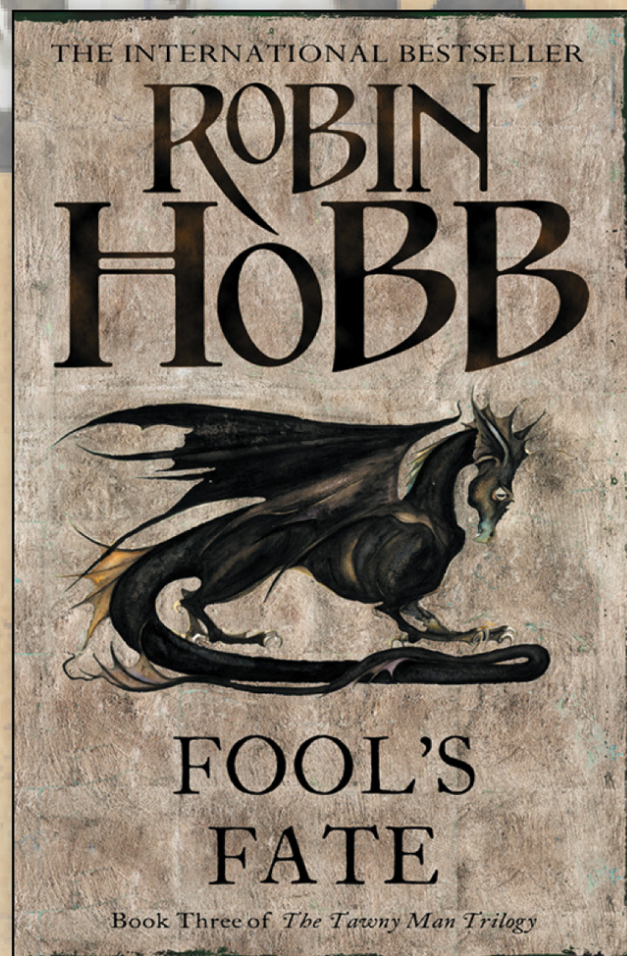
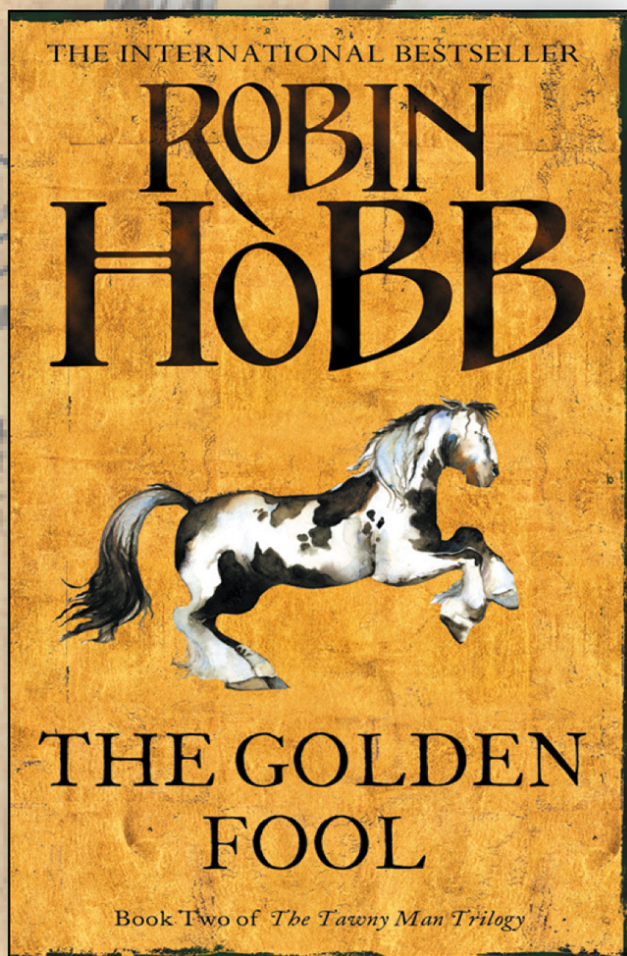


ROBIN HOBB



THE TAWNY MAN TRILOGY
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**Books 2 and 3 in
The Tawny Man
Trilogy
The Golden Fool
Fool's Fate
Robin Hobb**



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THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

ROBIN HOBB



THE GOLDEN FOOL

The Golden Fool
Book Two of The Tawny Man
Robin Hobb



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PROLOGUE Losses Sustained

The loss of a bond beast is a difficult event to explain to the non-Witted. Those who can speak of the death of an animal as 'It was only a dog' will never grasp it. Others, more sympathetic, perceive it as the death of a beloved pet. Even those who say, 'It must be like losing a child, or a wife' are still seeing only one facet of the toll. To lose the living creature that one has been linked with is more than the loss of a companion or loved one. It was the sudden amputation of half my physical body. My vision was dimmed, my appetite diminished by the insipid flavour of food. My hearing was dulled and

The manuscript, begun so many years ago, ends in a flurry of blots and angry stabbings from my pen. I can recall the moment at which I realized I had slipped from writing in generalities into my own intimate rendering of pain. There are creases on the scroll where I flung it to the floor and stamped on it. The wonder is that I only kicked it aside rather than committing it to the flames. I do not know who took pity on the wretched thing and shelved it on my scroll rack. Perhaps it was Thick, doing his tasks in his methodical, unthinking way. Certainly I find nothing there that I would have saved.

So it has often been with my writing efforts. My various attempts at a history of the Six Duchies too often meandered into a history of myself. From a treatise on herbs my pen would wander to the various treatments for Skill-ailments. My studies of the White Prophets delve too deeply into their relationships with their Catalysts. I do not know if it is conceit that always turns my thoughts to my own life, or if my writing is my pathetic effort to explain my life to myself. The years have come and gone in their scores of turnings, and night after night I still take pen in hand and write. Still I strive to understand who I am. Still I promise myself, 'Next time I will do better' in the all-too-human conceit that I will always be offered a 'next time'.

