

Linnery in Cursive

by *Terry McGarry*


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Linnery



in Cursive

BY TERRY MCGARRY



Summer lay heavy on the crown city of Ollorawn when the scribe came to Luriel's home. He had negotiated the narrow, fetid streets of the poorest quarters. His silk tunic was stained, his hair plastered to his brow. But he gave polite greeting and bowed with genuine respect to the ragged woman—Luriel's aunt, Ashara—who warily opened the door at his soft knock. No spiked boots to kick it in, no razored gauntlets slicing the thick air to motion them out to their deaths. He addressed them formally, granting the deference due their scholarship. It had been three generations since anyone had treated their kind honorably. Luriel could see that her family was perplexed. What possessed this man, with his good teeth and strong bones and clear skin, his tailored clothes and fine leather satchel, to risk life and limb to see them?

As Ashara admitted him and shut the door with a quick glance down the stairwell, his gaze came to rest on Luriel, and he nodded once, his gold-flecked hazel eyes sliding closed, briefly quenching the fever-bright desire that burned there.

ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC DAVID ANDERSON

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. A lot of knowledge is a lot more dangerous—to those who have it.

Having seen those eyes, Aunt Ashara said, "If it's a love potion you're after, or a healing for some relative, you've come a long way for naught. Our trade is banned—or hadn't you heard?" She turned her head, as if to check the stewpot bubbling on the fire, but really to emphasize her marked cheek.

"No, madam," he said. "I know the sentence wizardry carries. I am no spy come to entrap you into casting." He gave a tight, nervous smile. "And I know you don't traffic in potions."

"Why, then?" Corlin, Luriel's uncle, demanded, coming down the ladder from the loft, where he had been all afternoon. Both his cheeks bore the symbols left by the king's branding irons. He was one of the few who had transgressed twice and lived—a testament to the love the king's son bore him when he fostered at the castle. The magelight glared in him, and he had found his way back to his own people, and used his royal cachet as long as he could. Now even the prince could not save him, if he was caught a third time.

"Why?" the court scribe echoed. His burning gaze fell again on Luriel.

"I invited him," Luriel said.

Corlin and Ashara turned and openly stared. Luriel had not spoken aloud in two years.

"I've been teaching him to write verse in the old styles," she said, words coming now in a joyous flood. "He's a very good pupil. In return, he's provided parchment and ink, brushes and pigment, even gold leaf. He bound this for me, in the castle bindery." She drew a small velvet codex from a deep pocket of her kirtle. "It was blank when he gave it to me. I've filled it, Seblik."

"As you were meant to."

"Is it her hand you want, then?" Ashara said, gauging him in a new way. "She's too young for you."

He failed to suppress a wince. Luriel felt sorry for him. She had been branded two years ago, at 10. She could not pass the castle gates, much less wed one of its scribes.

"No," he said, "and I do not deserve her in any event. They dress me well and feed me well, but I am in essence a slave. My eyes and hands were sold to the king when I was a child, and any children I sire belong to him. When my sight fails and my hands cramp with

trade, Seblik blanched, but held his ground.

"I know about your codices," he said. "I've known for some time that ... mages were guarding the old lore." Luriel could tell that he was about to say "marked ones." She was glad he used their own term for themselves. "A small store of volumes in each house, safe in a tin behind the hearth or above the privy. A vast, precious library, cached in pieces throughout the squalid sectors of the city. I applaud you for saving what you have."

The only permissible writing in Ollorawn was treaties, contracts, bills of sale ... the only permissible language in Ollorawn was modern Ghardic, its common tongue. Anything else might be wizardry, and thus all else was. Seblik na Lareon spent his days copying ledgers, notating transactions, drafting letters on behalf of royalty and merchants. An amanuensis, when he craved poetry, history. Luriel had given him what she could. But she owed him so much more. The only other thing she had to offer, besides her body, which was not yet ready, and her heart, which he already had, was their great secret.

Ashara looked at Luriel and said to Seblik, "You're the one, aren't you?"

He lowered his gaze, embarrassed, but nodded.

"Then you shall have whatever teaching you desire," Ashara said in a careful voice, moving to Luriel's side, stroking her hand once down the long fall of her hair. "You came here at great risk to yourself. You will have to come again. It cannot be taught in a day. But what you wish, you shall have."

Luriel beamed—but Seblik shook his head.

"That is not why I have come today. And you could not do it in any event."

A stillness came on the room. The fire crackled, pouring unwelcome heat into the humid space. The neglected pot boiled too high. Something in the loft toppled with a crash, and Ashara and Corlin exchanged an agonized look, and Luriel realized: They already knew. Whatever Seblik had come to tell them, it was related to something they had kept from her. What had Corlin been doing in the loft all those hours? He had not permitted her to help him. Ashara had busied her with makework, sorting her clothes into piles, what she wore

It came back on her in and terror

age, they will put me out to beg for alms. Any woman I took to wife would be herself a slave. Your life is hard here. But it belongs to you."

