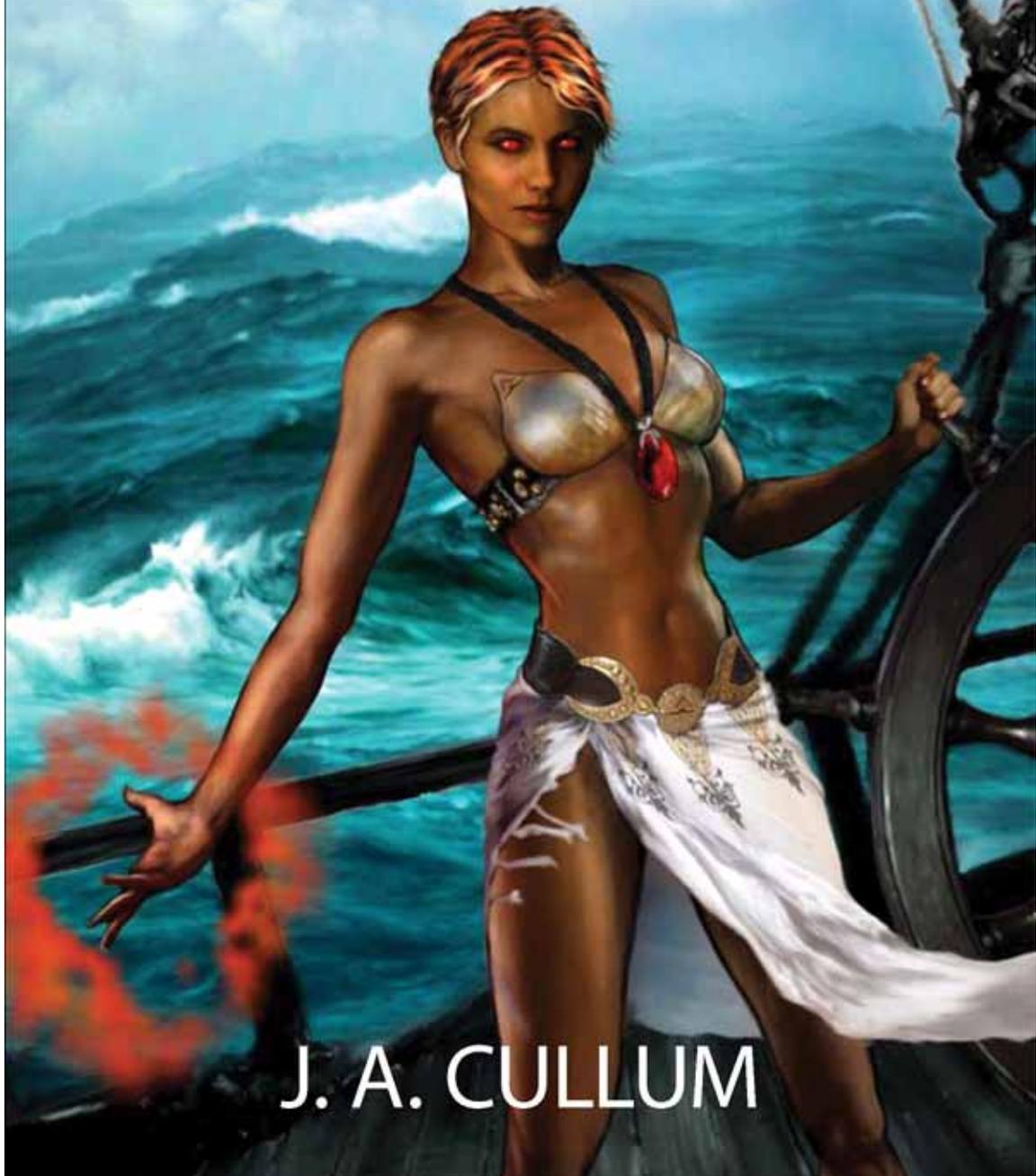


GINKARRION

THE HEART OF FIRE



J. A. CULLUM

I

4624, 463RD CYCLE OF THE YEAR OF THE TIGER
MONTH OF INGVASH

*"Little I thought, when I was a lass,
That I'd end up a whore in an alehouse,
But times are hard and money's tight
So I sell my body through the night."*