Yet I did not do that when I lost Nighteyes. I never promised myself that I would bond again, and do better by my next partner. Such a thought would have been traitorous. The death of Nighteyes gutted me. I walked wounded through my life in the days that followed, unaware of just how mutilated I was. I was like the man who complains of the itching of his severed leg. The itching distracts from the immense knowledge that one will ever after hobble through life. So the immediate grief at his death concealed the full damage done to me. I was confused, thinking that my pain and my loss were one and the same thing, whereas one was but a symptom of the other.

In a curious way, it was a second coming-of-age. This one was not an arrival at manhood, but rather a slow realization of myself as an individual. Circumstances had plunged me back into the intrigues of the court at Buckkeep Castle. I had the friendship of the Fool and Chade. I stood at the edge of a true relationship with Jinna, the hedge-witch. My boy Hap had flung himself headlong into both apprenticeship and romance, and seemed to be floundering desperately through both. Young Prince Dutiful, poised on the lip of his betrothal to the Outislander Narcheska, had turned to me as a mentor; not just as a teacher for both Skill and Wit, but as someone to guide him through the rapids of adolescence to manhood. I did not lack for people who cared about me, nor for folk I deeply cherished. But for all that, I stood more alone than ever I had before.

The strangest part was my slow realization that I chose that isolation.

Nighteyes was irreplaceable; he had worked a change on me in the years that we had shared. He was not half of me; together, we made a whole. Even when Hap came into our life, we regarded him as a juvenile and a responsibility. The wolf and I were the unit that made the decisions. Ours was the partnership. With Nighteyes gone, I felt I would never again share that arrangement with any other, animal or human.

When I was a lad, spending time in the company of Lady Patience and her companion, Lacey, I often overheard their blunt appraisals of the men at court. One assumption Patience and Lacey had shared was that a man or woman who had passed their thirtieth year unwed was likely to remain so. 'Set in his ways,' Patience would declare at the gossip that some greying lord had suddenly begun to

court a young girl. 'Spring has turned his head, but she'll find soon enough there is no room in his life for a partner. He's had it all his own way too long.'

And so I began, very slowly, to see myself. I was often lonely. I knew that my Wit quested out for companionship. Yet that feeling and that questing were like a reflex, the twitching of a severed limb. No one, human or animal, could ever fill the gap that Nighteyes had left in my life.

I had said as much to the Fool during a rare moment of conversation on our way back to Buckkeep. It had been one of the nights when we had camped beside our homeward road. I had left him with Prince Dutiful and Laurel, the Queen's Huntswoman. They had huddled around the fire, making the best of the cold night and sparse food. The Prince had been withdrawn and morose, still raw with the pain of losing his bond-cat. For me to be near him was like holding a previously burned hand near a flame; it woke all my own pain more sharply. So I had made the excuse of getting more wood for the fire and gone apart from them all.

Winter was announcing its approach with a dark and chill evening. There were no colours left in the dim world, and away from the firelight I groped like a mole as I searched for wood. At last I gave it up and sat down on a stone by the creekside to wait for my eyes to adjust. But sitting there alone, feeling the cold press in around me, I had lost all ambition to find wood, or indeed to do anything at all. I sat and stared, listening to the sound of the running water and letting the night fill me with its gloom.

The Fool came to me, moving quietly through the darkness. He sat down on the earth beside me and for a time we said nothing. Then he reached over, set a hand on my shoulder and said, 'I wish there were some way I could ease your grieving.'

It was a useless thing to say, and he seemed to feel that, for after those words he was silent. Perhaps it was the ghost of Nighteyes who reproached me for my surly silence to our friend, for after a time I groped for some words to bridge the dark between us. 'It is like the cut on your head, Fool. Time will heal it, but until it does all the best wishes in the world cannot make it heal faster. Even if there were some way to disperse this pain, some herb or drunkenness that would numb it, I could not choose it. Nothing will ever make his death better. All I can look forward to is becoming accustomed to being alone.'

Despite my effort, my words still sounded like a rebuke, and worse, a self-pitying one. It is a tribute to my friend that he did not take offence at them, but rose gracefully. 'I'll let you be, then. I think you are choosing to mourn alone, and if that is your choice, I'll respect it. I do not think it is your wisest choice, but I'll respect it.' He paused and gave a small sigh. 'I perceive something about myself now; I came because I wanted you to know that I knew you were in pain. Not because I could heal you of it, but because I wanted you to be aware that I shared that pain through our connection. I suspect there is an aspect of selfishness to that; that I wished you also to be aware of it, I mean. A burden shared not only can lighten it; it can form a bond between those who share it. So that no one is left to bear it alone.'

I sensed there was some germ of wisdom in his words, something I should consider, but I was too weary and racked to reach for it. 'I'll come back to the fire in a little while,' was what I said, and the Fool knew it was a dismissal. He took his hand from my shoulder and walked away.

It was only when I later considered his words that I understood them. I was choosing to be alone then; it was not the inescapable consequence of the wolf's death, nor even a carefully considered decision. I was embracing my solitude, courting my pain. It was not the first time I had chosen such a course.

I handled that thought carefully, for it was sharp enough to kill me. I had chosen my isolated years with Hap in my cabin. No one had forced me into that exile. The irony was that it had been the granting of my often-voiced wish. Throughout my youth, I had always asserted that what I truly wanted was to live a life in which I could make my own choices, independent of the 'duties' of my birth and position. It was only when fate granted that to me that I realized the cost of it. I could set

aside my responsibilities to others and live my life as I pleased only when I also severed my ties to them. I could not have it both ways. To be part of a family, or any community, is to have duties and responsibilities, to be bound by the rules of that group. I had lived apart from all that for a time, but now I knew it had been my choice. I had chosen to renounce my responsibilities to my family, and accepted the ensuing isolation as the cost. At the time, I had insisted to myself that fortune had forced me into that role. Just as I was making a choice now, even though I tried to persuade myself I was but following the inescapable path fate had set out for me.

