

Cazaril heard the mounted horsemen on the road before he saw them. He glanced over his shoulder. The well-worn track behind him curled up around a rolling rise, what passed for a hill on these high windy plains, before dipping again into the late-winter muck of Baocia's bony soil. At his feet a little rill, too small and intermittent to rate a culvert or a bridge, trickled greenly across the track from the sheep-cropped pastures above. The thump of hooves, jangle of harness, clink of bells, creak of gear and careless echo of voices came on at too quick a rhythm to be some careful farmer with a team, or parsimonious pack-men driving their mules.

The cavalcade trotted around the side of the rise riding two by two, in full panoply of their order, some dozen men. Not bandits—Cazaril let out his breath, and swallowed his unsettled stomach back down. Not that he had anything to offer bandits but sport. He trudged a little way off the track and turned to watch them pass.

The horsemen's chain shirts were silvered, glinting in the watery morning sunlight, for show, not for use. Their tabards of blue, dyes almost matching one with another, were worked with white in the sigil of the Lady of Spring. Their gray cloaks were thrown back like banners in the breeze of their passing, pinned at their shoulders with silver badges that had all the tarnish polished off today. Soldier-brothers of ceremony, not of war; they would have no desire to get Cazaril's stubborn bloodstains on *those* clothes.

To Cazaril's surprise, their captain held up a hand as they came near. The column crashed raggedly to a halt, the squelch and suck of the hooves trailing off in a way that would have had Cazaril's father's old horse-master bellowing grievous and entertaining insults at such a band of boys as this. Well, no matter.

"You there, old fellow," the leader called across the saddlebow of his banner-carrier at Cazaril.

Cazaril, alone on the road, barely kept his head from swiveling around to see who was being so addressed. They took him for some local farm lout, trundling to market or on some errand, and he supposed he looked the part: worn boots mud-weighted, a thick jumble of mismatched charity clothes keeping the chill southeast wind from freezing his bones. He was grateful to all the gods of the year's turning for every grubby stitch of that fabric, eh. Two weeks of beard itching his chin. Fellow indeed. The captain might with justice have chosen more scornful appellations. But...old?

The captain pointed down the road to where another track crossed it. "Is that the road to Valenda?"

It had been...Cazaril had to stop and count it in his head, and the sum dismayed him. Seventeen years

since he had ridden last down this road, going off not to ceremony but to real war in the provincar of Baocia's train. Although bitter to be riding a gelding and not a finer warhorse, he'd been just as glossy-haired and young and arrogant and vain of his dress as the fine young animals up there staring down at him. *Today, I should be happy for a donkey, though I had to bend my knees to keep from trailing my toes in the mud.* Cazaril smiled back up at the soldier-brothers, fully aware of what hollowed-out purses lay gaping and disemboweled behind most of those rich facades.

They stared down their noses at him as though they could smell him from there. He was not a person they wished to impress, no lord or lady who might hand down largesse to them as they might to him; still, he would do for them to practice their aristocratic airs upon. They mistook his returning stare for admiration, perhaps, or maybe just for half-wittedness.

He bit back the temptation to steer them wrong, up into some sheep byre or wherever that deceptively broad-looking crossroad petered out. No trick to pull on the Daughter's own guardsmen on the eve of the Daughter's Day. And besides, the men who joined the holy military orders were not especially noted for their senses of humor, and he might pass them again, being bound for the same town himself. Cazaril cleared his throat, which hadn't spoken to a man since yesterday. "No, Captain. The road to Valenda has a roya's milestone." Or it had, once. "A mile or three farther on. You can't mistake it." He pulled a hand out of the warmth of the folds of his coat, and waved onward. His fingers didn't really straighten right, and he found himself waving a claw. The chill air bit his swollen joints, and he tucked his hand hastily back into its burrow of cloth.

