacks that kept hindering her allies.

Dal babbled and slashed his hands through a mystic pattern, not caring who saw anymore, just trying to throw the next spell quickly. Even so, he was too slow. The woman in green nocked her arrow, pulled the gray goose-feather fletching to her ear, and let fly. The shaft slammed into Dal's chest. He blinked as if puzzled, and his knees buckled, dumping him down in the dirt.

Aeron felt shocked. Astonished. He'd seen plenty of men die violent deaths. Indeed, Oeble yielded such a steady crop of slaughtered corpses that the Faceless Master, ruler of the city, employed the freakish "gnarlbones" Hulm Draeridge to drive the Dead Cart through the streets every morning and collect them. But that was Dal!

Perhaps sensing Aeron's horror, his current opponent cut viciously at his flank. Fortunately, the thief's reflexes sufficed to twitch back out of range. Then, before the swordsman could swing his weapon back into position for another chop, Aeron sprang in and stabbed him. The warrior fell.

Aeron peered around. More guards were charging toward the outlaws, or rushing out of the Paeraddyn's

market to see what the fuss was about. The ranger strode through the milling horses and goats, plainly seeking a clear shot at the remaining thieves. A gash bisected Gavath's bald spot, and blood stained his face and ridiculous puffed doublet.

Aeron realized he and his comrades had no hope of escape, not without Dal's magic to aid them or a clever idea presenting itself in the next couple of heartbeats. He cast about once more, and finally, it came to him.

The sandstone walls enclosing the compound were high, but not impregnable-citadel high, only about twenty feet. Assuming a man could make it to the top, he might have a chance of surviving a jump.

"Come on!" he shouted.

He and his partners fell back, defending themselves as they retreated. They reached the patch of cool shadow at the foot of the wall, flung their current assailants back, and Aeron led them scrambling up a flight of stairs. Gavath was in the middle, and Kerridi brought up the rear.

Unfortunately, their frantic ascent gave all the bowmen clear shots at them.

"Surrender!" the guide shouted.

Had she been talking to some other scoundrel, Aeron might have laughed. Perhaps, since she was an outlander, she truly believed that a man in his situation might improve his circumstances by giving up, but he knew the sort of unpleasantness awaiting any prisoner who'd tried to commit a robbery in the Paer, particularly if he'd carved up a guard or two in the process. A quick demise was much to be preferred.

Crossbows clacked almost before she finished speaking. It was hard to dodge on the narrow steps, but Aeron flung himself down, and luck was with him. No shaft touched him, though they smashed into the stonework all around.

“Oh, sheltering shadows of Mask,” Gavath whimpered.

Aeron looked back. The small man had a quarrel and one of the scout’s gray-fletched arrows protruding from his torso. His throat rattled, and he slumped motionless.

“Keep moving!” Kerridi snapped.

She reared up as if she didn’t realize she had a cross-bow bolt sticking in her too, then swayed, fell over backward, and tumbled down the stairs, knocking into the pursuers who’d started up after her.

Aeron sprinted on. There was nothing else to do. For the next few seconds, he had little to fear from the cross-bowmen who’d just discharged their weapons. It took them some time to cock and load. The scout, however, was a different matter. She was already pulling back her bow.

He wondered how many arrows she could loose before he made it up to the wall-walk. Too many, he suspected, for him to dodge them all. Given her manifest competence, he wondered if he could even evade the next one.

Her bow jumped, straightening itself, but the arrow didn’t streak at him. It simply dropped at her feet. For an instant, he didn’t understand, then he realized the string had broken.

He dashed on, fast as he’d ever moved in his life. A swordsman met him at the top of the steps. He dodged the fellow’s blade, then slashed him across the wrist. The guard dropped his weapon, his eyes and mouth gaped open wide, and Aeron bulled him out of the way.

He glanced back. The ranger already had her bow restrung and another arrow drawn back.

He dived over the crenellations, and the ground rushed up at him. He told himself to roll, but he smashed down so hard that afterward he wasn’t sure if he’d actually done it or not. Time skipped, and he was sprawled on his back.

He heaved himself to his feet. Evidently the desperate leap hadn’t broken any bones. He hurt all over, but that

didn't matter any more than the fatigue implicit in his pounding heart and gasping lungs. He had to run before someone took another shot at him from the ramparts, or other foes came streaming out of the gate.

He dashed north, toward the heart of the city with its leaning ramshackle towers, seeking to lose himself in the maze of twisting alleyways. Eventually he found a thin, unmarked flight of stairs at the end of a narrow cul-de-sac, and after descending into the earth, permitted himself to hunker down, utterly spent, and rest. His eyes stung, and he knuckled them angrily.



Bow in hand, guiding the sorrel mare with her knees, Miri Buckman forced her way down the congested lane until it became clear that the thief had outdistanced her.

