

'Fantasy as it ought to be written' George R.R. Martin



# Fool's Assassin

ROBIN HOBB

BOOK ONE OF *FITZ AND THE FOOL*

The title 'Fool's Assassin' is rendered in a highly decorative, blackletter-style font. The letter 'F' is particularly large and ornate, with a small illustration of a building or castle integrated into its upper loop. The 'A' is also large and features a sword-like flourish extending from its left side. The 'S' at the end of the word 'Assassin' has a long, elegant tail that loops around and ends with a small butterfly illustration. The overall style is classic and elegant, typical of fantasy book covers.

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The logo for Harper Voyager, featuring a stylized crescent moon symbol above the text 'HARPER' and 'Voyager' stacked vertically.

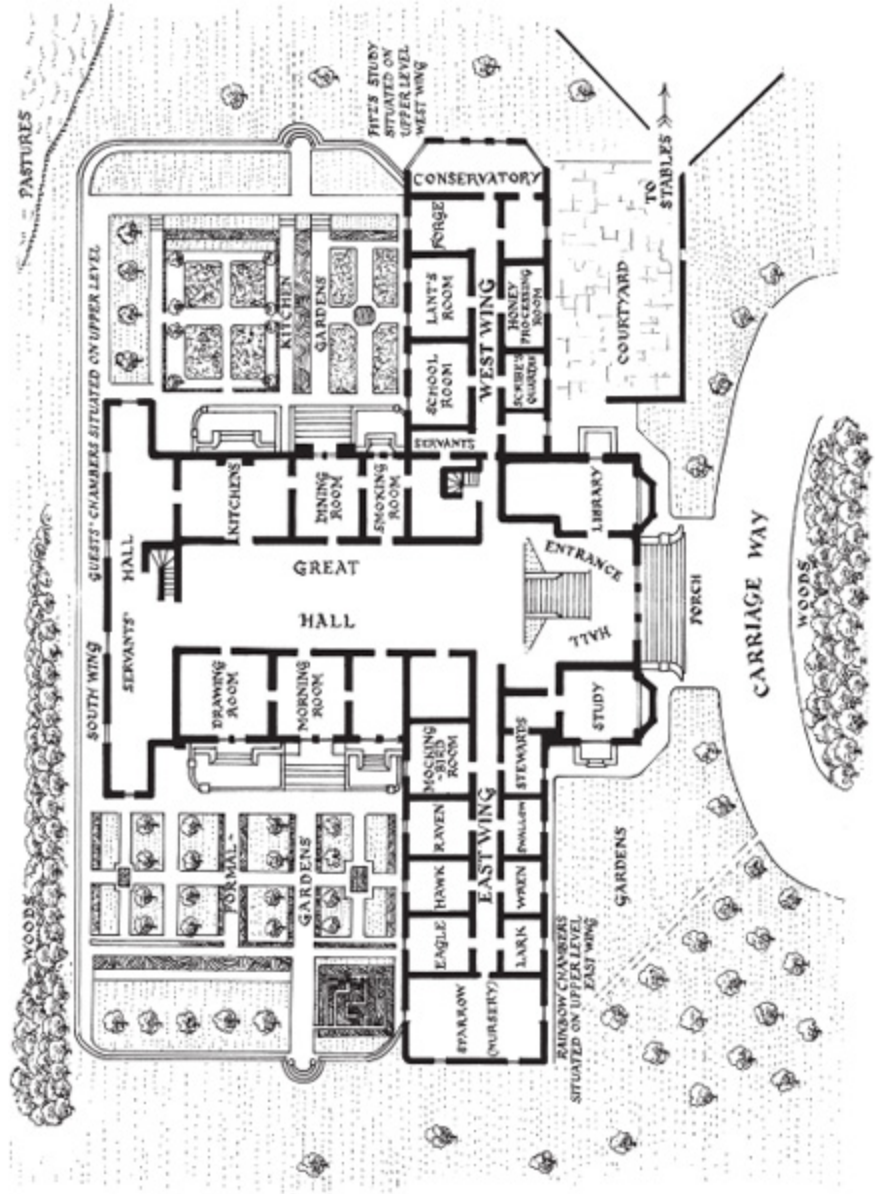
HARPER  
Voyager

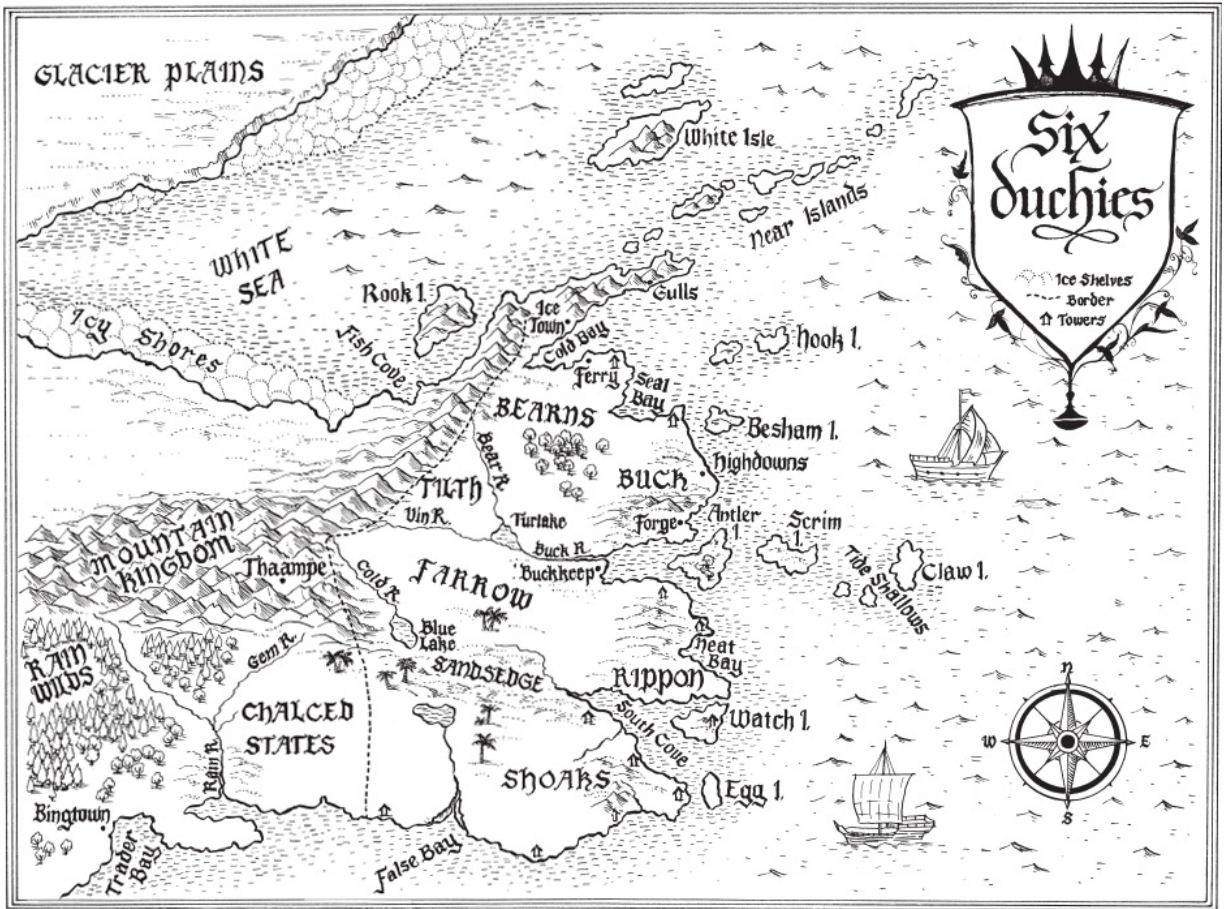
## Dedication

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









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Also by Robin Hobb

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About the Publisher

## 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 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 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.