The captain nodded at his banner-carrier, a thick-shouldered...fellow, who cradled his banner pole in the crook of his elbow and fumbled out his purse. He fished in it, looking no doubt for a coin of sufficiently small denomination. He had a couple brought up to the light, between his fingers, when his horse jinked. A coin—a gold royal, not a copper vaida—spurred out of his grip and spun down into the mud. He stared after it, aghast, but then controlled his features. He would not dismount in front of his fellows to grub in the muck and retrieve it. Not like the peasant he expected Cazaril to be: for consolation, he raised his chin and smiled sourly, waiting for Cazaril to dive frantically and amusingly after this unexpected windfall.

Instead, Cazaril bowed and intoned, "May the blessings of the Lady of Spring fall upon your head, young sir, in the same spirit as your bounty to a roadside vagabond, and as little begrudged."

If the young soldier-brother had had more wits about him, he might well have unraveled this mockery, and Cazaril the seeming-peasant drawn a well-earned horsewhip across his face. Little enough chance of that, judging by the brother's bull-like stare, though the captain's lips twisted in exasperation. But the captain just shook his head and gestured his column onward.

If the banner-bearer was too proud to scramble in the mud, Cazaril was much too *tired* to. He waited till the baggage train, a gaggle of servants and mules bringing up the rear, had passed before crouching painfully down and retrieving the little spark from the cold water seeping into a horse's print. The adhesions in his back pulled cruelly. *Gods. I do move like an old man.* He caught his breath and heaved to his feet, feeling a century old, feeling like road dung stuck to the boot heel of the Father of Winter as he made his way out of the world.

He polished the mud off the coin—little enough even if gold—and pulled out his own purse. Now there was an empty bladder. He dropped the thin disk of metal into the leather mouth and stared down at its lonely glint. He sighed and tucked the pouch away. Now he had a hope for bandits to steal again. Now he had a reason to fear. He reflected on his new burden, so great for its weight, as he stumped up the road in the wake of the soldier-brothers. Almost not worth it. Almost. Gold. Temptation to the weak, weariness to the wise...what was it to a dull-eyed bull of a soldier, embarrassed by his accidental largesse?

Cazaril gazed around the barren landscape. Not much in the way of trees or coverts, except in that distant watercourse over there, the bare branches and brambles lining it charcoal-gray in the hazy light. The only shelter anywhere in sight was an abandoned windmill on the height to his left, its roof fallen in and its vanes broken down and rotting. Still...just in case...

Cazaril swung off the road and began trudging up the hill. Hillock, compared to the mountain passes he'd traversed a week ago. The climb still stole his wind; almost, he turned back. The gusts up here were stronger, flowing over the ground, riffling the silver-gold tufts of winter's dry grasses. He nipped out of the raw air into the mill's shadowed darkness and mounted a dubious and shaking staircase winding partway up the inner wall. He peered out the shutterless window.

On the road below, a man belabored a brown horse back along the track. No soldier-brother: one of the servants, with his reins in one hand and a stout cudgel in the other. Sent back by his master to secretly shake the accidental coin back out of the hide of the roadside vagabond? He rode up around the curve, then, in a few minutes, back again. He paused at the muddy rill, turned back and forth in his saddle to peer around the empty slopes, shook his head in disgust, and spurred on to join his fellows again.

Cazaril realized he was laughing. It felt odd, unfamiliar, a shudder through his shoulders that wasn't cold or shock or gut-wringing fear. And the strange hollow absence of...what? Corrosive envy? Ardent desire? He didn't want to follow the soldier-brothers, didn't even want to lead them anymore. Didn't want to be them. He'd watched their parade as idly as a man watching a dumb-show in the marketplace. *Gods. I must be tired.* Hungry, too. It was still a quarter-day's walk to Valenda, where he might find a moneylender who could change his royal for more useful copper *vaidas*. Tonight, by the blessing of the Lady, he might sleep in an inn and not a cow byre. He could buy a hot meal. He could buy a shave, a *bath* ...

He turned, his eyes adjusted now to the half shadows in the mill. Then he saw the body splayed out on the rubble-strewn floor.

He froze in panic, but then breathed again when he saw the body didn't. No live man could lie unmoving in that strange back-bent position. Cazaril felt no fear of dead men. Whatever had made them dead, now...

