

FOOL'S ASSASSIN

BY ROBIN HOBB

THE FARSEER TRILOGY

Assassin's Apprentice
Royal Assassin
Assassin's Quest

THE LIVESHIP TRADERS

Ship of Magic
The Mad Ship
Ship of Destiny

THE TAWNY MAN

Fool's Errand
The Golden Fool
Fool's Fate

THE SOLDIER SON

Shaman's Crossing
Forest Mage
Renegade's Magic

THE RAIN WILD CHRONICLES

The Dragon Keeper
Dragon Haven
City of Dragons
Blood of Dragons

The Inheritance

The Wilful Princess and the Piebald Prince

WRITING AS MEGAN LINDHOLM

The Reindeer People
Wolf's Brother

Harpy's Flight
The Windsingers
The Limbreth Gate
Luck of the Wheels

Wizard of the Pigeons
Cloven Hooves
Alien Earth



Fool's
Assassin

ROBIN HOBB

Book One of Fitz and the Fool



HARPER
Voyager

HarperVoyager
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This hardback edition published 2014

1

Copyright © Robin Hobb 2014

Robin Hobb asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 744417 5

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Goudy Oldstyle Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

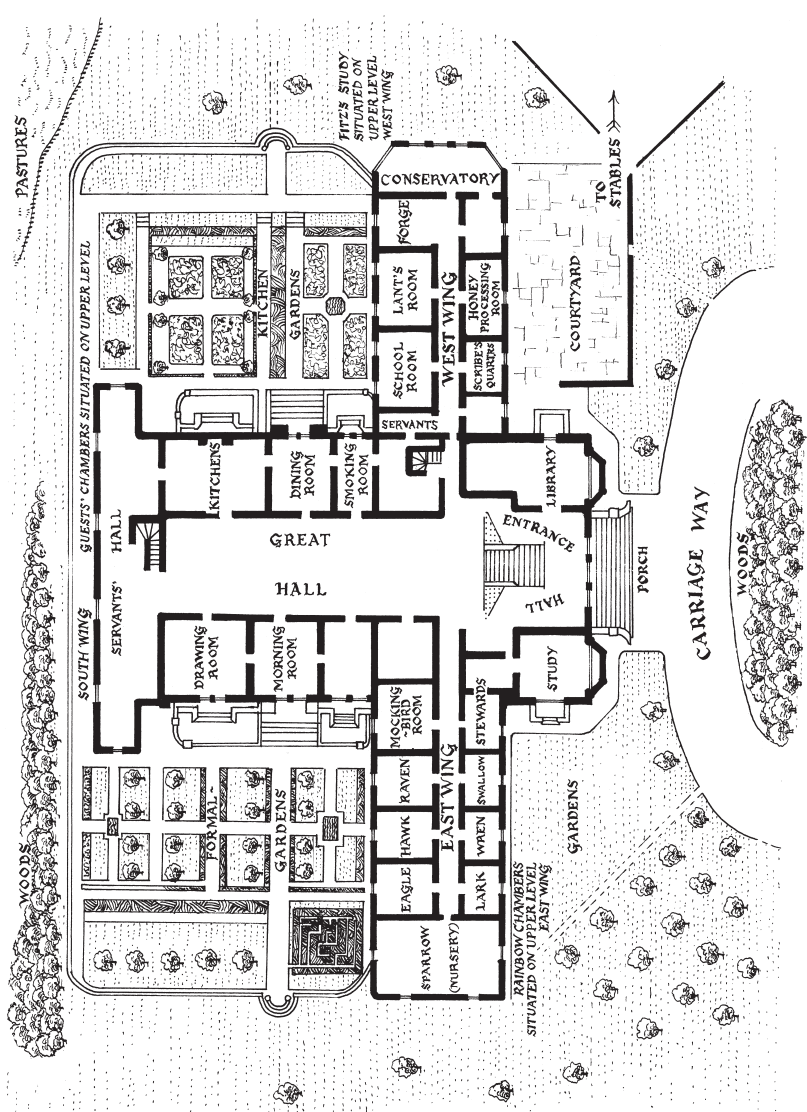
FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations,
and other controlled sources.

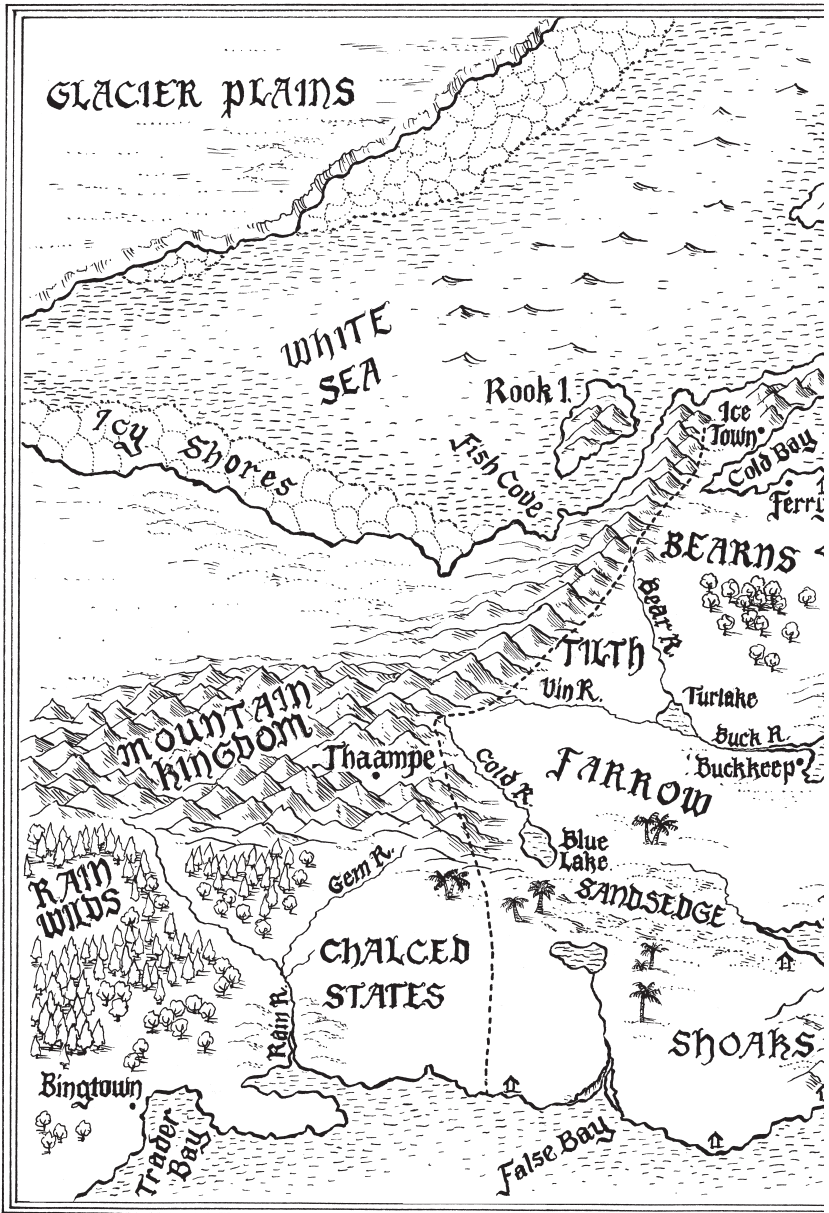
Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