— VERSE FROM "THE SAILOR'S LADY"
FROM *SONGS OF THE SEA AND SHORE*, EDITED BY BAR PANYARA, 4592

A WIDE, UNPAVED STREET RAN THE LENGTH of Nemali's harbor. Under the late afternoon sun it teemed with people. Merchants and planters, dressed in garments ranging from voluminous robes to tailored khaki, gestured and shouted. Nearly naked laborers led donkey or bullock-carts, pushed hand-drawn barrows, or carried hogsheads of oil and wine on their backs. The reek of rotting fish, copra and decaying vegetation wafting off the tidal flats mingled with a faint aroma of cloves.

Above the commotion, the sun scorched the arch of the sky and blazed down on the exposed brown mud at the mouth of the Mocuba River and on the gray coral and beige adobe walls of the town. There was no trace of the cooling fog that sometimes came in off the Gulf of Mekkai, not the faintest hint of haze.

Morrien Songard wiped the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve. Under a wide straw hat, her red hair was pulled back in a braid but tendrils had escaped and heat, damp and split ends made the loose hair frizz around her face where it didn't stick to her skin. She had been pretty once, but now her face was lined and her body had thickened. Her breasts sagged under her loose, faded cotton dress and her skin looked pasty. Only her eyes, still large and green, retained their former beauty.

She shouldered her way through the confusion of people and wagons, trying to reach a vantage point where she could see the length of the harbor. A cart piled high with copal and hides and another carrying kwaluccan, tortoise-shells and beeswax swayed past, both on their way down from the river landings to off load at one of the ships. Another string of wagons was headed the other way, carrying goods from the

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ships destined for inland plantations: bolts of machine-made cotton cloth, china, firearms and ammunition all the way from Mahran or Ilwheirlane in the Northern Hemisphere.

"Move aside there! Move aside," a voice yelled nearby. Morrien stepped backward as a cart full of sacks of hunical, barrels of salt meat and fresh vegetables barely missed her on its way toward the boarding ramp of the ship on her right. "Don't plan on lingering this trip," the voice continued to some third party. "Loading my supplies and lifting anchor. Sooner I see the last of Nemali, the happier I'll be. Got any sense, you'll do the same."

Morrien looked around for the source of the voice and saw a burly sailor in soft, knee-high leather boots, green pants, a scarlet shirt, a wide leather belt with both a scimitar and a pistol hanging from it, and a captain's insignia on his wide-brimmed, straw hat. He was supervising the loading of the provisions from the cart. His companion, more soberly clad in brown, wore matching insignia. As she watched, the second man spat into the narrow stretch of green water between the pier and the ship and said, "Lot of nervous folk around, Halev. You hear something specific?"

Halev, a big brown-skinned man with whiskers like a walrus, frowned. "Feeling in my bones." He shrugged. "Traffic's increased in the waters off Senanga lately. Troop ships, maybe? Dekese has ambitions. Wants to put Cassinga right off the map so there won't be any human nation left in Cibata." He shook his head. "Nemali's just not a safe place, right across the river from tiger folk."

A gap appeared in the stream of carts. Morrien dodged through it. She had covered almost the full length of the harbor and *Arroth* was not in port. She cursed. Three months, and still no news from her family in Candith. And *Arroth* wasn't the only vessel missing. No ships had come from the capitol of Cassinga in the past week. Would *Arroth* come at all? Or had its captain heard a rumor and decided the chance of profit wasn't worth the risk? Crowded as the port appeared at this hour, she had seen it much more congested.

Nemali was a ripe fruit waiting to be picked. The merchants had pled for more troops for the past twelve years, since Rungwa and the region northwest of the Mocuba River had fallen to Senanga. But Njombe Isiro, the Ahar of Cassinga, was too busy with the pleasures of his court to heed them. Even when taxes were raised, Nemali gained only three dozen soldiers, although the increase should have paid for ten times that number.