To recognize you are the source of your own loneliness is not a cure for it. But it is a step towards seeing that it is not inevitable, and that such a choice is not irrevocable.

ONE Piebalds

The Piebalds always claimed only to want freedom from the persecution that has been the lot of the Witted folk of the Six Duchies for generations. This claim can be dismissed as both a lie and a clever deceit. The Piebalds wanted power. Their intent was to mould all of the Witted folk of the Six Duchies into a united force that would rise up to seize control of the monarchy and put their own people into power. One facet of their ploy was to claim that all Kings since the Abdication of Chivalry were pretenders, that the bastardy of FitzChivalry Farseer was wrongly construed as an obstacle to his inheriting the throne. Legends of the 'True-Hearted Bastard' rising from the grave to serve King Verity in his quest proliferated beyond all common sense, ascribing powers to FitzChivalry that raise the Bastard to the status of a near-deity. For this reason, the Piebalds have also been known as the Cult of the Bastard.

These ridiculous claims were intended to give some sort of legitimacy to the Piebald quest to overthrow the Farseer monarchy and put one of their own on the throne. To this end, the Piebalds began a clever campaign of forcing the Witted either to unite with them or risk exposure. Perhaps this tactic was inspired by Keбал Rawbread, leader of the Outislanders during the Red Ship War, for it is said that he drew men to follow him, not by his charisma, but by fear of what he would do to their homes and families if they refused to fall in with his plans.

The Piebalds' technique was simple. Either families tainted with the Wit-magic joined their alliance or they were exposed by public accusations that led to their execution. It is said that the Piebalds often began an insidious attack on the fringes of a powerful family, exposing first a servant or a less affluent cousin, all the while making it clear that if the head of the stalwart house did not comply with their wishes he, too, would eventually meet such an end.

This is not the action of folk who wish to bring an end to persecution of their kin. This is the act of a ruthless faction determined to gain power for themselves, first by subjugating their own kind.

Rowell's *The Piebald Conspiracy*

The watch had changed. The town watchman's bell and cry came thin through the storm, but I heard it. Night had officially ended and we were venturing towards morning and still I sat in Jinna's cottage waiting for Hap to return. Jinna and I shared the comfort of her cosy hearth. Jinna's niece had come in some time ago and chatted with us briefly before she sought her bed. Jinna and I passed the time, feeding log after log to the fire and chatting about inconsequential things. The hedge-witch's little house was warm and pleasant, her company congenial, and waiting for my boy became an excuse that allowed me to do what I wished, which was simply to sit quietly where I was.

Conversation had been sporadic. Jinna had asked how my errand had gone. I had replied that it had been my master's business and that I had but accompanied him. To keep that from sounding too brusque, I added that Lord Golden had acquired some feathers for his collection and then chatted to her about Myblack. I knew Jinna had no real interest in hearing about my horse, but she listened amiably. The words filled the small space between us comfortably.

In truth, our real errand had had nothing to do with feathers, and had been more mine than Lord Golden's. Together, we had recovered Prince Dutiful from the Piebalds who had first befriended and then captured him. We had returned him to Buckkeep with none of his nobles the wiser. Tonight the aristocracy of the Six Duchies feasted and danced, and tomorrow they would formalize Prince Dutiful's betrothal to the Outisland Narcheska Elliania. Outwardly, all was as it had been.

Few would ever know how much the seamless continuation of their normality had cost the Prince and me. The Prince's Wit-cat had sacrificed her life for him. I had lost my wolf. For close to a score of years, Nighteyes had been my other self, the repository of half my soul. Now he was gone. It was as profound a change in my life as the snuffing of a lamp makes in an evening room. His absence seemed a solid thing, a burden I must carry in addition to my grief. Nights were darker.

No one guarded my back for me. Yet I knew I would continue to live. Sometimes that knowledge seemed the worst part of my loss.

I reined back before I plunged completely into self-pity. I was not the only one who was bereaved. Despite the Prince's briefer bond with his cat, I knew he suffered deeply. The magic link that the Wit forms between a human and an animal is a complex one. Severing it is never trivial. Yet the boy had mastered his grief and was stalwartly going through the motions of fulfilling his duties. At least I did not have to face my betrothal tomorrow night. The Prince had been plunged immediately back into his routine since we returned to Buckkeep yesterday afternoon. Last night he had attended the ceremonies that welcomed his bride-to-be. Tonight, he must smile and eat, make conversation, accept good wishes, dance and appear well pleased with what fate and his mother had decreed for him. I thought of bright lights and skirling music and laughter and loud conversations. I shook my head in sympathy for him.

'And what makes you shake your head like that, Tom Badgerlock?'

Jinna's voice broke in on my introspection, and I realized that the silence had grown long. I drew a long breath and found an easy lie. 'The storm shows no sign of dying, does it? I was pitying those who must be out in it this night. I am grateful that I am not one of them.'

'Well. To that, I'll add that I am thankful for the company,' she said, and smiled.

'And I the same,' I added awkwardly.

To pass the night in the placid companionship of a pleasant woman was a novel experience for me. Jinna's cat sat purring on my lap, while Jinna's hands were occupied with knitting. The cosy warmth of the firelight reflected in the auburn shades of Jinna's curly hair and the scattering of freckles on her face and forearms. She had a good face, not beautiful, but calm and kind. Our conversation had wandered wide this evening, from the herbs she had used to make the tea to how driftwood fires sometimes burned with coloured flames and beyond, to discussing ourselves. I had discovered she was about six years younger than I truly was, and she had expressed surprise when I claimed to be forty-two. That was seven years past my true age; the extra years were part of my role as Tom Badgerlock. It pleased me when she said that she had thought I was closer to her age. Yet neither of us really gave mind to our words. There was an interesting little tension between us as we sat before the fire and conversed quietly. The curiosity suspended between us was like a string, plucked and humming.