Despite the corpse's stillness, Cazaril scooped up a loose cobble from the floor before approaching it. A man, plump, middle-aged, judging from the gray in his neatly trimmed beard. The face under the beard was swollen and empurpled. Strangled? There were no marks showing on his throat. His clothing was sober but very fine, yet ill fitting, tight and pulled about. The brown wool gown and

black sleeveless vest-cloak edged with silver-embroidered cord might be the garb of a rich merchant or minor lord with austere tastes, or of a scholar with ambition. Not a farmer or artisan, in any case. Nor soldier. The hands, mottled purple-yellow and swollen also, lacked calluses, lacked—Cazaril glanced at his own left hand, where the two missing finger ends testified to the ill-advisedness of arguing with a grappling rope—lacked damage. The man bore no ornaments at all, no chains or rings or seals to match his rich dress. Had some scavenger been here before Cazaril?

Cazaril gritted his teeth, bending for a closer look, a motion punished by the pulls and aches in his own body. Not ill fitted, and not fat—the body was unnaturally swollen, too, like the face and hands. But anyone that far gone in decay ought to have filled this dreary shelter with his stench, enough to have choked Cazaril when he'd first ducked through the broken door. No scents here but some musky perfume or incense, tallow smoke, and clay-cold sweat.

Cazaril discarded his first thought, that the poor fellow had been robbed and murdered on the road and dragged up here out of sight, as he looked over the cleared patch of hard-packed dirt floor around the man. Five candle stumps, burned to puddles, blue, red, green, black, white. Little piles of herbs and ash, all kicked about now. A dark and broken pile of feathers that resolved itself in the shadows as a dead crow, its neck twisted. A moment's further search turned up the dead rat that went with it, its little throat cut. Rat and Crow, sacred to the Bastard, god of all disasters out of season: tornadoes, earthquakes, droughts, floods, miscarriages, and murders... *Wanted to compel the gods, did you?* The fool had tried to work death magic, by the look of it, and paid death magic's customary price. Alone?

Touching nothing, Cazaril levered himself to his feet and took a turn around both the inside and the outside of the sagging mill. No packs, no cloaks or possessions dumped in a corner. A horse or horses had been tied up on the side opposite the road, recently by dampness of their droppings, but they were gone now.

Cazaril sighed. This was no business of his, but it was impious to leave a man dead and abandoned, to rot without ceremony. The gods alone knew how long it would be till someone else found him. He was clearly a well-to-do man, though—someone would be looking. Not the sort to disappear tracelessly and unmissed like a ragged vagabond. Cazaril set aside the temptation to slide back down to the road and go off pretending he'd never seen the man.

Cazaril set off down the track leading from the back side of the mill. There ought to be a farmhouse at the end of it, people, something. But he'd not walked more than a few minutes before he met a man leading a donkey, loaded high with brush and wood, climbing up around the curve. The man stopped and eyed him suspiciously.

“The Lady of Spring give you good morning, sir,” said Cazaril politely. What harm was in it, for Cazaril to *Sir* a farmer? He'd kissed the scaly feet of lesser men by far, in the abject terrified slavery of the galleys.

The man, after an appraising look, gave him a half salute and a mumbled, “B'yer'Lady.”

“Do you live hereabouts?”

“Aye,” the man said. He was middle-aged, well fed, his hooded coat, like Cazaril’s shabbier one, plain but serviceable. He walked as though he owned the land he stood on, though probably not much more.

“I, ah,” Cazaril pointed back up the track. “I’d stepped off the road a moment, to take shelter in that mill up there”—no need to go into details of what he’d been sheltering from—“and I found a dead man.”

“Aye,” the man said.

Cazaril hesitated, wishing he hadn’t dropped his cobble. “You know about him?”

“Saw his horse tied up there, this morning.”

“Oh.” He might have gone on down the road after all, with no harm done. “Have you any idea who the poor fellow was?”

The farmer shrugged, and spat. “He’s not from around here, is all I can say. I had our divine of the Temple up, soon as I realized what sort of bad doings had been going on there last night. She took away all the fellow’s goods that would come loose, to hold till called for. His horse is in my barn. A fair trade, aye, for the wood and oil to speed him out. The divine said he daren’t be left till nightfall.” He gestured to the high-piled load of burnables hitched to the donkey’s back, gave the halter rope a tug, and started up the track again. Cazaril fell into step beside him.