What if Halev were right and the long dreaded invasion was about to happen? What could she do? Nothing much, she realized. She wasn't suited to hiding out in the jungle, even if she could reach it, and she had no money or jewels for passage on one of the ships left in port.

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Morrien sighed, turned and headed back. She would have to hurry to make it to the tavern before her evening shift.

The crowd thinned as she moved away from the harbor, but she was still late by the time she reached the Molting Griffin. The gray coral building had a thatched roof made from palm fronds. From the narrow, raised wooden sidewalk outside the bar, Morrien could see down Anzib Street to the harbor where the tops of the ships' masts caught the last rays of the sun.

Inside, she had to blink before her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. The tavern was smoky from the fire in the open hearth. Years of that smoke had darkened the beamed ceiling to black. The heat was stifling, but the aroma of roasting meat almost drowned out the other, less appetizing scents coming from the river mouth and the harbor.

"Hey, Morrien! 'Bout time you got here. We need another round!" a heavysset man called from a back table.

Morrien took off her hat and grabbed her apron, yelling the order to the bartender, Erlen.

She took over from the boy who had been basting a haunch of seral roasting on the spit in the hearth. "Thanks, Kafir."

Kafir grinned at her and skipped away behind the bar. Within moments Morrien felt as though she were in one of the steam baths she had visited when she lived in Candith.

"Slowing down already, Morrien? Sure you don't need a rest break upstairs?" Burl gestured crudely and his friends laughed.

"Only if you're going to turn the spit for me in the meantime."

This sally was greeted with renewed hilarity, attracting glances from the other patrons. She thought she heard sounds from outside and the floor seemed to vibrate but she could not be sure over the background noise in the tavern.

Pushing back her hair with a reddened hand greasy from the basting brush, Morrien crossed to the bar where Erlen had set a tray with six tankards of mead.

"I can get Kafir to turn the spit again," Erlen offered.

Morrien snorted. "They don't have money. They're just mouthing off." She hefted the tray and carried it over to the men, thumping it down in the middle of the table. "Help yourselves, lesskan," she said, matching their vulgarity and swaying out of the way of their groping hands.

A man threw the door open. Screams came from the street outside, followed by the sounds of gunfire. "Linlarin!" he yelled. "The whole cursed army of Senanga! They broke through the wall. They're taking the town!" As fast as he had appeared, he disappeared, turning and running toward the harbor. There was a loud boom of cannon in the

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distance and the floor vibrated as it had before. Morrien froze for a moment, then shrugged, put the tray down and went back to turning the spit as everyone except Erlen charged out into the street. At least it gave her something to do with her hands.

"You're not going to try to escape?" Erlen asked.

"What's the point? They'll have crossed the river upstream. They'll be all around the town by now. You know that. If Senanga wants Nemali, there's no one here going to stop them. I'll take my chances as a slave. Better that than playing hide and seek in the jungle with a bunch of tigers."

The screaming had not stopped and the gunfire sounded closer. The cannon boomed again. Morrien waved her arm at the door. "They've broken through the wall. The barricades won't hold them long. You don't have much time." She gestured at the roast. "They eat like we do. Maybe a little slaughter will make them hungry."

"We might make it to one of the ships." Erlen said. "Halev's in port. He's got the luck of Jehan. If anyone can get away, he will. He might take us aboard." He came around the bar, lurching on the wooden post that had replaced one of his legs.

"You, maybe. You used to sail with him, but he won't take me! If he takes any passengers at all, they'll be young women and children." Morrien turned the meat on the spit another time then looked back over her shoulder when she realized he was still standing by the door. "What're you waiting for? Get going, or all the ships will have gone."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Morrien turned her face back to the meat so he couldn't see her sudden tears. She should have stayed in Candith, but in Candith she'd been an embarrassment to her family who never understood why she wouldn't marry. They hated the way she lived. She let go of the spit and dug her fingernails into her palms to stop herself from crying as she listened to Erlen make his uneven way out onto the sidewalk. Even if she couldn't stay in Candith, she should never have come to Nemali. She had known the risk. The Senangans wouldn't be satisfied until Cassinga was totally destroyed. It was the last human nation left on the continent of Cibata.