Then run away. Luriel had said to him, so many times. *Come live with us. We'll bide you.*

He had smiled in his sad way, and said, *Sweet Luriel. They would find me and kill me. I am a weak, frightened man approaching middle age. Escape demands a bravery I know better than to expect of myself.*

It's not brave to run away, she had said.

No. But it takes courage and strength of heart to build a new life for yourself. Besides, if I escaped, who would steal your materials for you?

But he *was* brave. He was so much braver than he knew.

"He's come here for knowledge," Luriel said, caressing the soft cover of her codex. "He wants to read our volumes of lore, study the ancient languages. I've taught him all I can, but I'm still learning. He'd like to learn, too."

Corlin rose from his seat, face darkening. Ashara took his arm, though there was no telling if he meant to throw the scribe out or strike Luriel for divulging their secret to a stranger. He was not young, but Corlin was a big man still roped in muscle from his dockman's

often and what they could pass to the beggars, but she hadn't minded, because today Seblik might come, he'd said he might, she'd told him the way—

"The king knows," Seblik said. "I kept the log of his meeting with the informers. You concealed it well, for many days. But he has signed the decree to round you all up at dawn. Prince Erith is in shackles for his part in the deception. There is no helping you now."

"How did you get out of the castle?" Corlin asked. His voice was very flat.

Seblik glanced at Luriel, where she sat clutching the little book against her chest, desperately trying to make sense of what they were saying, trying to find a way for Seblik to stay and read with her and learn and practice the old tongues. They were to sit by the fire as the autumn winds came to scratch at the door. He was to see that a new life with them would not be such a hard thing to build. He was to wait until she grew up—

"Favors owed by a watchman," he said. "Favors that would cost him his manhood if they were known. He had no choice."

"And when you go back?" Corlin said.

Seblik's smile was thin. "It depends on who's on duty."

Ashara took her crocheted summer shawl from its peg behind the

door. Corlin was inking a quill, preparing to write a message on one of their precious supply of scrolls. "You have indeed dared much," he said. "And we have little time. Can you spare an hour to sup with us? Never go into exile on an empty stomach, I always say."

They laughed, adults sharing some brave joke in the face of dark times to come, and Luriel, forgotten, burst from her chair. "What?" she cried. "What's happening?"

Ashara reached for her. "Oh, my love ..."

She eeked away from her aunt and threw herself into Seblrik's arms. He held her tight, as he had held her so long ago. The familiar rose-water smell of him mixed with the familiar smells of home—lentil stew, limewashed vellum, linseed oil, acrid ink. He breathed her name. Then he took her shoulders in firm hands, pushed her back, turned her to face her uncle, who was all the father she had now, and gave her into his keeping.

"We are leaving the city," Corlin said quietly, looking her straight in the eyes. "We are leaving Ollorawn forever."

It came back on her in a rush, the night of lace and terror and burning.

The beginning was like any other. A duke and his scribe and two soldiers came to the door and demanded entrance. Mother, as always, made her hide under the table, this time behind the good lace draped for their solstice observance. In the wizards' quarter, folk lived in single rooms above shops that catered only to their own, and theirs had had no loft. Luriel had seen this before: the fine boots tramped in, the orders were given, the casting was done, the boots tramped out. Although magecraft was banned, still the rich and the royal came to be cured, healed, strengthened. They paid in silver, if they paid at all; Mother said they believed it was customary. They had many misconceptions about the craft, and there was no longer anything anyone could do to set them right. Some mages considered such a visit lucky—it meant that a man of power might turn a blind eye the next time a casting was discovered. Father called those mages fools, and said they'd hang as high as anyone. Father never tried to protect her from the truth.

a rush, the night of lace and burning.

But something was wrong. The duke was laughing, demanding they scribe a curse for him to put under his wife's pillow. "That can't be done with magecraft," Mother said. "Cure these chilblains for me, then," he'd replied. "Surely your sorcery is capable of that?" His men snickered.

It was a waste of precious vellum. A calf had died to provide the skin they scribed on. But Mother and Father complied. With only two of them, it should be a weak casting. Effective castings required three. But Father had talent and a strong spirit, and Mother's mage-light was the brightest anyone had ever seen.