“Do you have any idea what the fellow was doing?” asked Cazaril.

“Plain enough what he was doing.” The farmer snorted. “And got what he deserved for it.”

“Um...or who he was doing it to?”

“No idea. I’ll leave it to the Temple. I do wish he hadn’t done it on my land. Dropping his bad luck all over...like to haunt the place hereafter. I’ll purge him with fire and burn down that cursed wreck of a mill at the same time, aye. No good to leave it standing, it’s too close to the road. Attracts”—he eyed Cazaril—“trouble.”

Cazaril paced along for another moment. Finally, he asked, “You plan to burn him with his clothes on?”

The farmer studied him sideways, summing up the poverty of his garb. “*I’m* not touching anything of his. I wouldn’t have taken the horse, except it’s no charity to turn the poor beast loose to starve.”

Cazaril said more hesitantly, “Would you mind if I took the clothes, then?”

“I’m not the one as you need to ask, aye? Deal with *him*. If you dare. I won’t stop you.”

“I’ll...help you lay him out.”

The farmer blinked. "Now, that would be welcome."

Cazaril judged the farmer was secretly more than pleased to leave the corpse handling to him. Perforce, Cazaril had to leave the farmer to pile up the bigger logs for the pyre, built inside the mill, though he offered a few mild suggestions how to place them to gain the best draft and be most sure of taking down what remained of the building. He helped carry in the lighter brush.

The farmer watched from a safe distance as Cazaril undressed the corpse, tugging the layered garments off over the stiffened limbs. The man was swollen further even than he'd appeared at first, his abdomen puffing out obscenely when Cazaril finally pulled his fine embroidered cotton undershirt from him. It was rather frightening. But it couldn't be contagion after all, not with this uncanny lack of smell. Cazaril wondered, if the body weren't burned by nightfall, if it was likely to explode or rupture, and if it did, what would come out of it...or enter into it. He bundled up the clothing, only a little stained, as quickly as he could. The shoes were too small, and he left them. He and the farmer together heaved the corpse onto the pyre.

When all was readied, Cazaril fell to his knees, shut his eyes, and chanted out the prayer for the dead. Not knowing which god had taken up the man's soul, though he could make a shrewd guess, he addressed all five of the Holy Family in turn, speaking clearly and plainly. All offerings must be one's best, even if all one had to offer was words. "Mercy from the Father and the Mother, mercy from the Sister and the Brother, Mercy from the Bastard, five times mercy, High Ones, we beseech you." Whatever sins the stranger had committed, he had surely paid. Mercy, High Ones. *Not justice, please, not justice. We would all be fools to pray for justice.*

When he'd finished, he climbed stiffly back to his feet and looked around. Thoughtfully, he collected the rat and the crow, and added their little corpses to the man's, at his head and feet.

It was Cazaril's day for the gods' own luck, it seemed. He wondered which kind it would prove to be this time.

A COLUMN OF OILY SMOKE ROSE FROM THE BURNING mill as Cazaril started up the road to Valenda once more, the dead man's clothes tied into a tight bundle on his back. Though they were less filthy than the clothes he wore, he would, he thought, find a laundress and have them thoroughly cleaned before donning them. His copper vaidas were dwindling sadly in his mind's accounting, but the services of a laundress would be worth them.

He'd slept last night in a barn, shivering in the straw, his meal a half a loaf of stale bread. The remaining half had been his breakfast. It was nearly three hundred miles from the port city of Zagotur, on Ibra's mild coast, to the middle of Baocia, centralmost province of Chalion. He hadn't been able to walk the distance nearly as quickly as he'd calculated. In Zagotur, the Temple Hospital of the Mother's Mercy was dedicated to the succor of men cast up, in all the various ways they could be cast up, by the sea. The charity purse the acolytes there had given him had run thin, then out altogether, before he'd reached his goal. But only just before. One more day, he'd figured, less than a day. If he could just put one foot in front of the other for one more day, he might reach his refuge and crawl into it.