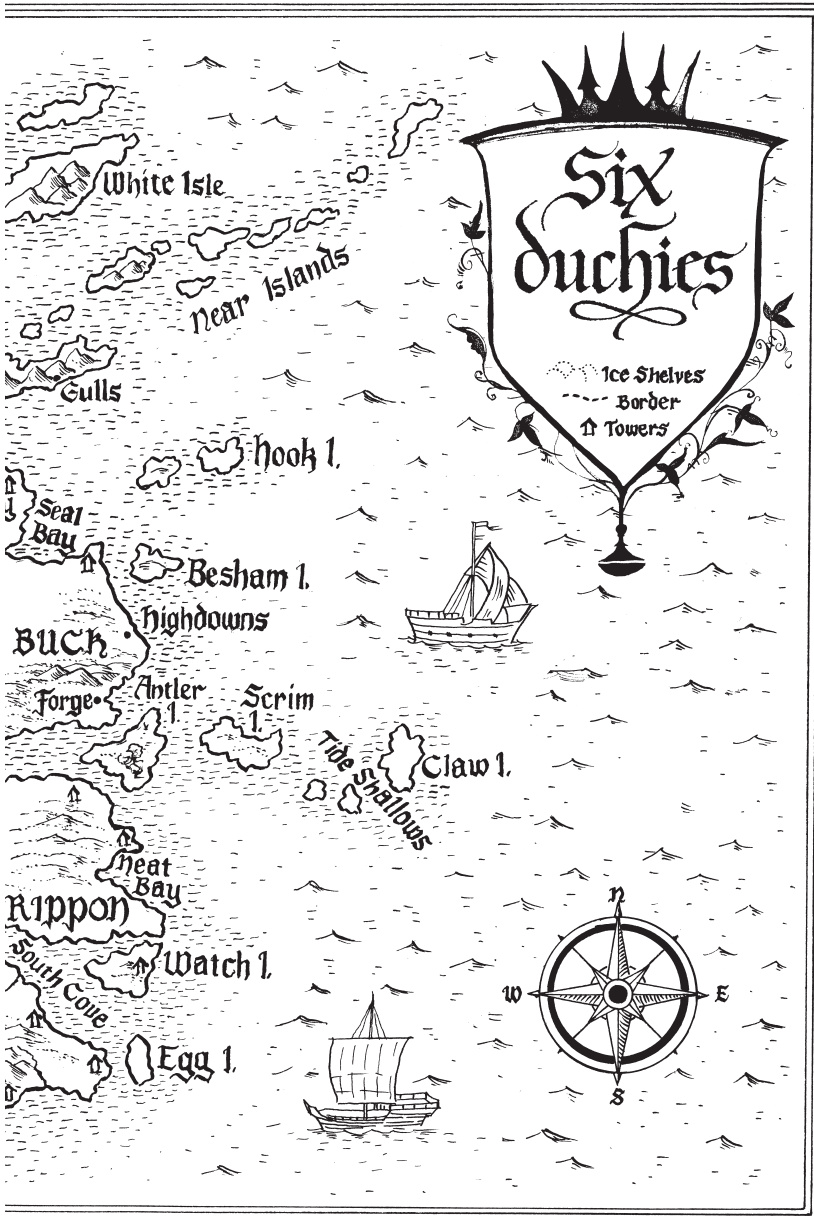
*For Soren and Felix.
This one's for the guys*











PROLOGUE

*My dear Lady Fennis,
We have been friends far too long for me to be circumspect. As you so delicately hinted, yes, there has been shattering news delivered to me. My stepson, Prince Chivalry, has exposed himself as the crude fellow I have always known him to be. His bastard child, fathered on a Mountain whore, has been revealed.*

As shameful as that is, it could have been handled far more discreetly if his clever-as-a-stone brother Prince Verity had taken swift and decisive action to eliminate the disgrace. Instead, he has announced him in an indiscreet message to my husband.

And so, in the face of this base behaviour, what does my lord do? Why, not only does he insist the bastard must be brought to Buckkeep Castle, he then bestows on Chivalry the title to Withywoods, and sends him out to pasture there with his awkward barren wife. Withywoods! A fine estate that any number of my friends would be pleased to occupy, and he rewards it to his son for fathering a bastard with a foreign commoner! Nor does King Shrewd find it distasteful that said bastard has been brought back here to Buckkeep Castle where any member of my court may see the little Mountain savage.

And the final insult to me and my son? He has decreed that Prince Verity will now take up the title of King-in-Waiting, and be the next presumed heir to the throne. When Chivalry had the decency to secede his claim in the face of this disgrace, I secretly rejoiced, believing that Regal would immediately be recognized as the next king. While he may be younger than both his half-brothers, no one can dispute

Robin Hobb

that his bloodlines are more noble, and his bearing as lordly as his name.

Truly, I am wasted here. As wasted as my son Regal. When I gave up my own reign and titles to be Shrewd's queen, it was in the belief that any child I bore him would be seen as possessing far better lineage than the two reckless boys his former queen gave him, and would reign after Shrewd. But does he now look at Chivalry and admit his mistake in naming him heir? No. Instead he sets him aside only to install his doltish younger brother as King in Waiting. Verity. Hulking, square-faced Verity, with all the grace of an ox.

It is too much, my dear. Too much for me to bear. I would leave court, save that Regal would then be without a defender here.

A missive from Queen Desire to Lady Fennis of Tilth

I hated her when I was a boy. I recall the first time I found that missive, unfinished and never sent. I read it, confirming for myself that the queen I had never formally met had, indeed, hated me from the moment she knew of me. I made it mutual. I never asked Chade how he came by that letter. A bastard himself and half-brother to King Shrewd, Chade had never hesitated in pursuing the best interests of the Farseer throne. He had purloined it from Queen Desire's desk, perhaps. Perhaps it had been his ploy to make it appear the queen snubbed Lady Fennis by not responding to her letter. Does it matter now? I do not know, for I do not know what effect my old mentor gained with his theft.

Yet I do wonder, sometimes, if it was an accident that I found and read Queen Desire's letter to Lady Fennis, or if it was a deliberate revelation on Chade's part. He was my mentor in those days, teaching me the assassin's arts. Chade served his king ruthlessly, as assassin, spy and manipulator of the court at Buckkeep Castle, and taught me to do the same. A royal bastard, he told me, is only safe in a court so long as he is useful. Ostensibly, I was a lowly bastard, ignored or reviled as I navigated the dangerous currents of politics in the castle. But both King Shrewd and I knew that I was protected by the king's hand and his assassin. Yet it was not only poisons and knife-work and subterfuge that he taught me, but what one must do to survive as a bastard of royal lineage. Did he seek to give me

Fool's Assassin

warning, or teach me to hate that I might be more firmly his? Even those questions come to me too late.

Over the years, I have seen Queen Desire in so many guises. First, she was the horrid woman who hated my father and hated me even more, the woman with the power to snatch the crown from my father's head and condemn me to a life where even my name was the mark of my bastardy. I recall a time in my life when I feared even to let her see me.