When Erlen had gone, Morrien wiped her face on her grimy apron and cleared the tables, piling the empty tankards onto the tray and dumping them out on the service table next to the door to the kitchen. No one would come for them now, but she didn't know where else to put them. Then she pulled the roast seral onto a serving tray.

She was carving when the Senangans arrived, pushing open the door, a wave of nearly naked figures, both male and female, with only brief leather harnesses to hold their weapons and equipment. Their

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skins were every shade of brown from near black to bronze and shiny with sweat. She had heard that tiger folk fought naked to facilitate their shape-changing, but the actual sight of them still shocked her. Except for their height and striped hair, their nudity revealed them as disturbingly human.

Morrien swallowed, then drew herself up and faced them. "The food's fresh," she said in Eshk, the trade language.

"You're alone?" one of the Senangans, obviously an officer, demanded in the same tongue. The only one fully dressed, he wore a scarlet uniform, the jacket decorated with gold symbols of his authority.

She took a deep breath. "Search if you like, but you're wasting your time." Walking over to the counter, she collected a pile of plates. One linlar moved to stop her, but the officer waved him back and gave a series of commands in his harsh, sibilant language. Four of the soldiers left to search the rest of the building, two of them disappearing up the stairs and another two into the back room where the cooking was done.

"If they break things, I may not be able to serve your dinner," Morrien said.

The officer's face twitched in what might have been a smile. "Why didn't you run with the others?"

She shrugged. "Where could I go?"

"Humans aren't usually so sensible." His brilliant amber eyes examined her and she felt a momentary nausea, as though his eyes were seeing inside her. Then he laughed. It was a cruel sound echoed by more screaming and gunfire in the distance, this time from the direction of the harbor. There was another roar of cannon fire and the building shook.

Morrien thought of Erlen and shuddered. The Senangans had come so quickly. The troops manning the barricades must have panicked. There was no way Erlen could have made it to the harbor, much less to Halev's ship.

The yellow-gold eyes were still fixed on her. She gestured to the roast. "You want some of this? There's fresh baked bread and a lorsk casserole in the back, if your men haven't looted it all."

The officer said something sharply in his own language and all but two of the troopers left in the room filed out. The remaining soldiers positioned themselves on either side of the door.

"I think I will have something to eat. This is as good a place as any for my command headquarters." He sat down at one of the tables farthest from the fireplace.

"You want the rest of the food from the back?"

"Certainly." He gestured to one of the guards by the door. "Sathar will accompany you." He paused and again his eyes burned into her. "So you won't tamper with the food, I'll expect you to join me."

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Morrien's eyes narrowed. "If I'd thought to have poison handy, that wouldn't have stopped me."

His amber eyes sharpened. "You don't care about your life?"

"Why should I?"

His expression was enigmatic. "Even slavery can have its compensations. It depends on the slave."

His eyes brightened and Morrien suddenly realized that he was extremely handsome. The tawny stripes in his black hair were the only alien thing about him. He had a high forehead and an aquiline nose above a wide, flexible mouth, thin-lipped but sensual. She tore her gaze away and hurried toward the back room, so aware of the eyes of the officer on her back that she hardly noticed the soldier a few steps behind her. Twenty years ago, even ten years ago, she would have been thrilled to meet a human man who looked like the officer, but he was not human. He was linlar; he could change into a tiger. Moreover, he was the commander of the Senangan army and she was a harlot several years past her prime.

She was about to pull aside the curtain to the back room when she heard a loud oath and the sound of a struggle. The soldier behind her grabbed her and pulled her out of the way just as the two who had preceded her emerged, dragging a struggling boy.

"Kafir! I thought you left with the others."