When he'd started from Ibra, his head had been full of plans for how to ask the Dowager Provincara for a place, for old times' sake, in her household. At the foot of her table. Something, anything at all so long as it was not too hard. His ambition had dwindled as he'd slogged east over the mountain passes into the cooler heights of the central plateau. Maybe her castle warder or her horse-master would grant him a place in her stables, or a place in her kitchen, and he need not intrude upon the great lady at all. If he could beg a place as a scullion, he wouldn't even have to give his real name. He doubted anyone was left in her household by now who'd know him from the charmed days when he'd served the late Provincar dy Baocia as a page.

The dream of a silent, abashed place by the kitchen fire, nameless, not bellowed at by any creature more alarming than a cook, for any task more dreadful than drawing water or carrying firewood, had drawn him onward into the last of the winter winds. The vision of rest drove him as an obsession, that and the knowledge that every stride put another yard between himself and the nightmare of the sea. He'd bemused himself for hours on the lonely road, revolving suitable new servile names for his new, anonymous self. But now, it seemed, he need not appear before the shocked eyes of her court dressed in poor men's castoffs after all. *Instead, Cazaril begs a peasant for the clothes off a corpse, and is grateful for both their favors. Is. Is. Most humbly grateful. Most humbly.*

THE TOWN OF VALENDIA TUMBLED DOWN OVER ITS low hill like a rich quilt worked in red and gold, red for the tile roofs, gold for the native stone, both glowing in the sun. Cazaril blinked at the dazzle of color in his blurring eyes, the familiar hues of his homeland. The houses of Ibra were all whitewashed, too bright in their hot northern noons, bleached and blinding. This ochre sandstone was the perfect shade for a house, a town, a country—a caress upon the eyes. At the top of the hill, like a golden crown in truth, the Provincara's castle sprawled, its curtain walls seeming to waver in his vision. He stared at it, daunted, for a little, then slogged onward, his steps somehow going faster than he'd been able to push them all this long journey, despite the shaking, aching weariness of his legs.

It was past the hour for the markets, so the streets were quiet and serene as he threaded through them to the main square. At the temple gate, he approached an elderly woman who looked unlikely to try to follow and rob him, and asked his way to a moneylender. The moneylender filled his hand with a satisfying weight of copper *vaidas* in exchange for his tiny royal, and directed him to the laundress and the public bath. He paused on the way only long enough to buy an oil cake from a lone street vendor, and devour it.

He poured out *vaidas* on the laundress's counter and negotiated the loan of a pair of linen drawstring trousers and a tunic, together with a pair of straw sandals in which he might trot down the street through the now-mild afternoon to the baths. In competently red hands she carried off all his vile clothing and his filthy boots. The bath's barber trimmed his hair and beard while he sat, still, in a real chair, oh wonderful. The bath boy served him tea. And then it was back to the bath courtyard itself, to stand on the flagstones and scrub himself all over with scented soap and wait for the bath boy to sluice him down with a bucket of warm water. In joyous anticipation, Cazaril eyed the huge copper-bottomed wooden tank that was sized for six men, or women every other day, but which by the happy chance of the hour he looked to have all to himself. The brazier underneath kept the water steaming.

He could soak there all afternoon, while the laundress boiled his clothing.

The bath boy climbed the stool and poured the water over his head, while Cazaril turned and sputtered under the stream. He opened his eyes to find the boy staring at him, mouth agape.

“Were you...were you a deserter?” the boy choked out.

Oh. His back, the rosy red mess of scars piled one across another so thickly as to leave no untouched skin between, legacy of the last flogging the Roknari galley-masters had given him. Here in the royacy of Chalion, army deserters were among the few criminals punished so savagely by that particular means. “No,” said Cazaril firmly. “I’m not a deserter.” Cast-off, certainly; betrayed, perhaps. But he’d never deserted a post, not even his most disastrous ones.

The boy snapped his mouth shut, dropped his wooden bucket with a clunk, and scampered out. Cazaril sighed, and made for the tank.

He’d just lowered his aching body to the chin in the heavenly heat when the bath owner stomped into the tiny tiled courtyard.