Before I had left on my errand with Lord Golden, I had spent an afternoon with Jinna. She had kissed me. No words had accompanied that gesture, no avowals of love or romantic compliments. There had been just the one kiss, interrupted when her niece had returned from the market. Right now, neither of us quite knew how to return to the place where that moment of intimacy had been possible. For my part, I was not sure that I wished to venture there. I was not ready even for a second kiss, let alone what it might bring. My heart was too raw. Yet I wanted to be here, sitting before her fireside. It sounds a contradiction, and perhaps it was. I did not want the inevitable complications that caresses would lead to, yet in my Wit-bereavement, I took comfort in this woman's company.

Yet Jinna was not why I had come here tonight. I needed to see Hap, my foster son. He had just arrived at Buckkeep Town and had been staying here with Jinna. I wished to be sure his apprenticeship with Gindast the woodworker was going well. I must also, much as I dreaded it, give him the news of Nighteyes' death. The wolf had raised the lad as much as I had. Yet even as I winced at the thought of telling him I hoped it would, as the Fool had said, somehow ease the burden of my sorrow. With Hap, I could share my grief, however selfish a thing that might be. Hap had been mine for the last seven years. We had shared a life, and the wolf's companionship. If I still belonged to anyone or anything, I belonged to my boy. I needed to feel the reality of that.

'More tea?' Jinna offered me.

I did not want more tea. We had already drunk three pots of it, and I had visited her back-house twice. Yet she offered the tea to let me know I was welcome to stay, no matter how late, or

early, the hour had become. So, 'Please,' I said, and she set her knitting aside, to repeat the ritual of filling the kettle with fresh water from the cask and hanging it from the hook and swinging it over the fire again. Outside, the storm rattled the shutters in a fresh surge of fury. Then it became not the storm, but Hap's rapping at the door. 'Jinna?' he called unevenly. 'Are you awake still?'

'I'm awake,' she replied. She turned from putting the kettle on. 'And lucky for you that I am, or you'd be sleeping in the shed with your pony. I'm coming.'

As she lifted the latch, I stood up, gently dumping the cat off my lap.

Imbecile. The cat was comfortable. Fennel complained as he slid to the floor, but the big orange tom was too stupefied with warmth to make much of a protest. Instead he leapt onto Jinna's chair and curled up in it without deigning to give me a backward glance.

The storm pushed in with Hap as he shoved the door open. A gust of wind carried rain into the room. 'Whew. Put the wood in the hole, lad,' Jinna rebuked Hap as he lurched in. Obediently he shut the door behind him and latched it, and then stood dripping before it.

'It's wild and wet out there,' he told her. His smile was beatifically drunken, but his eyes were lit with more than wine. Infatuation shone there, as unmistakable as the rain slipping from his lank hair and running down his face. It took him a moment or two to realize that I was there, watching him. Then, 'Tom! Tom, you've finally come back!' He flung his arms wide in a drunkard's ebullience for the ordinary, and I laughed and stepped forward to accept his wet hug.

'Don't get water all over Jinna's floor!' I rebuked him.

'No, I shouldn't. Well. I won't then,' he declared, and dragged off his sodden coat. He hung it on a peg by the door and peeled off his wool cap to drip there as well. He tried to take his boots off standing, but lost his balance. He sat down on the floor and tugged them off. He leaned far to set them by the door under his wet coat and then sat up with a blissful smile. 'Tom. I've met a girl.'

'Have you? I thought you'd met a bottle from the smell of you.'

'Oh, yes,' he admitted unabashedly. 'That, too. But we had to drink the Prince's health, you know. And that of his intended. And to a happy marriage. And for many children. And for as much happiness for ourselves.' He gave me a wide and fatuous smile. 'She says she loves me. She likes my eyes.'

'Well. That's good.' How many times in his life had folk looked at his mismatched eyes, one brown and one blue, and made the sign against evil? It had to be balm to meet a girl who found them attractive.

And I suddenly knew that now was not the time to burden him with any grief of mine. I spoke gently but firmly. 'I think perhaps you should go to bed, son. Won't your master be expecting you in the morning?'

He looked as if I had slapped him with a fish. The smile faded from his face. 'Oh. Yes, yes that's true. He'll expect me. Old Gindast expects his apprentices to be there before his journeymen, and his journeymen to be well at work when he arrives.' He gathered himself and slowly stood up. 'Tom, this apprenticeship hasn't been what I expected at all. I sweep and carry boards and turn wood that is drying. I sharpen tools and clean tools and oil tools. Then I sweep again. I rub oil finishes into the completed pieces. But not a tool have I had in my hand to use, in all these days. It's all, "watch how this is done, boy," or "repeat back what I just told you" and "this isn't what I asked for. Take this back to the wood stock and bring me the fine-grained cherry. And be quick about it." And, Tom, they call me names. "Country boy" and "dullard".'

'Gindast calls all his apprentices names, Hap.' Jinna's placid voice was both calming and comforting, but it was still strange to have a third person include herself in our conversation. 'It's common knowledge. One even took the taunt with him when he went into business for himself. Now you pay a fine price for a Simpleton table.' Jinna had moved back to her chair. She had taken up her knitting but not resumed her seat. The cat still had it.

I tried not to show how much Hap's words distressed me. I had expected to hear that he loved his position and how grateful he was that I had been able to get it for him. I had believed that his apprenticeship would be the one thing that had gone right. 'Well, I warned you that you would have to work hard,' I attempted.

'And I was ready for that, Tom, truly I was. I'm ready to cut wood and fit it and shape it all day. But I didn't expect to be bored to death. Sweeping and rubbing and fetching ... I might as well have stayed at home for all I'm learning here.'

Few things have such sharp edges as the careless words of a boy. His disdain for our old life, spoken so plainly, left me speechless.

He lifted his eyes to mine accusingly. 'And where have you been and why have you been gone so long? Didn't you know that I'd need you?' Then he squinted at me. 'What have you done to your hair?'

'I cut it,' I said. I ran a self-conscious hand over my mourning-shortened locks. I suddenly did not trust myself to say more than that. He was just a lad, I knew, and prone to see all things first in how they affected himself. But the very brevity of my reply alerted him that there was much I had not said.