Years after I arrived at Buckkeep, when my father was murdered at Withywoods, hers was the hand most likely behind it. And yet there was nothing I or Chade could do about it, no justice we could demand. I remember wondering if King Shrewd did not know or if he did not care. I remember knowing with absolute certainty that if Queen Desire wished my death, she could ask for it. I even wondered then if Chade would protect me or if he would bow to his duty and allow it to happen. Such things for a child to wonder.

Withywoods was an idea to me, a harsh place of banishment and humiliation. When I was a boy and I lived in Buckkeep, I was told that was where my father had gone, to hide from the shame that was me. He had abdicated his throne and crown, bowed his head to the hurt and anger of his lawful wife Patience, apologized to king and court for his failure of virtue and judgment, and fled from the bastard he had sired.

And so I imagined that place based on the only places I had ever lived, as a fortified castle on a hill. I had thought of it as a place like the stockade fortress at Moonseye in the Mountain Kingdom, or the steep walls of Buckkeep Castle perched on top of sheer and forbidding black cliffs overlooking the sea. I had imagined my father, brooding alone in a chill stone hall hung with battle pennants and ancient arms. I imagined stony fields that gave onto grey-fogged marshes.

Later I would discover that Withywoods was a grand manor, a large and comfortable home built in a wide and generous valley. Its walls were not of stone, but of golden oak and rich maple, and though the floors of the halls were flagged with flat river stone, the walls were panelled in warm wood. The gentle sunlight of the farming valley fell in broad stripes into the rooms through the tall,

Robin Hobb

narrow windows. The carriageway to the front door was wide, and graceful white birches lined it. In autumn, they shed a carpet of gold on the road, and in winter, burdened with snow, they arched over it, a frosted white tunnel paned with glimpses of blue sky.

Withywoods was not a fortress banishment, not an exile, but a tolerant pasturing-out for my father and his barren wife. I think my grandfather had loved my father as much as his stepmother hated him. King Shrewd sent him to that distant estate to be safe.

And when my time came to go there, with the woman I loved and her lively boys and the woman who had always wanted to be my mother, it became for a time a haven of rest and peace for us.

Time is an unkind teacher, delivering lessons that we learn far too late for them to be useful. Years after I could have benefited from them, the insights come to me. Now, I look back on 'old' King Shrewd and see him as a man beset by a long wasting illness that stole from him the comfort of his own body and the sharpness of his mind. But worse, I see Queen Desire for what she was: not an evil woman intent on making my little life miserable, but as a mother full of ruthless love for her only son, intent that he should never be slighted in any way. She would stop at nothing to put him on a throne.

What would I not have done to protect my little daughter? What action would have been too extreme? If I say, 'I would have killed them all, with no regrets,' does that make me a monster?

Or just a father?

But it is all hindsight. All these lessons, learned too late. When I was still a young man, I felt in my flesh like a bent old gaffer, full of pains and sighs. Oh, how I pitied myself, and justified every wild decision I had ever made! And then, when it came time for me to be the wise elder of my household, I was trapped in the body of a man of middle years, still subject to those passions and impulses, still relying on the strength of my right arm when I would have been wiser to stop and employ my powers of reason.

Lessons learned too late. Insights discovered decades later.

And so much lost as a result.

ONE

Withywoods

*Burrich, old friend,
Well, we are settled here, I suppose. It has not been a pleasant time for me, or for you if your somewhat terse message conceals as much as I suspect it does. The house is immense, far too large for the two of us. It is so like you to ask after our mounts before inquiring after my own health. I will answer that query first. I'm pleased to tell you that Silk has taken the change in stable quite calmly, as the well-mannered palfrey she has always been. Tallfellow, in contrast, has made a new hobby out of bullying the resident stallion, but we have taken steps to be sure their stalls and paddocks are well separated now. I've reduced his grain and there is a young stableman here named, oddly enough, Tallman, who was absolutely ecstatic to receive my request that he take the horse out and run him hard at least once a day. With such a regimen, I am sure he will soon settle.*

My lady wife. You did not ask after her, but I know you well, my friend. So I will tell you that Patience has been furious, wounded, melancholy, hysterical and altogether of a hundred different minds about the situation. She berates me that I was unfaithful to her before we met, and in the next instant forgives me and blames herself that she has not furnished me an heir, given that 'it is evident that the problem is entirely with me'. Somehow, we two will weather this.

I appreciate that you have taken command of my other responsibilities there. My brother has told me enough of your charge's temperament that I send my sympathy to both of you and my deepest thanks. On whom else could I rely at a time such as this, for a favour so extreme?

Robin Hobb

I trust you to understand why I remain circumspect in this regard. Give Vixen a pat, a hug, and a large bone from me. I am confident that I owe as much to her vigilance as to yours. My wife is calling for me down the halls. I must end this and send it on its way. My brother may have words for you from me when next your paths cross.

Unsigned letter to Stablemaster Burrich, from Chivalry

Fresh snowfall perched in white ramparts on the bare black birch limbs that lined the drive. White gleamed against black, like a fool's winter motley. The snow came down in loose clumps of flakes, adding a fresh layer of glistening white to the banked snow in the courtyard. It was softening the hard ridges of fresh wheel tracks in the carriageway, erasing the boys' footprints in the snow and smoothing the rutted pathways to mere suggestions of themselves. As I watched, another carriage arrived, drawn by a dapple-grey team. The driver's red-cloaked shoulders were dusted with snow. A page in green and yellow darted from the steps of Withywoods to open the carriage door and gesture a welcome to our guests. From my vantage, I could not tell who they were, save that their garb bespoke Withy merchants rather than gentry from one of the neighbouring estates. As they passed out of my view and their driver moved the carriage off to our stables, I looked up at the afternoon sky. Definitely more to come. I suspected it would snow all night. Well, that was fitting. I let the curtain fall and turned as Molly entered out bedchamber.

'Fitz! You aren't ready yet?'

I glanced down at myself. 'I thought I was . . .'

My wife clicked her tongue at me. 'Oh, Fitz. It's Winterfest. The halls are festooned with greenery, Patience had Cook create a feast that will probably sustain the whole household for three days, all three sets of minstrels that she invited are tuning up, and half our guests have already arrived. You should be down there, greeting them as they enter. And you're not even dressed yet.'

I thought of asking her what was wrong with what I was wearing, but she was already digging through my clothing chest, lifting garments, considering them and discarding them. I waited. 'This,' she said, pulling out a white linen shirt with ridges of lace

Fool's Assassin

down the sleeves. 'And this jerkin over it. Everyone knows that wearing green at Winterfest is good luck. With your silver chain to match the buttons. These leggings. They're old fashioned enough to make you look like an old man, but at least they're not as saggy as those you have on. I know better than to ask you to wear your new trousers.'

'I AM an old man. At forty-seven, surely I'm allowed to dress as I please.'

She lowered her brows and gave me a mock glare. She set her hands to her hips. 'Are you calling me an old woman, sirrah? For I seem to recall I have three years on you.'

'Of course not!' I hastily amended my words. But I could not resist grumbling, 'But I have no idea why everyone wishes to dress as if they are Jamaillian nobility. The fabric on those trousers is so thin, the slightest bramble would tear them and . . .'