“Out!” the owner roared. “Out of there, you—!”

Cazaril recoiled in terror as the bath man seized him by the hair and dragged him bodily up out of the water. “*What?*” The man shoved his tunic and trousers and sandals at him, all in a wad, and dragged him fiercely by the arm out of the courtyard and into the front of the shop. “Here, wait, what are you doing? I can’t go naked into the street!”

The bath man wheeled him around, and released him momentarily. “Get dressed, and get out. I run a respectable place here! Not for the likes of you! Go down to the whorehouse. Or better still, drown yourself in the river!”

Dazed and dripping, Cazaril fumbled the tunic over his head, yanked up the trousers, and tried to cram his feet back into the straw sandals while holding up the pants’ drawstring and being shoved again toward the door. It slammed in his face as he turned, realization dawning upon him. The other crime punished by flogging near to death in the royacy of Chalion was the rape of a virgin or a boy. His face flushed hot. “But it wasn’t—but I didn’t—I was sold to the corsairs of Roknar—”

He stood trembling. He considered beating on the door, and insisting those within listen to his explanations. *Oh, my poor honor.* The bath man was the bath boy’s father, Cazaril rather guessed.

He was laughing. And crying. Teetering on the ragged edge of...something that frightened him more than the outraged bath man. He gulped for breath. He had not the stamina for an argument, and even if he could get them to listen, why should they believe him? He rubbed his eyes with the soft linen of his sleeve. It had that sharp, pleasant scent left only by the track of a good hot iron. It tumbled him back to memories of life in houses, not in ditches. It seemed a thousand years ago.

Defeated, he turned and shuffled back up the street to the laundress’s green-painted door again. Its bell rang as he pushed timidly back inside.

“Have you a corner where I might sit, ma’am?” he asked her, when she popped back out at the bell’s summons. “I... finished earlier than...” his voice died in muffled shame.

She shrugged sturdy shoulders. “Ah, aye. Come back with me. Wait.” She dived below her counter and came up with a small book, the span of Cazaril’s hand and bound in plain undyed leather. “Here’s your book. You’re lucky I checked your pockets, or it would be a mucky mess by now, believe you me.”

Startled, Cazaril picked it up. It must have lain concealed in the thick cloth of the dead man’s outer cloak; he hadn’t felt it when he’d bundled the garment up so hastily back in the mill. This ought to go to that divine of the Temple, with the rest of the dead man’s possessions. *Well, I’m not walking it back there tonight, that’s certain.* He would return it as soon as he was able.

For now, he merely said, “Thank you, ma’am,” to the laundress, and followed her into a central court with a deep well, similar to her neighbor’s of the bathhouse, where a fire kept a cauldron on the boil, and a quartet of young women scrubbed and splashed at the laundry tubs. She gestured him to a bench by the wall and he sat down out of range of the splashes, staring a while in a kind of disembodied bliss at the peaceful, busy scene. Time was he would have scorned to eye a troupe of red-faced peasant girls, saving his glances for the fine ladies. How had he never realized how beautiful laundresses were? Strong and laughing, moving like a dance, and kind, so kind, so kind...

Finally, his hand moved in reawakened curiosity to look in the book. It might bear the dead man’s name, solving a mystery. He flipped it open to discover its pages covered in a thicket of handwriting, with occasional little scratchy diagrams. Entirely in a cipher.

He blinked, and bent more closely, his eye beginning to take the cipher apart almost despite his own volition. It was mirror-writing. And with a substitution-of-letters system—those could be tedious to break down. But the chance of a short word, three times repeated on the page, handed him his key. The merchant had chosen the most childish of ciphers, merely shifting each letter one position and not troubling to shuffle his pattern thereafter. Except that...this wasn’t in the Ibran language spoken, in its various dialects, in the royacies of Ibra, Chalion, and Brajar. It was in Darthacan, spoken in the southernmost provinces of Ibra and great Darthaca beyond the mountains. And the man’s handwriting was dreadful, his spelling worse, and his command of Darthacan grammar apparently almost nonexistent. This was going to be harder than Cazaril had thought. He would need paper and pen, a quiet place, time, and a good light, if he was to make head or tail of this mess. Well, it might have been worse. It might have been ciphered in bad Roknari.