His eyes wandered over my face. 'What's happened?' he demanded.

I took a breath. No help for it now. 'Nighteyes is dead,' I said quietly.

'But ... is it my fault? He ran away from me, Tom, but I did look for him, I swear I did, Jinna will tell you –'

'It wasn't your fault. He followed and found me. I was with him when he died. It was nothing you did, Hap. He was just old. It was his time and he went from me.' Despite my efforts, my throat clenched down on the words.

The relief on the boy's face that he was not at fault was another arrow in my heart. Was being blameless more important to him than the wolf's death? But when he said, 'I can't believe he's gone,' I suddenly understood. He spoke the exact truth. It would take a day, perhaps several, before he realized the old wolf was never coming back. Nighteyes would never again sprawl beside him on the hearthstones, never nudge his hand to have his ears scratched, never walk at his side to hunt rabbits again. Tears rose in my eyes.

'You'll be all right. It will just take time,' I assured him thickly.

'Let's hope so,' he responded heavily.

'Go to bed. You can still get an hour or so of sleep before you must rise.'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'I suppose I'd better.' Then he took a step towards me. 'Tom. I'm so sorry,' he said, and his awkward hug took away much of the earlier hurt he had dealt me. Then he lifted his eyes to mine to ask earnestly, 'You'll come by tomorrow night, won't you? I need to talk to you. It's very important.'

'I'll come by tonight. If Jinna does not mind.' I looked past Hap's shoulder at her as I released him from my embrace.

'Jinna won't mind at all,' she assured me, and I hoped only I could hear the extra note of warmth in her voice.

'So. I'll see you tonight. When you're sober. Now to bed with you, boy.' I ruffled his wet hair, and he muttered a good night. He left the room to seek his bedchamber and I was suddenly alone with Jinna. A log collapsed in the fire and then the small crackling of its settling was the only sound in the room. 'Well. I must go. I thank you for letting me wait for Hap here.'

Jinna set down her knitting again. 'You are welcome, Tom Badgerlock.'

My cloak was on a peg by her door. I took it down and swirled it around my shoulders. She reached up suddenly to fasten it for me. She pulled the hood of it up over my shorn head, and then smiled as she tugged at the sides of the hood to pull my face down to hers. 'Good night,' she said breathlessly. She lifted her chin. I put my hands on her shoulders and kissed her. I wanted to, and yet I wondered that I allowed myself to do it. Where could it lead, this exchange of kisses, but to complications and trouble?

Did she sense my reservations? As I lifted my mouth from hers, she gave her head a small shake. She caught my hand in hers. 'You worry too much, Tom Badgerlock.' She lifted my hand to her mouth and put a warm kiss on the palm of it. 'Some things are far less complex than you think they are.'

I felt awkward, but I managed to say, 'If that were true, it would be a sweet thing.'

'Such a courtier's tongue.' Her words warmed me until she added, 'But gentle words won't keep Hap from running aground. You need to take a firm hand with that young man soon. Hap needs some lines drawn or you may lose him to Buckkeep Town. He wouldn't be the first good country lad to go bad in a town.'

'I think I know my own son,' I said a bit testily.

'Perhaps you know the boy. It's the young man I fear for.' Then she dared to laugh at my scowl and add, 'Save that look for Hap. Good night, Tom. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Good night, Jinna.'

She let me out, then stood in her doorway watching me walk away. I glanced back at her, a woman watching me from a rectangle of warm yellow light. The wind stirred her curly hair, blowing it about her round face. She waved to me, and I waved back before she shut the door. Then I sighed and pulled my cloak more tightly around me. The worst of the rain had fallen, the storm decayed to swirling gusts that seemed to lurk in wait at the street corners. It had made merry with the festival trim of the town. The blustering gusts sent fallen garlands snaking down the street, and whipped banners to tatters. Usually the taverns had torches set in sconces to guide customers to their doors, but at this hour they were either burned out or taken down. Most of the taverns and inns had closed their doors for the night. All the decent folk were long abed, and most of the indecent ones, too. I hurried through the cold dark streets, guided more by my sense of direction than my eyes. It would be even darker once I left the cliff-side town behind and began the winding climb through the forest towards Buckkeep Castle, but that was a road I had known since my childhood. My feet would lead me home.

I became aware of the men following me as I left the last scattered houses of Buckkeep Town behind. I knew that they were stalking me, not merely men on the same path as myself, for when I slowed my steps, they slowed theirs. Obviously they had no wish to catch up with me until I had left the houses of the town behind me. That did not bode well for their intentions. I had left the keep unarmed, my country habits telling against me. I had the belt knife that any man carries for the small tasks of the day, but nothing larger. My ugly, workaday sword in its battered sheath was hanging on the wall in my little chamber. I told myself it was likely that they were no more than common footpads, looking for easy prey. Doubtless they believed me drunk and unaware of them, and as soon as I fought back, they would flee.

It was thin solace. I had no wish to fight at all. I was sick of strife, and weary of being wary. I doubted they would care. So I halted where I was and turned in the dark road to face those who came after me. I drew my belt knife and balanced my weight and waited for them.

Behind me, all was silence save for the wind souging through the whispering trees that arched over the road. Presently, I became aware of the waves crashing against the cliffs in the distance. I listened for the sounds of men moving through the brush, or the scuff of footsteps on the road, but heard nothing. I grew impatient. 'Come on, then!' I roared to the night. 'I've little enough for you to take, save my knife, and you won't get that hilt first. Let's get this done with!'

Silence flowed in after my words, and my shouting to the night suddenly seemed foolish. Just as I almost decided that I had imagined my pursuers, something ran across my foot. It was a small animal, lithe and swift, a rat or a weasel or perhaps even a squirrel. But it was no wild creature, for it snapped a bite at my leg as it passed. It unnerved me and I jumped back from it. Off to my right, I heard a smothered laugh. Even as I turned towards it, trying to peer through the gloom of the forest, a voice spoke from my left, closer than the laugh had been.

