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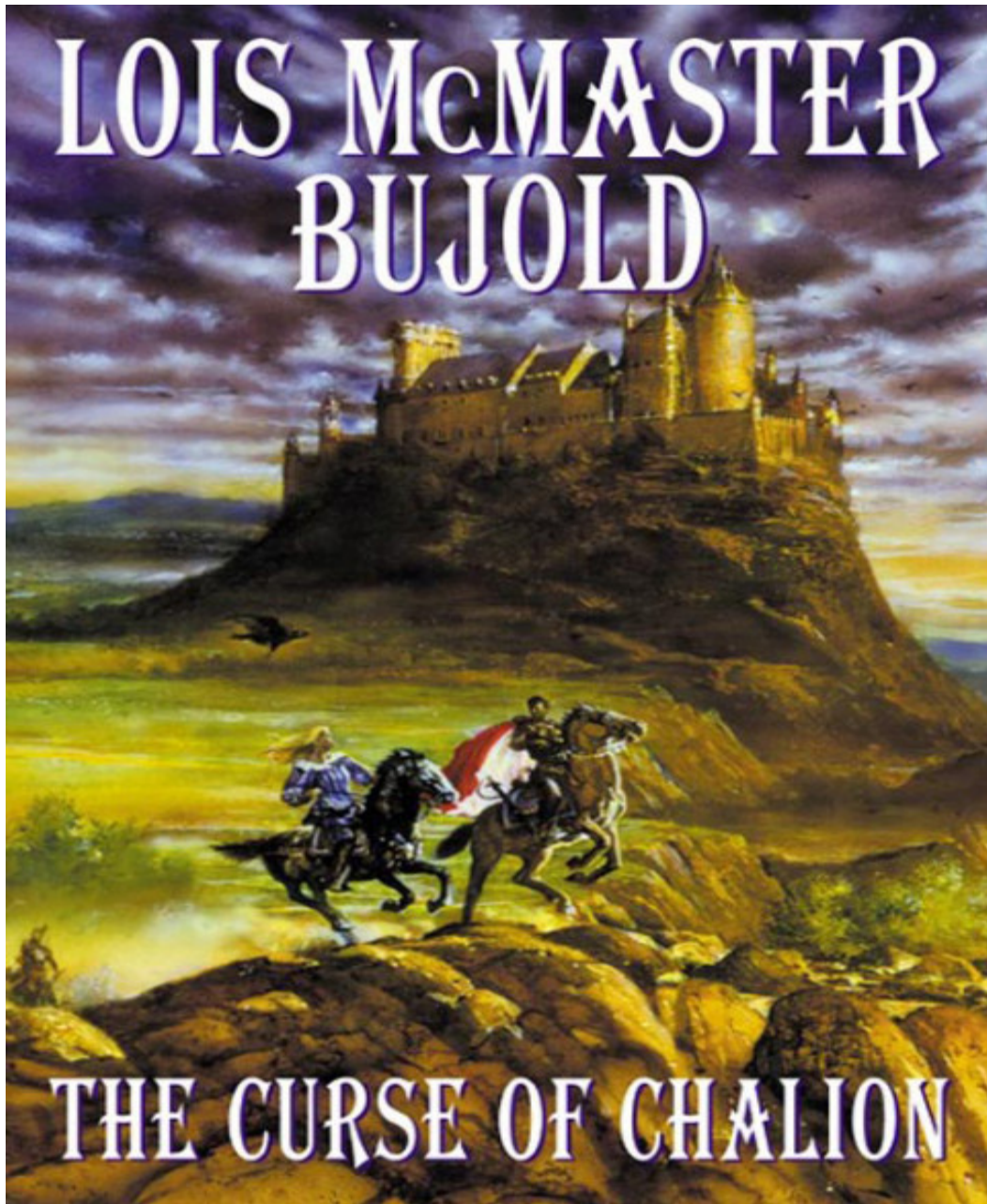
Author of the Hugo Award-winning *Paladin of Souls*



The  
CURSE  
of  
CHALION

"A powerful story that begins with a battered soldier, broken of all except honor, and grows to explore the meaning of courage, faith, duty, love and sacrifice." —MARY JO PUTNEY

LOIS McMASTER  
BUJOLD



THE CURSE OF CHALION

**Lois McMaster Bujold**

**The Curse of Chalion**

 HarperCollins e-books

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# 1

*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.*