It was almost certainly the man’s notes on his magic experiments, however. That much Cazaril could tell. Enough to convict and hang him, if he hadn’t been dead already. The punishments for practicing—no, for *attempting*—death magic were ferocious. Punishment for succeeding was generally considered redundant, as there was no case Cazaril knew of a magical assassination that had not cost the life of its caster. Whatever the link was by which the practitioner forced the Bastard to let one of his demons into the world, it always returned with two souls or none.

That being so, there should have been another corpse made somewhere in Baocia last night... By its

nature, death magic wasn't very popular. It did not allow substitutions or proxies in its double-edged scything. To kill was to be killed. Knife, sword, poison, cudgel, almost any other means was a better choice if one wanted to survive one's own murderous effort. But, in delusion or desperation, men still attempted it from time to time. This book must definitely be taken back to that rural divine, for her to pass along to whatever superior of the gods' Temple ended up investigating the case for the royacy. Cazaril's brow wrinkled, and he sat up, closing the frustrating volume.

The warm steam, the rhythm of the women's work and voices, and Cazaril's exhaustion tempted him to lie on his side, curled up on the bench with the book pillowed under his cheek. He would just close his eyes for a moment...

He woke with a start and a crick in his neck, his fingers closing around an unexpected weight of wool...one of the laundresses had thrown a blanket over him. An involuntary sigh of gratitude escaped his throat at this careless grace. He scrambled upright, checking the lay of the light. The courtyard was nearly all in shadow now. He must have slept for most of the afternoon. The sound waking him had been the thump of his cleaned and, to the limit they would take it, polished boots, dropped from the laundress's hand. She set the pile of Cazaril's folded clothing, fine and disreputable both, on the bench next to him.

Remembering the bath boy's reaction, Cazaril asked timorously, "Have you a room where I might dress, ma'am?" *Privately.*

She nodded cordially and led him to a modest bedroom at the back of the house, and left him. Western light poured through the little window. Cazaril sorted his clean laundry, and eyed with aversion the shabby clothes he'd been wearing for weeks. An oval mirror on a stand in the corner, the room's richest ornament, decided him.

Tentatively, with another prayer of thanks to the spirit of the departed man whose unexpected heir he had become, he donned clean cotton trews, the fine embroidered shirt, the brown wool robe—warm from the iron, though the seams were still a trifle damp—and finally the black vest-cloak that fell in a rich profusion of cloth and glint of silver to his ankles. The dead man's clothes were long enough, if loose on Cazaril's gaunt frame. He sat on the bed and pulled on his boots, their heels lopsided and their soles worn to scarcely more than the thickness of parchment. He had not seen himself in any mirror larger or better than a piece of polished steel for...three years? This one was glass, and tilted to show himself quite half at a time, from head to foot.

A stranger stared back at him. *Five gods, when did my beard go part-gray?* He touched its short-trimmed neatness with a trembling hand. At least his newly scissored hair had not begun to retreat from his forehead, much. If Cazaril had to guess himself merchant, lord, or scholar in this dress, he would have to say scholar; one of the more fanatic sort, hollow-eyed and a little crazed. The garments wanted chains of gold or silver, seals, a fine belt with studs or jewels, thick rings with gleaming stones, to proclaim him any rank higher. And yet the flowing lines suited him, he fancied. He stood a little straighter.

In any case, the roadside vagabond had vanished. In any case...here was not a man to beg a scullion's place from a castle cook.

He'd planned to buy a night's bed in an inn with the last of his vaidas and present himself to the Provincara in the morning. Uneasily, he wondered if gossip from the bath man had gotten round town very far yet. And if he would be denied entry to any safe and respectable house....

Now, tonight. Go. He would climb to the castle and find out if he might claim refuge or not. *I cannot bear another night of not knowing. Before the light failed. Before my heart fails.*

He tucked the notebook back into the inside pocket of the black vest-cloak that had apparently concealed it before. Leaving the vagabond's clothing in a pile on the bed, he turned and strode from the room.