She looked up at me with an exasperated sigh. 'Yes. I've heard it from you a hundred times. Let's ignore that there are few brambles inside Withywoods, shall we? So. Take these clean leggings. The ones you have on are a disgrace; didn't you wear them yesterday when you were helping with that horse that had a cracked hoof? And put on your house shoes, not those worn boots. You'll be expected to dance, you know.'

She straightened from her excavation of my clothing chest. Conceding to the inevitable, I'd already begun shedding garments. As I thrust my head out of the shirt, my gaze met hers. She was smiling in a familiar way, and as I considered her holly crown, the cascading lace on her blouse and gaily embroidered kirtle, I found a smile to answer hers. Her smile broadened even as she took a step back from me. 'Now, Fitz. We've guests below, waiting for us.'

'They've waited this long, they can wait a bit longer. Our daughter can mind them.'

I advanced a step. She retreated to the door and set her hand to the knob, all the while shaking her head so that her black ringlets danced on her brow and shoulders. She lowered her head and looked up at me through her lashes, and suddenly she seemed just a girl to me again. A wild Buckkeep Town girl, to be pursued down a sandy beach. Did she remember? Perhaps, for she caught

Robin Hobb

her lower lip between her teeth and I saw her resolve almost weaken. Then, 'No. Our guests can't wait, and while Nettle can welcome them, a greeting from the daughter of the house is not the same as an acknowledgement from you and me. Riddle may stand at her shoulder as our steward and help her, but until the king gives his permission for them to wed, we should not present them as a couple. So it is you and I who must wait. Because I'm not going to be content with "a bit" of your time tonight. I expect better effort than that from you.'

'Really?' I challenged her. I took two swift steps toward her, but with a girlish shriek she was out of the door. As she pulled it almost shut, she added through the crack, 'Hurry up! You know how quickly Patience's parties can get out of hand. I've left Nettle in charge of things, but you know, Riddle is very nearly as bad as Patience.' A pause. 'And do not dare to be late and leave me with no dancing partner!'

She shut the door just as I reached it. I halted and then, with a small sigh, went back for my clean leggings and soft shoes. She would expect me to dance, and I would do my best. I did know that Riddle was apt to enjoy himself at any sort of festivity at Withywoods with an abandon that was very unlike the reserved fellow he showed himself at Buckkeep, and perhaps not precisely correct for a man who was ostensibly just our former household steward. I found myself smiling. Where he led, sometimes Nettle followed, showing a merry side of herself that she, too, seldom revealed at the king's court. Hearth and Just, the two of Molly's six grown sons who were still at home, would need very little encouragement to join in. As Patience had invited half of Withy and far more musicians than could perform in one evening, I fully expected that our Winterfest revelry would last at least three days.

With some reluctance, I removed my leggings and pulled on the trousers. They were a dark green that was nearly black, thin linen and nearly as voluminous as a skirt. They tied at my waist with ribbons. A broad silk sash completed the ridiculous garment. I told myself that my wearing them would please Molly. I suspected that Riddle would have been bothered into donning similar garb. I sighed again, wondering why we must all emulate Jamaillian fashions, and then resigned myself to it. I finished dressing,

Fool's Assassin

badgered my hair into a warrior tail, and left our bedchamber. I paused at the top of the grand oak staircase; the sounds of merriment drifted up to me. I took a breath as if I were about to dive into deep water. I had nothing to fear, no reason to hesitate, and yet the ingrained habits of my distant boyhood still clutched at me. I had every right to descend this stair, to walk among the glad company below as master of the house and husband to the lady who owned it. Now I was known as Holder Tom Badgerlock, common-born perhaps but elevated alongside Lady Molly to gentry status. The bastard FitzChivalry Farseer – grandson and nephew and cousin to kings – had been laid to rest two score years ago. To the folk below, I was Holder Tom and the founder of the feast they would enjoy.

Even if I was wearing silly Jamaillian trousers.

I paused a moment longer, listening. I could hear two distinct groups of minstrels vying to tune their instruments. Riddle's laugh rang suddenly clear and loud, making me smile. The hum of voices from the grand room lifted in volume and then fell again. One set of minstrels gained ascendancy, for a lively drumbeat suddenly broke through the voices to dominate all. The dancing would soon begin. Truly, I was late, and had best descend. Yet there was sweetness to standing here, above it all, imagining Nettle's flashing feet and sparkling eyes as Riddle led her through the dance steps. Oh, and Molly! She would be waiting for me! I had become a passable dancer over the years, for her sake, as she loved it so. She would not easily forgive me if I left her standing.

I hurried down the polished oak steps two at a time, reached the hall foyer and was there suddenly ambushed by Revel. Our new young steward was looking very fine indeed in a white shirt, black jacket and black trousers in the Jamaillian fashion. His green house shoes were startling, as was the yellow scarf at his throat. Green and yellow were the Witherwoods colours, and I suspected these accoutrements were Patience's idea. I did not let the smile curve my mouth but I think he read it in my eyes. He stood even taller and looked down at me as he soberly informed me, 'Sir, there are minstrels at the door.'

I gave him a puzzled glance. 'Well, let them in, man. It's Winterfest.'

Robin Hobb

He stood still, his lips folded in disapproval. 'Sir, I do not think they were invited.'

'It's Winterfest,' I repeated, beginning to be annoyed. Molly would not be pleased at being kept waiting. 'Patience invites every minstrel, puppeteer, tumbler, tinker or blacksmith she meets to come and sojourn with us for a time. She probably invited them months ago and forgot all about it.'

I did not think his back could get stiffer but it did. 'Sir, they were outside the stable, trying to peer in through a crack in the planking. Tallman heard the dogs barking and went to see what it was about and found them. That is when they said they were minstrels, invited for Winterfest.'

'And?'

He took a short breath. 'Sir, I do not think they are minstrels. They have no instruments. And while one said they were minstrels, another said, no, they were tumblers. But when Tallman said he would walk them up to the front door, they said that he needn't, they only wished to beg shelter for the night, and the stable would be fine.' He shook his head. 'Tallman spoke to me privately when he brought them up. He thinks they're none of what they claim to be. And so do I.'

I gave him a look. Revel folded his arms. He did not meet my glance but his mouth was stubborn. I found a bit of patience for him. He was young and fairly new to the household. Cravit Softhands, our ancient steward, had died last year. Riddle had stepped up to shoulder many of the old man's duties, but insisted that Withywoods needed a new steward trained. I'd casually replied that I did not have time to find one, and within three days Riddle had brought Revel to us. After two months, Revel was still learning his place, I told myself, and considered that perhaps Riddle had infused him with a bit too much caution. Riddle was, after all, Chade's man, insinuated into our household to watch my back and probably spy on me. Despite his current merriness and devotion to my daughter, he was a man steeped in carefulness. Given his way, we'd have had a guard contingent at Withywoods to rival the Queen's Own. I reined my mind back to the question at hand.

'Revel, I appreciate your care. But it's Winterfest. And be they

Fool's Assassin

minstrels or wandering beggars, no man should be turned from our door on such a holiday, or on such a snowy evening. While there's room in the house, they need not sleep in the stable. Bring them in. I'm sure all will be well.'