'Where's your wolf, Tom Badgerlock?'

Both mockery and challenge were in the words. Behind me, I heard claws on gravel, a larger animal, a dog perhaps, but when I spun about, the creature had melted back into the darkness. I turned again to the sound of muffled laughter. At least three men, I told myself, and two Wit-beasts. I tried to think only of the logistics of this immediate fight, and nothing beyond it. I would consider the full implications of this encounter later. I drew deep slow breaths, waiting for them. I opened my senses fully to the night, pushing away a sudden longing not just for Nighteyes' keener perception but for the comforting sensation of my wolf watching my back. This time I heard the scuttle as the smaller beast approached. I kicked at it, more wildly than I had intended, but caught it only a glancing blow. It was gone again.

'I'll kill it!' I warned the crouching night, but only mocking laughter met my threat. Then, I shamed myself, shouting furiously, 'What do you want of me? Leave me alone!'

They let the echoes of that childish question and plea be carried off by the wind. The terrible silence that followed was the shadow of my aloneness.

'Where is your wolf, Tom Badgerlock?' a voice called, and this time it was a woman's, melodic with suppressed laughter. 'Do you miss him, renegade?'

The fear that had been flowing with my blood turned suddenly to the ice of fury. I would stand here and I would kill them all and leave their entrails smoking on the road. My fist that had been clenched on my knife haft suddenly loosened, and a relaxed readiness spread through me. Poised, I waited for them. It would come as a sudden rush from all directions, the animals coming in low, and the people attacking high, with weapons. I had only the knife. I'd have to wait until they were close. If I ran, I knew they'd take me from behind. Better to wait and force them to come to me. Then I would kill them, kill them all.

I truly don't know how long I stood there. That sort of readiness can make time stand still or run swift as wind. I heard a dawn bird call, and then another answered it, and still I waited. When light began to stain the night sky, I drew a deeper breath. I took a long look around myself, peering into the trees, but saw nothing. The only movement was the high flight of small birds as they flitted through the branches and the silver fall of the raindrops they shook loose. My stalkers were gone. The little creature that had snapped at me had left no trace of his passage on the wet stone of the road. The larger animal that had crossed behind me had left a single print in the mud at the road's edge. A small dog. And that was all.

I turned and resumed my walk up to Buckkeep Castle. As I strode along, I began to tremble, not with fear, but with the tension that was now leaving me, and the fury that replaced it.

What had they wanted? To scare me. To make me aware of them, to let me know that they knew what I was and where I denned. Well, they had done that, and more. I forced my thoughts into order and tried to coldly assess the full threat they presented. I extended it beyond myself. Did they know about Jinna? Had they followed me from her door, and if so, did they know about Hap as well?

I cursed my own stupidity and carelessness. How could I have ever imagined the Piebalds would leave me alone? The Piebalds knew that Lord Golden came from Buckkeep, and that his servant Tom Badgerlock was Witted. They knew Tom Badgerlock had lopped off Laudwine's arm and stolen their prince-hostage from them. The Piebalds would want revenge. They could have it as easily as posting one of their cowardly scrolls, denouncing me as practising the Wit, the despised beast-magic. I would be hanged, quartered and burned for it. Had I supposed that Buckkeep Town or Castle would keep me safe from them?

I should have known that this would happen. Once I plunged back into Buckkeep's court and politics and intrigue, I had become vulnerable to all the plotting and schemes that power attracted. I *had* known this would happen, I admitted bitterly. And for some fifteen years that knowledge had kept me away from Buckkeep. Only Chade and his plea for help in recovering Prince Dutiful had lured me back. Cold reality seeped through me now. There were only two courses open to me. I either had to sever all ties and flee, as I had once before, or I had to plunge fully into the swirling intrigue that had

always been the Farseer court at Buckkeep. If I stayed, I would have to start thinking like an assassin again, always aware of the risks and threats to myself, and how they affected those around me.

Then I wrenched my thoughts into a more truthful path. I'd have to *be* an assassin again, not just think like one. I'd have to be ready to kill when I encountered people that threatened my prince or me. For there was no avoiding the connection: those who came to taunt Tom Badgerlock about his Wit and the death of his wolf were folk who also knew that Prince Dutiful shared their despised beast-magic. It was their handle on the Prince, the lever they would use not just to end the persecution of those with the Wit, but to gain power for themselves. It was no help to me that my sympathies were, in part, with them. In my own life, I had suffered from the taint of being Witted. I had no desire to see anyone else labour under that burden. If they had not presented such a threat to my prince, I might have sided with them.

My furious striding carried me up to the sentries at the gate to Buckkeep. There was a guardhouse there, and from within came the sound of men's voices and the clatter of soldiers at food. One, a lad of about twenty, lounged by the door, bread and cheese in one hand and a mug of morning beer in the other. He glanced up at me, and then, mouth full, nodded me through the gates. I halted, anger coursing through me like a poison.

'Do you know who I am?' I demanded of him.

He startled, then peered at me more closely. Obviously he was afraid he had offended some minor noble, but a glance at my clothing reassured him.

'You're a servant in the keep. Aren't you?'

'Whose servant?' I demanded. Foolishness, to call attention to myself this way, and yet I could not stop the words. Had others come this way before me last night, were they inside the keep even now? Had a careless sentry admitted folk bent on killing the Prince? It all seemed too possible.

'Well ... I don't know!' the boy sputtered. He drew himself up straight, but still had to look up to glare at me. 'How am I supposed to know that? Why should I care?'

'Because, you damned fool, you are guarding the main entrance to Buckkeep Castle. Your queen and your prince depend on you to be alert, and to keep their enemies from walking in. That is why you are here. Isn't it?'

'Well. I –' The boy shook his head in angry frustration, then turned suddenly to the door of the guardhouse. 'Kespin! Can you come out here?'