The sound of his name seemed to snap something in the boy and he went limp. The two soldiers, one holding each of his arms, supported his weight.

"They got you, too," he said.

"There was no place for me to go."

"Stand up and come here, boy!" the officer commanded in Eshk.

Kafir stared at him, his body still, but his attitude expressing stubborn disobedience and contempt.

The officer studied the boy, then said something to one of the soldiers holding him. The Senangan dropped Kafir's arm and stepped back, his body melting, flowing toward a new form. Morrien gaped at the metamorphosing shape, both fascinated and repelled, as it resolved into a tiger with a high, domed head and fierce eyes. She observed, almost analytically, how the soldier's harness, which held his bow and arrows, a sword and a pistol, had been designed to fit the tiger form as well as the man.

The change took under a minute. Kafir had gone to his knees when the soldier dropped his arm. When the other soldier holding him also let go, he remained frozen in a position of supplication, his eyes wide with terror, fixed on those of the tiger. Then the tiger's front paw reached out and the boy's face disintegrated into a mass of blood and

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torn flesh. There was a snapping sound as his neck broke. Kafir was dead.

Morrien stared. She had seen men die before, but always in the heat of some sort of action or from disease. She had never seen a death quite so sudden or horrible. "Why?" she asked, tearing her eyes away from the red pulp that had been the child's face and turning to the officer.

"He was of no use to us. Too rebellious."

"And me?" Morrien swallowed. "Will you do the same to me when I've finished serving your dinner?"

"You needn't worry, I have no intention of killing you. You interest me. I like survivors." He gave a brief command for the body to be removed, then turned back to her. His thin lips stretched into a wry smile. "I imagine in some respects you'll even find life as my slave less onerous than the life you've known."

"Just a different class of customer."

He frowned. "Not quite. I'm ready for my dinner now." He nodded a dismissal.

Morrien fetched the rest of the food and served him. He seemed to have forgotten his earlier remark about her eating with him, for which she was grateful. She had no appetite. By the time he finished, several other officers had come to make reports and she served them as well.

By midnight she was exhausted. She gathered from the little she understood of their speech that the minor skirmish that had been the taking of Nemali was over. The Senangan forces were in charge. The surprise of their attack against the poorly armed city meant that they had met almost no resistance. The humans who hadn't escaped were either dead or subdued.

"I've finished," Morrien said. "Can I go up to bed, now?"

The officer eyed her and grimaced. "I'd prefer you to wash first."

"What do you mean?"

"I intend to employ your services but I find your current state repulsive. Correct it. One of my men will bring you hot water. You have fifteen minutes."

Morrien realized that she was staring at him again, struck dumb with surprise. She was thirty-eight and looked older. Moreover, she had no illusions about her appearance. "You want to bed me?"

"That is my intent." His eyes met hers and she felt another wave of attraction, stronger than the one she had experienced earlier.

Too stunned to resist the power of his eyes, she nodded stiffly and climbed the stairs.

Two soldiers carried up enough water to fill her old, wooden tub and Morrien bathed and washed her hair. She felt better clean; it had been days since she'd had such an opportunity. The bath couldn't ease

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her tension, however, and she realized with surprise that she was terrified. Earlier, she'd been too shocked to notice her fear.

She glanced around her room with its steeply sloping ceiling and small window. She could escape through the window, but where would she go? The town had fallen. The jungle inland would be swarming with Senangan troops and all the human ships that hadn't been taken would have left the harbor long before. She shivered.

"I told you that you have no need to be afraid."

The voice of the Senangan commander coming out of the darkness near the door startled her.

"I'm not finished yet."

"You've had enough time. I'll dry you." He held out the towel and Morrien had little choice but to rise and step out of the tub into it. She wondered if the sight of her body, the aging body that bulged in all the wrong places and sagged where it should have bulged, would make him change his mind, but it did not.

Instead his mouth twisted and he said, "Ironic, here you are, an aging whore, but if a wizard had discovered you when you were young enough to train, you might have been uniquely powerful."