'Sir.' He was not agreeing, but he was obeying. I suppressed a sigh. That would do for now. I turned to join the throng in the Great Hall.

'Sir?'

I turned back. My voice was stern as I asked him, 'Is there something else, Revel? Something pressing?' I could hear the tentative notes of musicians bringing their instruments into harmony and then the music suddenly opened into blossom. I'd missed the start of the first dance. I gritted my teeth as I thought of Molly standing alone, watching the dancers whirl.

I saw his teeth catch for an instant on his lower lip. He decided to press on. 'Sir, the messenger still waits for you in your study.'

'Messenger?'

Revel gave a martyred sigh. 'Hours ago, I sent one of our temporary pages looking for you with a message. He said he shouted it at you through the door of the steams. I have to inform you, sir, this is what comes of us using untrained boys and girls as pages. We should have a few here permanently, if only to train them for future need.'

At my wearied look, Revel cleared his throat and changed tactics. 'My apologies, sir. I should have sent him back to confirm you'd heard him.'

'I didn't. Revel, would you mind dealing with it for me?' I took a hesitant step toward the hall. The music was rising.

Revel gave a minute shake of his head. 'I am very sorry, sir. But the messenger insists the message is specifically for you. I have asked twice if I could be of any help, and offered to write the message for you to receive.' He shook his head. 'The messenger insists that only you can receive the words.'

I guessed the message, then. Holder Barit had been trying to wrangle me into agreeing that he could pasture some of his flock with our sheep. Our shepherd had adamantly insisted that would be too many beasts on our winter pasturage. I intended to listen to Shepherd Lin, even if Barit was now willing to offer a decent

Robin Hobb

amount of money. Winterfest eve was no time to be doing business. It would keep. 'It's fine, Revel. And don't be too stern with our pages. You are right. We should have one or two on staff. But most of them will grow up to work in the orchards or follow their mothers' trades. It's rare that we need them here at Withy.' I didn't want to be thinking about this right now. Molly was waiting! I took a breath and made my decision. 'Thoughtless as it is for me to have left a messenger waiting so long, it would be ruder by far if I leave my lady unpartnered for the second dance as well as the first. Please extend my apology to the messenger for my unfortunate delay and see that he is made comfortable with food and drink. Tell him that I'll come to the study directly after the second dance.' I had no wish to do so. The festivities beckoned tonight. A better idea came to me. 'No! Invite him to join the festivities. Tell him to enjoy himself, and that we will sit down together before noon tomorrow.' I could think of nothing in my life that could possibly be so pressing as to demand my attention tonight.

'Her, sir.'

'Revel?'

'Her. The messenger is a girl, sir. Scarcely a woman, by the look of her. Of course, I have already offered her food and drink. I would not so neglect anyone who came to your door. Let alone one who seems to have come a long and weary way.'

Music was playing and Molly was waiting. Better the messenger wait than Molly. 'Then offer her a room, and ask if she would like a hot bath drawn or a quiet meal alone before we meet tomorrow. Do your best to see she is comfortable, Revel, and I will give her as much of my time as she wishes tomorrow.'

'I shall, sir.'

He turned to go back to the entrance hall and I hastened to the Great Hall of Withywoods. The two tall doors stood open, the golden oak planks gleaming in firelight and candlelight. Music and the tap and slap of dancing feet spilled from into the panelled corridor, but just as I drew near the musicians played the last refrain and with a shout the first dance was over. I rolled my eyes at my ill luck.

But as I stepped into the hall, breasting the wave of applause

Fool's Assassin

for the minstrels, I saw that Molly's dance partner was bowing gravely to her. My stepson had rescued his mother and taken her to the floor. Young Hearth had been growing like a weed for the past year. He was as darkly handsome as his father Burrich had been, but his brow and smiling mouth were Molly's. At seventeen, he could look down at the top of his mother's head. His cheeks were flushed with the lively dance and Molly did not look as if she had missed me even a tiny bit. As she looked up and her eyes met mine across the hall, she smiled. I blessed Hearth and resolved that I would find a substantial way to convey my thanks to him. Across the room, his older brother, Just, lounged against the hearth. Nettle and Riddle stood nearby; Nettle's cheeks were pink and I knew he was teasing his older sister, and Riddle was in on it.

I made my way across the room to Molly, pausing often to bow and return greetings to our many guests who hailed me. Every rank and walk of life was reflected there. The gentry and minor nobility of our area, finely dressed in lace and linen trousers; Tinker John and the village seamstress and a local cheese-maker were there as well. Their festive garments might be a bit more dated and some were well-worn, but they had been freshly brushed for the occasion and the shining holly crowns and sprigs that many wore were newly harvested. Molly had put out her best scented candles, so the fragrances of lavender and honeysuckle filled the air even as the dancing flames painted the walls with gold and honey. Grand fires blazed in all three hearths, with spitted meats tended by red-faced village lads employed for the occasion. Several maids were busy at the ale keg in the corner, topping mugs on the trays they would offer to the breathless dancers when the music paused.

At one end of the room, tables were laden with breads, apples and dishes of raisins and nuts, pastries and creams, platters of smoked meats and fish, and many another dish I didn't recognize. Dripping slices of fresh-cut meat from the roasts on the spits supplied all that any man could ask for, and added their rich fragrance to the festive air. Benches were filled with guests already enjoying food and drink, for there was also beer and wine in plenty.

Robin Hobb

At the other end of the room, the first set of minstrels were yielding the stage to the second. The floor had been strewn with sand for the dancers. Undoubtedly it had been swept into elegant patterns when the guests first arrived, but it now showed the busy tread of the merrymakers. I reached Molly's side just as the musicians swept into their opening notes. This tune was as pensive as the first had been jolly, so as Molly seized my hand and led me to the dance floor, I was able to keep possession of both her hands and hear her voice through the melody. 'You look very fine tonight, Holder Badgerlock.' She drew me into line with the other men.

I bowed gravely over our joined hands. 'If you are pleased, then I am content,' I replied. I ignored the flapping of fabric against my calves as we turned, parted briefly and then clasped hands again. I caught a glimpse of Riddle and Nettle. Yes, Riddle wore the same sort of flapping trousers, in blue, and he held my daughter not by her fingertips but by her hands. Nettle was smiling. When I glanced back at Molly, she was smiling, too. She had noted the direction of my glance.

'Were we ever that young?' she asked me.

I shook my head. 'I think not,' I said. 'Life was harsher for us when we were that age.' I saw her cast her thoughts back through the years.

'When I was Nettle's age, I was already the mother of three children and carrying a fourth. And you were . . .' She let the thought trail away and I did not speak. I had been living in a little cabin near Forge with my wolf. Was that the year I had taken in Hap? The orphan had been glad of a home, and Nighteyes had been glad of livelier company. I had thought myself resigned, then, to losing her to Burrich. Nineteen long years ago. I pushed the long shadow of those days aside. I stepped closer, put my hands to her waist, and lifted her as we turned. She set her hands to my shoulders, her mouth opening in surprise and delight. Around us, the other dancers gawked briefly. As I put her back on her feet, I observed, 'And that is why we should be young now.'