They chalked a ritual circle on the floor, over the ghost of all the erased circles, and sat across from each other. Father inscribed the vellum with the ancient curative verses, the next thing that Luriel was supposed to learn. She wished she could see him write. She loved his flowing hand, the cursive style of old Celyrian, the most powerful language for healings. Then he handed the vellum leaf to Mother, who painted a viridian weave of vining trefoils around his words. In the codices hidden under the floorboards they sat on, the illuminations were elaborate, gilded, permanent—but powerless. At the end, as Mother sang the words that Father had inscribed, to bind their magelights into the work, the inscribed leaf dissipated in a frosty

puff, and the casting was complete. Luriel shivered. Even a casting as basic as this was a thing of awesome power. No wonder the king was afraid.

Someday, she had thought, I'll find people who aren't afraid to fight and cast the king right out of Ollorawn, and all his nobles and all his rich men, and anyone else who says that magecraft is evil and then wastes a little calf's life on something herbs would cure.

"Ahh," the duke sighed. "Much better, good wizards. Now let's find out what you're truly made of." Through the web of lace, Luriel saw his booted feet pivot; he must have gestured to one of his men. "Bring him in."

Hurled onto the floor in the middle of the casting circle was a youth, bound and gagged, in clothes finer than Luriel had seen anyone dare wear into this quarter.

"This young man has aided wizards," the duke said. "I can think of no better punishment for him than one meted out by wizards. Can you?"

What he wanted them to do was unspeakable.

"We are only two," Mother said. "What you ask cannot be done."

Silence, another gesture she couldn't see, an oath from her father, and a razor-gauntleted arm reached suddenly into her hiding place and hauled her out into the light. Father lunged for her. A sword came up. The duke said, "Hold! Don't kill him. I want this boy's confession—a little sorcery of our own. And I want him to feel the sting of the abomination he tried to protect."

Luriel looked at their faces. The duke's was pinched and cruel, the soldiers' were scarred and craggy; the scribe's was handsome and impassive. He held a goatskin parchment not unlike one they might use for a casting, and an inkpot, and a quill—his tools were their tools. He was gripping them very hard, and standing very straight. His tense body said everything his face did not.

"Here's your third," the duke said.

"She shows no light," Father said. "Sometimes it skips a generation—"

"A lie."

"She's too young," Mother said. "She's not trained."

"Let this be her training. Let her learn, now, the truth of your dark craft."

"We do not use our craft to cause pain."

"But you can."

"We will not."

Fraying rope could not be very difficult, Luriel thought, or melting swords; they did harder things when they knit broken bones and routed out disease. Couldn't her mother see the possibilities? They'd pretend to obey, but use the casting to free the youth and disarm the men, and he and her father could fight off the soldiers, and the duke would have to go away—

"You'll have to kill us," Mother said. "We will not harm this boy."

"I have other forms of incentive." The duke motioned to his soldiers. There were three—the two who'd come in first, and the one who'd guarded the youth. Now the heaviest one grabbed Luriel, and the tallest grabbed her father. The third strode to the fire, and with gloved hands unwrapped an iron he'd tucked in his scabbard belt. He plunged its wrought end into the embers. The heavy one dragged her to the hearth. The embers hissed.

"She'll be marked anyway, when she's older," her mother said. Luriel had never seen an expression so flat. The mark on her mother's

“She taught me that there are know. She writes in languages

cheek seemed to burn; three curved arms radiating from a central point into a joined periphery. It represented a casting circle and three mages. Mother said they should wear it with pride.

As the hot iron was brought to Luriel's cheek, the duke said, “Let this serve as an indication of what else I will do to her if you refuse.” Father roared and drove his skull into the face of the soldier behind him.

It all ran together: the agony, her scream, the smell of burning flesh, another scream, the scribe easing the duke's blood-soaked body to the floor, the penknife in his hand, the shock on his face, the blood pumping from the duke's neck and pouring from the soldier's nose, the soldier's sword in Father's grip as he launched himself, too late, to save her. The heavy soldier released her and drew his sword. The other dropped the hot iron and drew his own. She picked up the iron. The heavy one shifted to run her father through. She drove her arm up straight and caught him in the throat. He crumpled, gasping, clutching at his neck. He didn't seem to be able to breathe. The bones in her arm were jammed together; her hand was burned. She turned around as her father's sword clanged on the sword of the soldier who'd branded her. The two blades formed a bright X in the fire's glow. Her father's blade twisted and brought the soldier's down. Father glanced at her. The soldier's left hand was at his belt. Her mother shouted as the knife came out. Father looked back, but not in time; he froze, impaled on the blade, then spat into the soldier's face. The soldier flinched. He did not see Father hefting the sword in a last, monumental effort. Its arc took it through the soldier's neck.

“Galandra,” her father said as he fell, and died. Her mother's name.