Could she track him, then? Through a forest or across a moor, almost certainly. But in the city, creaking carts, drawn by oxen and mules, rolled up and down the avenues to erase whatever sign her quarry might have left. Pedestrians milled pointlessly about to complete the obliteration, and moreover, some of the wider thoroughfares were cobbled.

She cursed under her breath. She wasn't fond of cities in general with their crowds, dirt, and stink, and crumbling Oeble seemed a particularly obnoxious one.

By the Hornblade, she thought, the spires look as if they might collapse at any second.

Every other person on the street seemed either to slink furtively or to affect a bravo's strut and sneer. Indeed, every third passerby was a pig-faced, olive-skinned orc or some sort of goblin-kin. She would have had no trouble believing the town was as foul a nest of villains as rumor maintained even if she hadn't suffered an overt demonstration of its lawlessness.

She wheeled the mare and cantered back to the Paer-addyn, where someone had already found a couple healers to tend the injured warriors. It didn't look as if the outlaws had actually killed more than a couple of her warriors. She supposed that was good, though in her present humor, she was half inclined to cut down a few of them herself. Stupid, incompetent—

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, controlling the anger, or at least redirecting it toward the proper target. She had no business scorning the mercenaries for failing to protect the treasure. Ultimately, it had been her responsibility and, maddeningly, her failure, just a few scant minutes before she might have divested herself of her charge.

Hostegym Longstride hobbled up to her with a faltering gait that belied his surname. Not seeing any blood on the burly, azure-cloaked mercenary, Miri surmised that one of the thieves had scored on him with a shrewd kick to the knee, a stamp to the foot, or some such.

"Most of our lads should survive," he rumbled. "Most of the inn's guards, too, if you care."

"How about the three thieves who didn't get away?" she replied, swinging herself down off her horse. The motion made the top of her head throb where the fraudulent beggar had kicked her.

"All dead," the mercenary captain said. "The arrows and crossbow bolts killed the men outright, and it looks like the big wench broke her neck bouncing down the steps."

"Piss and dung," Miri swore. She'd hoped to question one of them.

A hostler, a pimply, gangling youth, scurried up to her.

"Madame . . . m-madame ranger?" he stammered, as if uncertain of the proper way to address her, or else simply afraid she might take out her frustrations on him. "A gentleman inside the inn wants to talk to you."

“I’m sure he does. Take care of my mount.” She handed the boy the reins, then glanced at Hostegym and added, “You might as well come along, too.”

They headed into the common room of the inn. Judging by the babble, the dozen or so voices shouting for the taverner’s or a serving maid’s attention, the excitement of the robbery and brawl had engendered quite a thirst in those who’d simply stood and watched the show. A white, soft-looking hand beckoned through a curtain of yellow glass beads. The scout and mercenary passed through the glittering strands and down a little passage lined with private chambers. The door to the last one on the left was ajar. They stepped through and seated themselves on the opposite side of a scarred, rectangular table from the man they’d come to meet. The small window was closed and shuttered, and the dim, confined space was stuffy with the trapped heat of a warm autumn afternoon.

Catching a first glimpse of that clean, well-tended hand, Miri had immediately guessed it had never performed any task more strenuous than guiding a quill across a piece of parchment. Seeing its owner up close reinforced the impression. Plump, clad in an unpretentious yet well-tailored tunic and breeches, dove gray with brown accents, he had the look of a chief clerk or steward, a highly placed functionary who spent his days assigning work to other people. Yet the set of his fleshy jaw bespoke a certain resolution, and his brown eyes, a wry intelligence, that persuaded her to defer the contempt she generally felt for such citified parasites.

“So,” he said.

“You are . . . ?” Miri prompted.

“The man you were supposed to meet,” he said. “The fellow who would have examined the item, then gone and fetched the coin and letters of credit if everything was in order. We don’t need to throw names around. Certainly not now.”

“I thought this Paeraddyn place was supposed to be safe,” Hostegym grumbled.

“My master’s house is safe,” the Oeble man replied, a thin edge of anger in his mild, reasonable baritone voice, “but your employer insisted we make the exchange on neutral ground, no doubt so I’d have difficulty simply seizing the item and refusing to pay the balance due.”

“The folk of Oeble,” Miri said, “even the more reputable ones, enjoy a certain notoriety.”

“And sometimes,” the pudgy man said, “a man spends so much effort looking over his shoulder for dragons that he walks right up on a bear. But I suppose it will do no good to debate what we ought to have done.”

“I assume,” Miri said, “that even Oeble has some sort of watch, or constables.”