'You, perhaps.' Her cheeks were pink and she seemed a bit breathless as we made another promenade and then turned, parted and then rejoined. Or almost rejoined. No, I should have turned

Fool's Assassin

again and then . . . I'd hopelessly muddled it, just as I'd been taking great pride that I recalled every step from the last time we had danced this. The other dancers avoided me, parting to flow past me as if I were a stubborn rock in a creek. I spun in a circle, looking for Molly, and found her standing behind me, her hands lifted in a useless attempt to contain her laughter. I reached for her, intending to insert us back into the dance, but she seized both my hands and pulled me from the floor, laughing breathlessly. I rolled my eyes and tried to apologize but, 'It's all right, dear. A bit of rest and something to drink would be welcome. Hearth wore me out earlier with his prancing. I need a brief rest.' She caught her breath suddenly and swayed against me. Her brow glistened with perspiration. She set her hand to the back of her neck and rubbed it as if to relieve a cramp.

'And I the same,' I lied to her. Her face was flushed and she smiled faintly at me as she pressed her hand to her breast as if to calm her fluttering heart. I smiled back at her and took her to her chair by the hearth. I had scarcely seated her before a page was at my elbow, offering to bring her wine. She nodded and sent him scampering.

'What was that, stitched all round his cap?' I asked distractedly.

'Feathers. And locks of hair from horse tails.' She was still breathless.

I looked askance at her.

'It was Patience's fancy this year. All the boys she hired from Withy to act as pages for the holiday are dressed so. Feathers to bid all our troubles take flight, and horse tail hairs, which is what we will show to our problems as we flee them.'

'I . . . see.' My second lie of the evening.

'Well, it's good that you do, as I certainly don't. But every Winterfest, it's something, isn't it? Do you remember the year that Patience handed out greenwood staffs to every unmarried man who came to the festival? With the length based on her assessment of his masculinity?'

I bit down on the laugh that threatened to escape. 'I do. Apparently she thought the young ladies needed a clear indication of which men would make the best mates.'

Robin Hobb

Molly lifted her brows. 'Perhaps they did. There were six weddings at Springfest that year.'

My wife looked across the room. Patience, my stepmother, was dressed in a grand old gown of pale blue velvet trimmed with black lace at the cuffs and throat. Her long grey hair had been braided and pinned to her head in a coronet. She had a single sprig of holly in it, and several dozen bright blue feathers stuck in at all angles. A fan dangled from a bracelet at her wrist; it was blue to match her gown and feathers and also edged with stiffened black lace. She looked both lovely and eccentric to me, as she always had. She was wagging a finger at Molly's youngest, warning him about something. Hearth stood straight, looking solemnly down at her, but his clasped fingers fidgeted behind his back. His brother Just stood at a distance, concealing his grin and waiting for him to be released. I took pity on them both. Patience seemed to think they were still ten and twelve, despite how they towered over her. Just was barely short of his twentieth birthday, and Hearth was Molly's youngest at seventeen. Yet he stood like a scolded boy and tolerantly accepted Patience's rebuke.

'I want to let Lady Patience know that more of her minstrels have arrived. I hope this is the last batch of them. Any more and I suspect they'll be coming to blows over who gets to perform and for how long.' Any minstrels invited to perform at Withywoods were assured of meals and a warm place to sleep, and a small purse for their efforts. The rest of their rewards were won from the guests, and often the musicians who performed the most reaped the greatest gain. Three sets of musicians were more than ample for a Winterfest at our holding. Four would be a challenge.

Molly nodded. She lifted her hands to her rosy cheeks. 'I think I'll just sit here a bit longer. Oh, here's the lad with my wine!'

There was a lull in the music and I took the opportunity to cross the dance floor quickly. Patience saw me coming and first smiled and then scowled at me. By the time I reached her side, she had completely forgotten Hearth and he had escaped with his brother. She snapped her fan shut, pointed it at me and asked me accusingly, 'What has become of your leggings? Those skirts are flapping about your legs like a ship with storm-torn canvas!'

Fool's Assassin

I looked down at them, and up at her. 'The new style from Jamaillia.' As her disapproval deepened, I added, 'Molly chose them.'

Lady Patience stared down at them as if perhaps I had a litter of kittens concealed in them. Then she lifted her eyes to mine, smiled and said, 'A lovely colour. And I am sure she is pleased that you wore them.'

'She is.'

Patience lifted her hand, I extended my arm, she placed her hand on my forearm and we began a slow perambulation of the Great Hall. Folk parted for her, bowing and curtsying. Lady Patience, for so she was this evening, gravely inclined her head or warmly greeted or embraced as each person merited. I was content simply to be her escort, to see her enjoying herself, and to endeavour to keep a straight face through her whispered asides about Lord Durden's breath or her pity for how quickly Tinker Dan was losing his hair. Some of the older guests remembered when she was not only the Lady of Withywoods but wife to Prince Chivalry. In many ways, she still reigned here, for Nettle spent a good portion of her time at Buckkeep Castle as Skillmistress to King Dutiful, and Molly was content to let Patience have her way in most things.

'There are times in a woman's life when only the company of other women can suffice.' Patience had explained to me when she had summarily moved in with us at Withywoods five years previously. 'Girls need an older woman in the house as they become women, to explain those changes to them. And when that other change comes early to women, especially women who hoped to bear more children, it is good to have the guidance of a woman who has also known that disappointment. Men are simply not helpful at this time.' And while I had known trepidation about the arrangement when Patience first arrived with her baggage-train of animals, seeds and plants, she had proven the wisdom of her words. I knew it was rare for two women to exist so contentedly under one roof and blessed my good fortune.

When we reached her favourite chair by the hearth, I deposited her there, fetched her a cup of mulled cider, and then confided to her, 'The last of your musicians arrived just as I came down

Robin Hobb

the stairs. I haven't seen them come in yet, but I thought you'd want to know that they had arrived.'

She raised her brows at me and then turned to peer the length of the room. The third set of musicians were moving to take over the dais there. She looked back at me, 'No, they're all there. I was most careful in my selection this year. For Winterfest, I thought to myself, we must have some warm-tempered folk to keep the chill away. And so, if you look, there is a redhead in every group that I've invited. There, see the woman warming her voice? Look at that cascade of auburn hair. Don't tell me that she won't warm this fest with her spirit alone.' She did indeed appear to be a very warm-natured woman. She let the dancers rest by launching into a long story song, more fit for listening than dancing, sung in a rich and throaty voice. Her audience, old and young, drew closer as she sang the old tale of the maiden seduced by the Old Man of winter and carried off to his distant ice fortress in the far south.

All were rapt by the tale, and so it was that my eye caught the motion as two men and a woman entered the hall. They looked around as if dazzled, and perhaps they were after their long hike through an evening of falling snow. It was obvious they had come on foot, for their rough leather trousers were soaked to the knee. Their garb was odd, as minstrels were wont to wear, but unlike any that I had ever seen. Their knee-boots were yellow mottled brown from the wet, their leather trousers short, barely hanging past the tops of their boots. Their jackets were of the same leather, tanned to the same pale brown, with shirts of heavy-knit wool beneath them. They looked uncomfortable, as if the wool were too snug a fit under the leathers. 'There they are now,' I told her.