While her mind reeled from his words, he dried her with the impersonal precision he might have used on a pet animal. When she was dry, he made her lie down on the bed. Then he undressed and lay upon her and coupled with her.

Morrien had feared he might maul her; the tiger folk often tortured human prisoners. She had expected the feel of his hands to revolt her and had steeled herself not to be sick. It hadn't occurred to her that she might enjoy his touch. It had been years since she had felt anything during the act of intercourse other than a mild distaste at being handled, yet every time his strange amber eyes met hers she felt drawn. With his eyes controlling her, his hands pulled responses from her body that she hadn't known even in her youth. What she had thought to endure became instead an experience so exquisite that it drowned out the horror that had gone before. She lost herself in the slow spiral of feeling, the fire that spread through her veins, until she was all fire exploding in ecstasy. When it was over, she lay panting and covered with sweat by the officer's side, her body relaxed in a way that she had never felt before. She was shocked back to reality by his expression of aloof disdain.

She reached out to him, but he rose quickly, avoiding her touch. His skin was dark and shiny, the color of the ancient wooden beams downstairs. "Enough," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought my meaning obvious."

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"But it was so . . ." Morrien could not find words.

He looked her over dispassionately. "Of course. I believe in rewarding those who perform their services well."

"But I . . ."

"I am Senrec Kamrasi, the commander of the Senangan army. My only marriage was a complete fiasco. I have need of a strong heir and you have great genetic potential. The possibility that you might produce such an heir was worth a few moments of my time. But now I have duties to which I must attend. I'll see you're dispatched to my home in the morning. You may as well stay here the rest of the night."

Morrien watched, stunned, as he dressed, his manner dismissing her as though she had ceased to exist. A sickness rose in her throat.

Everything had happened so rapidly, but she should have known. He was a linlar; he had were-sight, if nothing more. Furthermore, he was the commander of the Senangan army. Why hadn't she realized right away that he was a wizard? He had looked at Kafir and known Kafir would be rebellious, not because he could see that from Kafir's stance, but because he could look inside Kafir's brain. He had looked at her, but he hadn't seen what a man would see. He had seen inside her, inside her body all the way down to the pattern of her genes. And because he was a wizard, he could not only see inside her, he could change what he saw.

She shuddered. He had manipulated her so easily. Press a button here and the whore will wiggle, she thought, but the button hadn't been a physical one. He hadn't raised those sensations in her by the way he had touched her with his hands. He had been inside her brain. She gagged, trying to choke down her nausea. The defilement was worse than physical rape, that mental invasion that had made her crave his touch, feel emotions she had never felt before.

And she was impregnated with his sperm! Morrien trembled. Her body felt abruptly cold, despite the heat of the room.

The commander finished pulling on his scarlet pants and buttoning the shirt he wore under his jacket and sat back down on her bed to pull on his boots. He didn't look at her as he did so. She might as well have been invisible. She had served her purpose and now was not worth even the slightest attention.

Morrien felt a sudden, overpowering rage, a hatred as intense as the passion he had raised in her only minutes earlier. He had been inside her brain! She sold her body, but her mind was her own. She stared at his back, his broad, flexible back, and memory of the passion she had felt ripped through her. She hated him, loathed him, but her body still craved his touch and he couldn't be bothered even to look at her. He hadn't felt a thing.

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But he would! He was so arrogant in his superiority that he was paying no attention to her at all. She knew what it felt like now when his mind was inside her, and it was gone. Her hand felt under the mattress for her dagger. She had often found it useful to have a weapon handy. Some men had strange tastes.

The dagger came to hand easily. Morrien didn't think about what she was doing. She kept her rage and hatred in the still place inside her. She was merely making sure that he felt something, too. She knew how to use a knife. She had carried one since she was nine.

The commander finished with one boot and was pulling on the second. She angled the blade upward to penetrate his ribs and drove it into his back with all her strength just where she knew it would reach his heart.