The man across the table nodded and said, “The Gray Blades, and I daresay they’ll make a genuine effort to find a robber who committed an outrage in the Paer. Indeed, my patron can take measures to encourage them to do their utmost. But let’s not tell them what the rogue stole.”

“Surely if they knew how valuable it—”

“Within a day, every scoundrel in town would know it, too, and that might be less than helpful. We can still reclaim our property if and when the Gray Blades actually recover it.”

Miri scowled and said, “You don’t seem confident they will.”

“They’re competent, some are even halfway honest, but they only number about thirty. Oeble is a big place and, I must concede, a rogue’s haven, where every day dozens of new crimes compete for the law’s attention. We’ll just have to hope for the best.”

“That’s not good enough,” Miri said. The warm, stale air was oppressive, and made her head pound. She irritably tugged at her green leather armor, pulling it away

from her neck to help her breathe. “We’ll find the wretch ourselves.”

Hostegym grunted and said, “I wonder if that’s a practical idea.”

“I’m a scout,” she said. “A tracker and hunter. It’s what I do.”

“It’s what you do out in the woods,” the mercenary leader replied. “What makes you think you’ll have the same kind of luck in a warren like this?”

“Your friend may have a point,” the functionary said. “I don’t mean to discourage you. As I understand it, your employer has his own problems, and urgently needs the rest of his coin. To say the least, it’s in everyone’s best interests that we recover the item and complete our transaction. But it won’t help anybody if you, Mistress Buckman, merely wind up getting tossed on the Dead Cart.”

Miri made a spitting sound and said, “You must be joking. It’s only one man who got away.”

“If you truly mean to do this,” the functionary said, “you’d better get that notion right out of your head. Oeble is full of knaves who’ll resent strangers asking questions about one of their own, or about anything, really.”

“Fine, point taken. But surely they’re no match for a band of trained warriors.”

The Oeble man arched an eyebrow.

“All right,” she said, “I admit, the four rogues made us look like idiots, but only because they had magic and luck on their side. The wizard’s dead now, and the whore-son who jumped off the wall has surely run through all the good fortune the Lady Who Smiles was willing to grant him.”

“That’s as may be,” Hostegym said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair, “but I have to tell you, Miri, if you go ahead with this, you won’t have that ‘band of trained warriors’ watching your back. The lads and me, we’re done.”

“What?” she cried.

“Now, don’t glare like that. We signed on to get your mysterious saddlebag to Oeble, and we did. We fulfilled the letter of the contract.”

She laughed and replied, “Do you honestly expect me to see it that way, and meekly hand over the rest of *your* coin? I couldn’t even if I were willing. I was supposed to pay you out of what our contact here was going to give me.”

The beefy warrior frowned.

“Ouch,” he said. “That’s bad news.”

“So I take it we’re still in this together?”

Hostegym sat pondering for a heartbeat or two, then finally shook his head and answered, “No, I don’t think so. You know what the boys and I are good at. That’s why you hired us. We understand fighting on horseback, watching for bandits and trolls in open country. We’re not thief takers, and I don’t think we’d fare well playing at it in a place as tricky as Oeble. Fortunately, caravans leave from here all the time, and I reckon the smart way for us to make more coin is to take another job as guards. Come with us if you like. We’d be glad to have you.”

She glared at him and said, “You miserable, treacherous coward . . .”

“Call me all the names you like. It won’t change anything. The fact is, the ‘item’ is lost because *you* made a mistake. When the thieves were on the steps, you could have shot the fellow with the saddlebag first, before your bow-string broke.”

He was right, of course. It had been the only sensible thing to do. Yet she hadn’t, and didn’t quite know why. Perhaps it was because she’d recognized that, a minute or two earlier, the bogus beggar could easily have killed her, yet had contented himself with knocking her down and kicking her. Thus, she’d felt obliged to give him one last chance to surrender.

Seeing she had no answer, Hostegym heaved himself to his feet, wincing as his bad leg took his weight.

“I guess we’ll stay here at the inn until we land another job,” he said. “If you see reason, come find us.”

He nodded to the plump man, then limped out the door.

“Does this change your mind?” the functionary asked.

“No,” Miri said. “In my guildhouse, they teach us to honor our commitments. I’ll recover the item by myself.”

“Do you have any idea how?”

“Well, at least I got a look at the thief.” The wretch had been lean and fit, with green eyes and keen, intelligent features. Given his agility, she assumed the sores on his legs were fake. Perhaps his goatee was, also. “But beyond that . . .”

She shrugged.

“Well, I know my master will want me to give you all the help I can,” the functionary said. “Unfortunately, we don’t have many contacts among the gangs and other outlaws. No matter what outsiders may believe, Oeble does have some citizens who don’t work hand-in-glove with the robbers and smugglers. But at the very least, I can provide some general information.”

Miri nodded and said, “Tell me.”