Patience stared at them from across the room. 'I did not hire them,' she declared with an offended sniff. 'Look at that woman, pale as a ghost. There's no heat to her at all. And the men are just as wintry, with hair the colour of an ice-bear's hide. Br. They chill me just looking at them.' Then the lines smoothed from her brow. 'So. I shall not allow them to sing tonight. But let's invite them back for high summer, when a chilly tale or a cool wind would be welcome on a muggy evening.'

Fool's Assassin

But before I could move to her bidding, I heard a roar of 'Tom! There you are! So good to see you, old friend!'

I turned with that mixture of elation and dismay that surprise visits from unconventional and loving friends stir in one. Web was crossing the room in long strides, with Swift but a step or two behind. I lifted my arms wide and went to greet them. The burly Witmaster had grown in girth these last few years. As always, his cheeks were as red as if he had just stepped in from the wind. Molly's son Swift was a couple of steps behind him, but as I watched, Nettle emerged from the crowd of guests and ambushed her brother in a hug. He stopped to lift her and whirl her in a joyous circle. Then Web engulfed me in a spine-cracking hug, followed by several solid thumps to my back. 'You're looking well!' he told me as I tried to catch my breath. 'Almost whole again, aren't you? Ah, and my Lady Patience!' Having released me from his exuberant greeting, he bowed gracefully over the hand that Patience extended to him. 'Such a rich blue gown! You put me in mind of a jay's bright feathers! But please tell me the feathers in your hair did not come from a live bird!'

'Of course not!' Patience looked properly horrified at the thought. 'I found him dead on the garden path last summer. And I thought, now here is a time for me to see just what is beneath those lovely blue feathers. But I saved his feathers, of course, plucking them carefully before I boiled him down to bones. And then, of course, once I had discarded the jay broth, my task was before me: to assemble his little bones into a skeleton. Did you know that a bird's wing is as close to a man's hand as is a frog's flipper? All those tiny bones! Well, doubtless you know the task is somewhere on my workbench, half-done as are so many of my projects. But yesterday, when I was thinking of feathers to take flight from our troubles, I remembered that I had a whole box full! And luckily for me, the beetles had not found and eaten them down to the quill, as they did when I tried to save the gull feathers. Oh! Gull! Have I been thoughtless? I beg pardon!'

She had obviously suddenly recalled that he was bonded with a gull. But Web smiled at her kindly and said, 'We of the Wit know that when life is done, what remains is empty. None, I

Robin Hobb

think, know better than we do. We sense the presence of all life, of course, with some burning brighter than others. A plant is not as vital in our senses as is a tree. And of course a deer outshines both, and a bird most of all.'

I opened my mouth to object to that. With my Wit I could sense birds, but had never found them particularly brimming with life. I recalled something that Burrich – the man who had all but raised me – had said to me, many years ago, when he had declared that I would not work with the hawks at Buckkeep Castle. 'They don't like you: you are too warm.' And I had thought he meant my flesh, but now I wondered if he had sensed something about my Wit that he could not, then, have explained to me. For the Wit had then been a despised magic, and if either of us had admitted to possessing it we would have been hanged, quartered and burned over water.

'Why do you sigh?' Patience abruptly demanded of me.

'Your pardon. I was not aware I had done so.'

'Well, you did! Witmaster Web was just telling me the most fascinating things about a bat's wing and suddenly you sigh as if you find us the most boring old things in the world!' She punctuated her words with a tap of her fan on my shoulder.

Web laughed. 'Lady Patience, doubtless his thoughts were elsewhere. I know Tom of old, and recall his melancholy streak well! Ah, but I have been keeping you to myself, and here are others of your guests, come to claim you!'

Was Patience deceived? I think not, but it pleased her to allow herself to be drawn away from us by the charming young man that doubtless Nettle had dispatched to allow Web to speak to me privately. Almost, I wished she had not done so; Web had sent me several letters and I was sure I knew the current of the conversation he wished to draw me into. It had been long since I had been bonded with an animal through my Wit. But what Web seemed to equate with a sulking child I felt was more like the solitude of a long-married man who is suddenly widowed. No one could replace Nighteyes in my heart, nor could I imagine such a connection with any other creature. Gone was gone, as he had just said. The echoes of my wolf within me were enough to sustain me now. Those vivid memories, so strong that sometimes

Fool's Assassin

I felt I still heard his thoughts in my mind, would always be preferable to any other joining.

So now, as he ventured past banalities about how I had been, and if Molly had been keeping well, and had the harvest been good this year, I deliberately diverted a conversation that would lead us, inevitably, to his perceived importance of my learning more of the Wit and discussing my solitary status. My considered opinion was that as I was unpartnered and intended to remain so for the rest of my life, I needed no more knowledge of the Wit-magic than what I had now.

So I tipped my head toward the 'musicians' still standing by the door and told him, 'I fear they've come a long way for nothing. Patience has told me that red-headed singers are for Winterfest, and she will save the blondes for summer.' I expected Web to share my amusement at Lady Patience's eccentricities. The strangers had not ventured into the hall to join the merriment, but remained by the door, speaking only to one another. They stood as long-time companions do, closer together than one stands near an acquaintance. The tallest man had a weathered, craggy face. The woman at his side, with her face tilted toward him, had broad cheekbones and a high, lined forehead. 'Blondes?' Web asked me, staring round.

I smiled. 'The strangely-dressed trio by the door. See them? In yellow boots and coats?'

He swept his eyes past them twice and then, with a start, stared at them. His eyes grew wider.

'Do you know them?' I asked at his look of dread.

'Are they Forged?' he asked in a hoarse whisper.

'Forged? How could they be?' I stared at them, wondering what had alarmed Web. Forging stripped a man's humanity from him, tore him from the network of life and empathy that enabled all of us to care and be cared about. Forged ones loved only themselves. Once, there had been many of them in the Six Duchies, preying on their families and neighbours, tearing the kingdom apart from within as the Red-Ship Raiders released our own people as a foe among us. Forging had been the dark magic of the Pale Woman and her captain Keбал Rawbread. But we had prevailed and driven the raiders from our shores. Years after the Red-Ship

Robin Hobb

Wars had ended, we had taken ship to her last stronghold on Aslevjal Island where we made an end of them forever. The Forged ones they had created were long gone to their graves. No one had practised that evil magic for years.

‘They feel Forged to me. My Wit cannot find them. I can barely sense them except with my eyes. Where did they come from?’

As a Witmaster, Web relied on that beast-magic far more keenly than I did. Perhaps it had become his dominant sense, for the Wit gives one a tingle of awareness for any living creature. Now, alerted by Web, I deliberately extended my own Wit toward the newcomers. I did not have his level of awareness and the crowded room muddled my senses even more. I could feel almost nothing from them. I dismissed that with a shrug.

‘Not Forged,’ I decided. ‘They huddle together too companionably. If they were Forged, each would be immediately seeking what they most needed, food, drink or warmth. They hesitate, not wishing to be seen as intruders here, but uncomfortable not knowing our ways. So not Forged. Forged ones never care for such niceties.’

I suddenly realized I sounded far too much like Chade’s apprentice assassin in how I analysed them. They were guests, not targets. I cleared my throat. ‘I do not know where they came from. Revel told me they came to the door as musicians for the feast. Or perhaps tumblers.’