Kespin was a taller man, and older. He moved like a swordsman, and his eyes were keen above his grizzled beard. They appraised me as a threat and dismissed me. 'What's the problem here?' he asked us both. His voice was not a warning, but an assurance that he could deal with either of us as we deserved.

The sentry waved his beer mug at me. 'He's angry because I don't know whose servant he is.'

'What?'

'I'm Lord Golden's servant,' I clarified. 'And I'm concerned that the sentries on this gate seem to do no more than watch folk go in and out of the keep. I've been walking in and out of Buckkeep Castle for over a fortnight now, and I've never been challenged once. It doesn't seem right to me. A score of years ago, when I visited, the sentries on duty here took their task seriously. There was a time when ...'

'There was a time when that was needed,' Kespin interrupted me. 'During the Red Ship War. But we're at peace, man. And the keep and the town are full of Outislander folk and nobility from the other duchies for the Prince's betrothal. You can't expect us to know them all.'

I swallowed, wishing I hadn't started this, yet determined to follow it to the end. 'It only takes one mistake for our prince's life to be threatened.'

'Or one mistake to insult some Outislander noble. My orders come down from Queen Kettricken, and she said we were to be welcoming and hospitable. Not suspicious and nasty. Though

I'd be willing to make an exception for you.' The grin he gave me somewhat modified his words, yet it was still clear he did not enjoy my questioning of his judgement.

I inclined my head to him. I was going about this all wrong. I should bother Chade about it, and see if he could not put the guards more on edge. 'I see,' I said conciliatingly. 'Well. I but wondered.'

'Well, next time you ride that tall black mare out of here, remember that a man doesn't have to say much to know a lot. And as long as you've made me wonder, what is your name?'

'Tom Badgerlock. Servant to Lord Golden.'

'Ah. His servant.' He smiled knowingly. 'And his bodyguard, right? Yeah, I'd heard some tale of that. And that isn't all that I heard about him. You're not what I expected he'd choose to keep by him.' He gave me an odd look as if I should make some reply to that, but I held my tongue, not knowing what he was implying. After a moment, he shrugged. 'Trust some foreigner to think he needs his own guard even while he lives in Buckkeep Castle. Well, go on with you, Tom Badgerlock. We know you now, and I hope that helps you sleep better at night.'

So they passed me into Buckkeep Castle. I walked away from them, feeling both foolish and dissatisfied. I must speak with Kettricken, I decided, and convince her that the Piebalds were still a very real danger to Dutiful. Yet I doubted my queen would have even a moment to spare for me in the days to come. The betrothal ceremony was tonight. Her thoughts would be full of her Outisland negotiations.

The kitchens were well astir. Maids and pages were preparing ranks of teapots and rows of porridge tureens. The smells awoke my hunger. I paused to load a breakfast tray for Lord Golden. I stacked a platter with smoked ham and fresh morning rolls and a pot of butter and strawberry preserves. There was a basket of pears from the keep orchard, and I chose firm ones. As I left the kitchen, a garden maid with a tray of flowers on her arm greeted me. 'You're Lord Golden's man?' she asked, and at my nod, she motioned me to a halt so that she could add a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers and a tiny nosegay of sweet white buds to the tray I carried. 'For his lordship,' she told me needlessly, and then hastened on her way.

I climbed the stairs to Lord Golden's chambers, knocked and then entered. The door to his bedchamber was closed, but before I had finished setting out his breakfast things, he emerged fully dressed. His gleaming hair had been smoothed back from his brow and was secured at the nape of his neck with a blue silk ribbon. A blue jacket was slung over his arm. He wore a shirt of white silk, the chest puffed with lace, and blue leggings a shade darker than the jacket. With the gold of his hair and his amber eyes, the effect was like a summer sky. He smiled warmly at me. 'Good to see that you've realized your duties require you to arise early, Tom Badgerlock. Now if only your taste in clothing would likewise awaken.'

I bowed gravely to him and drew out his chair. I spoke softly, casually, as his friend rather than in my role as servant. 'The truth is that I have not been to bed. Hap did not come home until the dim hours of the morning. And on my walk home, I encountered some Piebalds who delayed me a bit longer.'

The smile melted from his face. He did not take his chair, but seized my wrist in a cool grip. 'Are you hurt?' he asked earnestly.

'No,' I assured him, and gestured him to the table. He sat down reluctantly. I moved to the side of the table and uncovered the dishes before him. 'That was not their intent. They just wanted to let me know that they knew my name, where I lived, and that I am Witted. And that my wolf is dead.'

I had to force out the last words. It was as if I could live with that truth so long as I did not utter it aloud. I coughed and hastily took up the cut flowers. I handed the nosegay to him and muttered, 'I'll put these ones by your bedside.'

'Thank you,' he returned in a voice as muted as mine.

I found a vase in his room. Evidently even the garden maid was more familiar with Lord Golden's niceties than I was. I filled it with water from his wash-pitcher and set the flowers on a small

table adjacent to his bed. When I returned, he had donned his blue jacket and the white nosegay was pinned to the front of it.

‘I need to speak to Chade as soon as I can,’ I said as I poured his tea. ‘But I can’t very well go and hammer on his door.’

He lifted the cup and sipped. ‘Don’t the secret passages offer you access to his rooms?’

I gave Lord Golden a look. ‘You know that old fox. His secrets belong to him alone, and he will not risk anyone spying on him in an unguarded moment. He must have access to the corridors, but I don’t know how. Was he up very late last night?’

Lord Golden winced. ‘He was still dancing when I decided to seek my bed. For an old man, he finds an amazing wealth of energy when he wishes to enjoy himself. But I’ll send a page round with a message to him. I’ll invite him to ride with me this afternoon. Is that soon enough?’ He had caught the anxiety in my voice but was not asking questions. I was grateful for that.

‘It will do,’ I assured him. ‘It will probably be the soonest that his mind is clear.’ I rattled my own head as if it would settle my thoughts. ‘There is suddenly so much to think of, so many things I must worry about. If these Piebalds know about me, then they know about the Prince.’

‘Did you recognize any of them? Were they from Laudwine’s band?’