The linlar gasped when the blade struck. He started to rise and turn. She felt the knife try to force its way out and twisted the blade sideways as she shoved it back. His body convulsed even as his arm swung around and struck her on the side of the head. She lost her grip on the knife as she was knocked off the bed but the officer didn't follow her. He tried to stand. She felt his fury like a wave of pain. She was afraid that he would cry out. Then he collapsed onto the floor.

Morrien climbed to her feet, her ears straining to hear if the sound of his fall had disturbed the soldiers below. When more than a minute passed and no one came, she looked down at the body, shocked by what she had done; more shocked by the fact that, now that he was dead, she wanted to hold him, press herself against him, feel again that terrible pleasure. The thought appalled her but she couldn't tear her eyes away from his tall, lean body. He had fallen on his face and the knife stuck up from his back. Blood saturated his shirt and formed a pool on the bare wooden boards of the floor.

She should try to get away from the tavern. His soldiers would kill her if they found her with him. She felt cold and sick and wondered if she had the strength to escape, or cared enough to make the attempt. Instead she sat down on the bed next to the scarlet jacket he hadn't had time to put on. It was almost the same color as his blood.

Morrien was still sitting on the bed in a state of numb apathy when an explosion rocked the building. The sound of shouting came from downstairs and more gunfire.

So, it's not over, she thought, and a stab of fierce gladness pierced the fog that had overcome her. Someone was fighting back, maybe sailors from one of the ships.

The thought prodded her into action. She found clothes in her chest and dressed. The floor felt warm under her feet and she slipped on her shoes, trying to make out what was happening from the confusion of

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noises below. It was only when she opened her door and smelt the acrid smoke in the hall that she realized the tavern was on fire.

One look at the stairs already starting to char told Morrien she could never get down them alive and her room overlooked Anzib Street. She was sure to be seen if she tried to escape that way. She turned and ran to the room across from hers, feeling the heat of the floor through her shoes. The window! She threw it open, climbed out onto the spiky thatch of the roof and slid down to the edge. The irregular surface tore at her clothes and she just managed to catch the gutter. She dangled three meters from the ground, afraid of the drop, until her fingers began to go numb. When she let go, she fell in a heap in the alley behind the bar. The impact knocked the air out of her and bruised her hip. It was several moments before she caught her breath, but otherwise she was unhurt.

She stood up slowly. The air reeked of smoke and gunpowder. Buildings burned nearby, mostly to the east or farther inland. When she looked around the corner, she saw a troop of Senangans rounding up prisoners in the street. Over the roar of the flames she could hear screams and the staccato noise of gunfire. An explosion came from somewhere near the docks, lighting the night. Barrels of tar, she thought, or some other ships' stores.

She worked her way along the alley away from the harbor. There was no place to go. She was bound to be caught, but she could put some distance between herself and the Griffin. That way at least she might not be associated with the commander's death.

The night was lit by the spreading fires, a chiaroscuro of shifting shapes and running figures. She was knocked down once and felt nearly too tired to rise. Sometime later she was summoned to halt. When she turned, she saw a troop of Senangan soldiers escorting some two dozen prisoners tied together in a line. There was no escape, not when any one of those naked, human-looking soldiers could turn into a tiger and chase her down in moments. The one who bound her hands with a coarse rope and pushed her into the line had satiny flesh the same dark color as the commander's. She shivered when he touched her, welcoming the bite of the whip that reprimanded her for being slow when the line started to move again. The pain took her mind off her memories of the feel of a linlar's flesh.

The rest of the night was a blur of being dragged back and forth through the city amid a chaos of fighting and fires. Just before dawn Morrien found herself standing on a hill outside the town. A wind had come up from the south, clearing away most of the smoke, and she could see clearly again. The Senangan soldiers had fixed up a temporary holding pen. There were several hundred prisoners, mostly



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women and children but with some men intermingled. She was relieved to see Erlen, but she didn't try to speak to him.

Her last view of Nemali, as they were marched away, was of it blossoming with red and yellow fires, like flowers, as the sun turned the hazy sky pink with dawn. She wondered how horror could look so beautiful.