Web was still staring at them. ‘They are neither,’ he said decisively. Curiosity blossomed in his voice as he announced, ‘So. Let us speak to them and find out who and what they are.’

I watched as the three conferred with one another. The woman and the younger man nodded abruptly at what the taller man was saying. Then, as if they were herd-dogs set to bringing in sheep, they abruptly left his side and began to move purposefully through the crowd. The woman kept her hand at her hip, as if her fingers sought a sword that was not there. Their heads turned and their eyes roved as they went. Seeking something? No. Someone. The woman stood on tiptoe, trying to peer over the heads of the gathered folk who were watching the change of the musicians. Their leader faded back toward the door. Did he guard it lest

Fool's Assassin

their prey escape? Or was I imagining things? 'Who do they hunt?' I heard myself ask softly.

Web didn't respond. He'd already started moving toward where they had been. But as he turned from me, a lively drumbeat was suddenly joined by uplifted voices and a trilling pipe, and dancers surged back onto the floor. Couples spun and hopped like spinning tops to the lively tune, and blocked our path and my view. I put my hand on Web's broad shoulder and tugged him back from the hazards of the dance floor. 'We'll go around,' I told him, and led the way. But even that path was fraught with delays, for there were guests to greet, and one could not hurry through those conversations without seeming rude. Web, ever engaging and garrulous, seemed to lose his interest in the odd strangers. He focused his attention strongly on each person he was introduced to, and convinced them of his charm simply by his intense interest in who they were and what they did for a living and if they were having an enjoyable time tonight. I watched the room but could no longer locate the strangers.

They were not warming themselves at the big hearth as we passed it. Nor did I see them enjoying food or drink, or dancing, or watching the fest from the benches. When the music ended and the tide of dancers retreated, I firmly excused myself from Web's and Lady Essence's conversation and strode across the room to where I had last seen them. I was convinced now that they were not musicians and this was not a random stopping place for them. I tried not to let my suspicions escalate: my early training did not always serve me well in social situations.

I didn't find any of them. I slipped out of the Great Hall into the relative quiet of the corridor outside it and looked in vain for them. Gone. I took a breath and resolutely let my curiosity go. Doubtless they were somewhere in Witherwoods, changing into dry clothing or having a glass of wine or perhaps lost in the crowd of dancers. I would see them again. For now, I was the host of the gathering, and my Molly had been left alone too long. I had guests to attend to and a pretty wife to dance with and a lovely feast. If they were musicians or tumblers, they would soon make themselves known, for doubtless they would hope to win the favour and the largesse of the gathered guests. It was

Robin Hobb

even possible that I was the person they were looking for, as I controlled the purse that paid the entertainers. If I waited long enough, they would approach me. And if they were beggars or travellers, then still they were welcome here. Why must I always imagine danger to my loved ones?

I plunged myself back into the maelstrom of merriment, danced again with Molly, invited Nettle to join me in a jig but lost her to Riddle, interrupted Hearth seeing how many honey-cakes he could stack into a tower on a single plate for the amusement of a pretty Withy maiden, over-indulged myself in ginger cookies and was ultimately trapped by Web near the ale keg. He filled his mug after me, and then nudged us toward a bench not far from the hearth. I looked for Molly, but she and Nettle had their heads together, and as I watched they moved as one to stir Patience from where she was dozing in a chair. She was protesting feebly as they gathered her up to take her to her chambers.

Web spoke without beating about the bush. 'It's not natural, Tom,' he chided me, heedless of who might overhear us. 'You are so alone, you echo to my Wit. You should open yourself to the possibility of bonding again. For one of Old Blood to go so long un-partnered is not healthy.'

'I don't feel the need,' I told him honestly. 'I've a good life here, with Molly and Patience and the boys. There's honest work to keep me busy, and my idle time is enjoyed with those I love. Web, I don't doubt your wisdom and experience, but I also don't doubt my own heart. I don't need anything more than what I have right now.'

He looked into my eyes and I met his gaze. My last utterance was almost true. If I could have had my wolf back again, then, yes, life would have been much sweeter. If I could have opened my door, and found the Fool grinning on my doorstep, then my life would have been full indeed. But there was no point in sighing after what I could not have. It only distracted me from what I did have, and that was more than I'd ever had in my life. A home, my lady, youngsters growing to manhood under my roof, and the comforts of my own bed at night. Just enough consultations from Buckkeep Castle that I could feel I was still needed in the greater world, and few enough that I knew, truly, they

Fool's Assassin

could get by without me and let me have a measure of peace. I had anniversaries I could be proud of. It was nearly eight years that Molly had been my wife. It was almost ten years since I'd killed anyone.

Almost ten years since I'd last seen the Fool.

And there it was, that stone-dropping-into-a-well plunge of my heart. I kept it from showing on my face or in my eyes. That gulf, after all, had nothing to do with how long I'd gone with no animal companion. That was a different sort of loneliness entirely. Wasn't it?

Perhaps not. The loneliness that can never be filled by anyone except the one whose loss created the absence; well, then, perhaps it was the same.

Web was still watching me. I realized that I'd been staring past his shoulder at the dancers, but now the floor was empty. I shifted my gaze back to meet his. 'I'm fine as I am, old friend. Content. Why should I tamper with that? Would you prefer I long for more when I have so much already?'

It was the perfect question to stop Web's well-meaning pestering. I saw him think over my words, and then a deep smile rose onto his face, one that came from his heart. 'No, Tom, I wouldn't wish that on you, truly. I'm a man who can admit when he's wrong, and perhaps I've been measuring your wheat with my bushel.'

The discussion suddenly tipped upside-down for me. The words burst from me. 'Your gull, Risk, she is well, still?'

He smiled crookedly. 'As well as might be expected. She's old, Fitz. Twenty-three years with me, and she was probably two or three when we met.'

I was silent; I'd never stopped to wonder how long a gull might live, and I didn't ask him now. All the questions that were too cruel to ask left me silent. He shook his head and looked away from me. 'Eventually, I'll lose her, unless accident or disease takes me first. And I'll mourn her. Or she will mourn me. But I also know that if I am left alone, eventually, I'll look about for another partner. Not because Risk and I do not have something wonderful together, but because I am Old Blood. And we are not meant to be solitary souls.'

Robin Hobb

'I'll think well on what you have said to me,' I promised. Web deserved that courtesy from me. Time to leave this topic. 'Did you ever manage to have words with our odd guests?'

He nodded slowly. 'I did. But not many, and with the woman only. Tom, she made me uneasy. She rang oddly against my senses, as muted as muffled bells. She claimed that they were travelling jugglers and hoped to entertain us later. She was stingy in speaking of herself, but full of questions for me. She was looking for a friend of hers, who might also have come this way recently. Had I heard of any other travellers or visitors to the area? And when I told them that while I was a friend of the household, I had but arrived this night as well, then she asked me if I had met any other strangers on the road.'

'I wonder if a member of their party became separated from them.'

Web shook his head. 'I think not.' He frowned slightly. 'It was passing strange, Tom. When I asked who . . .'

And then Just touched my elbow. 'Mother would like your help,' he said quietly. A simple request yet something in the way he said it alarmed me.

'Where is she?'

'She and Nettle are in Lady Patience's chambers.'

'At once,' I said, and Web nodded as I set off.