‘It was dark. And they stayed well back from me. I heard a woman’s voice and a man’s, but I’m sure there were at least three of them. One was bonded with a dog, and another with a small, swift mammal – a rat or a weasel or a squirrel, perhaps.’ I took a breath. ‘I want the guards at Buckkeep’s gates to be put on alert. And the Prince should have someone accompanying him at all times. “A tutor of the well-muscled sort”, as Chade himself once suggested. And I need to make arrangements with Chade, for ways to contact him if I need his help or advice immediately. And the keep should be patrolled daily for rats, especially the Prince’s chambers.’

He took a breath to speak, then bit down on his questions. Instead, he said, ‘I fear I must give you one more thing to think about. Prince Dutiful passed a note to me last night, demanding to know when you will begin his Skill-lessons.’

‘He wrote down those words?’

At Lord Golden’s reluctant nod, I was horrified. I had been aware that the Prince missed me. Linked by the Skill as we were, I must be aware of such things. I had put up my own Skill-walls to keep my thoughts private from the young man, but he was not so adept. Several times I had felt his feeble efforts to reach towards me, but I had ignored them, promising myself that a better time would soon present itself. Evidently my prince was not so patient. ‘Oh, the boy must be taught caution. Some things should never be committed to paper, and those –’

My tongue suddenly faltered. I must have gone pale, for Lord Golden stood up abruptly and became my friend the Fool as he offered me his chair. ‘Are you all right, Fitz? Is it a seizure coming on?’

I dropped into the chair. My head was spinning as I pondered the depth of my folly. I could scarcely get the breath to admit my idiocy. ‘Fool. All my scrolls, all my writings. I came so swiftly to Chade’s summons, I left them there in my cottage. I told Hap to close up the house before he came to Buckkeep, but he would not have hidden them, only shut the door to my study. If the Piebalds are clever enough to connect me with Hap ...’

I let the thought trail away. I needed to say no more to him. His eyes were huge. The Fool had read all that I had so recklessly committed to paper. Not only my own identity was bared there, but also many Farseer matters better left forgotten. And personal vulnerabilities also were exposed in those cursed scrolls. Molly, my lost love. Nettle, my bastard daughter. How could I have been so stupid as to set such thoughts to paper? How could I have let the false comfort of writing about such things lull me into exposing them? No secret was safe unless it was locked solely in a man’s own mind. It should all have been burned, long ago.

‘Please, Fool. See Chade for me. I have to go there. Now. Today.’

The Fool set a cautious hand to my shoulder. 'Fitz. If they are gone, it is already too late. If Tom Badgerlock goes racing off today, you will only stir curiosity and invite pursuit. You may lead the Piebalds straight to them. They will be expecting you to bolt after they threatened you. They'll be watching the gates out of Buckkeep. So, think coolly. It could be that your fears are groundless. How would they connect Tom Badgerlock to Hap, let alone know where the boy came from? Take no reckless action. See Chade first and tell him what you fear. And speak to Prince Dutiful. His betrothal is tonight. The lad holds himself well, but his is a thin and brittle façade. See him, reassure him.' Then he paused and ventured, 'Perhaps someone else could be dispatched to –'

'No.' I cut him off firmly. 'I must go myself. Some of what is there I will take, and the rest I will destroy.' My mind danced past the charging buck that the Fool had carved into my tabletop. FitzChivalry Farseer's emblem graced Tom Badgerlock's board. Even that seemed a threat to me now. Burn it, I decided. Burn the whole cottage to the ground. Leave no trace that I had ever lived there. Even the herbs growing in the garden told too much about me. I should never have left that shell of myself for anyone to nose through; I should never have allowed myself to leave my marks so plainly on anything.

The Fool patted me on the shoulder. 'Eat something,' he suggested. 'Then wash your face and change your clothes. Make no abrupt decisions. If we hold our course, we'll survive this, Fitz.'

'Badgerlock,' I reminded him, and hauled myself to my feet. The roles, I decided, must be adhered to sharply. 'I beg pardon, my lord. I felt a moment's faintness, but I am recovered now. I apologize for interrupting your breakfast.'

For an instant the Fool's sympathy for me shone naked in his eyes. Then, without a word, he resumed his seat at the table. I refilled his teacup, and he ate in pondering silence. I moved about the room, seeking tasks to busy myself, but his innate tidiness had left me little to do in my role as servant. I suddenly perceived that his neatness was a part of his privacy. He had schooled himself to leave no sign of himself save those that he wished to be seen. It was a discipline I would do well to adopt. 'Would my lord excuse me for a few moments?' I asked.

He set down his cup and thought for a moment. Then, 'Certainly. I expect to go out shortly, Badgerlock. See that you clear away the breakfast things, bring fresh water for the pitchers, tidy the hearth and bring wood for the fire. Then, I suggest you continue to sharpen your fighting skills with the guardsmen. I shall expect you to accompany me when I ride this afternoon. Please see that you are dressed appropriately.'

'Yes, my lord,' I agreed quietly. I left him eating and went into my own dim chamber. I considered it quickly. Nothing would I keep here, I decided, save the items appropriate to Tom Badgerlock. I washed my face and flattened my butchered hair. I donned my blue servant's garb. Then I gathered all my old clothing and saddlepack, the roll of lock-picks and tools that Chade had given me, and the few other items that I had brought from my cottage. In the course of my hasty sorting, I came across a salt-water-shrivelled purse with a lump in it. The leather strings had dried shut and stiff so that I had to cut them to get it open. When I shook out the contents, the lump was the odd figurine the Prince had picked up on the beach during our ill-fated Skill-adventure. I slid it back into the ruined purse to return to him later and put it on top of my bundle. Then I shut the door to my bedchamber and walked across the pitch-dark room to press on a different section of wall. It gave way noiselessly to my push. Tentative fingers of daylight overhead betrayed the slits that admitted light to the secret passages of the keep. I closed the door firmly behind myself and began the steep climb to Chade's tower.

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