Her own name registered on her awareness and turned her head. Everything was happening through a white screen. The scribe was kneeling by the duke's body, wrestling with something. The third guard was disarmed, with a broken nose. But he, too, had a knife, a wicked curved blade. He held it underhand. Father said you should never hold a knife overhand, because the arc would bring it down into your own body as likely as anywhere else. Father had known about knives, and swords. Mother had not approved. Now Father lay dead, and Mother, who'd spoken peace and kindness all her life, stood and waited to be killed. Belatedly, her last words came through: “Run, Luriel. *Run.*”

But it was not brave to run away. The pain of her seared cheek was maddening. Her father lay in a pool of blood. There was blood everywhere. This was her *home*. It had all happened in an instant, one endless, impossible instant. The world could change that quickly. In an eyeblink.

She ran, blindly, screaming, at the armored man who was going to kill her mother.

She tripped over the bound man in the casting circle and sprawled under the guard's blade, into his knees.

The guard staggered and fell next to his duke, where the scribe still knelt. Luriel looked up into the scribe's beautiful face. It twisted into an expression of anguish as he wrenched the duke's knife free and, with a sob, brought it down, overhand, into the back of the guard's neck.

Now there would be no soldiers to tell what had happened here. Luriel knew that was important. She would never, ever tell what had happened here. She could not speak anyway for the agony in her face, but she would *not* speak—not until the world was whole again, no matter how long that might be.

Her mother had taken her, and their store of codices, to her sister's house. They'd released the youth; he'd aided mages before, and a mage had given his life in defense of him. And though they did not trust him they let him go, because Mother decided it. What they did with her father, or the dead duke and his soldiers, they never told her. The scribe had stood by her mother as long as he could, then gone off to summon the city watch and give them some agreed-upon story.

Then her mother had left. To keep Luriel safe, she said. Because there was work to do.

Someday, she'd thought, *I'll find people who aren't afraid to fight, and we'll kill the king, and all his dukes and all his soldiers.* The scribe had been afraid, but he had fought. She spent weeks trying to find him, haunting the merchant quarter, turning a fair cheek to anyone who saw her, going back after they saw the mark anyway and shooed her off or tried to wheedle secrets from her. She said nothing to any of them. When she spotted him at last, striding out of the quarter toward the Kingsroad, she ran after him and tugged on his coat. He hissed when he recognized her and hustled her into a shadowed alley.

“You mustn't be seen with me, ever,” he said. “Don't look for me again. There's still suspicion; I don't know how long it will take to fade. Years.” Then he'd really looked at her, checked to see how her cheek was healing, and pulled her roughly into his arms. “Thank the good spirits you're safe and well.”

She'd carried ink and quill and scroll in a little pouch all those weeks. She drew them out now, and wrote, *What is your name?*

He'd tilted his head at her scribing. “I can't make it out.”

But he was a scribe. He knew how to write. It wasn't that dark in the alley. She wrote the words again, taking pains to be clear. Still his eyes showed no comprehension. Puzzled, she tried the blocky glyphs of modern Ghardic. His eyes seemed to focus. “Ah!” he said. “But what in the world was *that?*”

Realization began to dawn.

Old Celyrian, she wrote, sounding the name out in Ghardic. *Can you not read that?*

He shook his head. “They don't teach that anymore. I've never even heard of it, and I can write in eight different languages. It's very beautiful.”

Impatient, she stamped her foot and huffed. He had not answered her question. He smiled, and took her quill. *Seblik na Lareon*, he wrote, then tapped the page with equal, but feigned, impatience.

Luriel na Galandra, she wrote in return. *Will you meet me again?*

Of course I said yes, if we were very cautious about it,” he told Corlin as they spooned up vegetable stew, while Ashara was on the roof sending his message by pigeon to mages on the other side of the city. Afterward, Corlin would go from door to door, while Ashara and Luriel finished packing. They would be ready by midnight. “I didn't know where she lived, and she was too canny to let me follow her. She fixed on me as some sort of defender, yet it took two years for her to trust me. She did not give up your secrets lightly. But she taught me that there are worlds beyond the world I know. She writes and thinks in languages I believed were dead or never knew existed. She knows, by heart, epics and lyrics in complex verse forms, while our children are punished for singing simple rhymes in the street. She takes for

worlds beyond the world I I believed were dead."

granted history that has been forbidden to us so long no one even misses it. She doesn't even consider it remarkable. I fell in love with her scribing, with her teaching. At first we communicated only with parchment and quill, that night had wounded her spirit so badly. After a year she started talking. I hope she'll start again."

He addressed that last to Luriel, where she sat on the hearthstones, arms crossed stubbornly across her chest. She remembered the day she first spoke again. It was the day she realized she loved him, and that with him by her side, she and her mother would be three again. Now Mother could come back.

Corlin came to sit next to her, his aging knees folding with an audible pop. "I'm sorry, love," he said. "We should have told you, but we didn't want to frighten you before it was time. Your mother never explained exactly what happened. Now that I've heard the story, I know you've faced far worse. So now I can tell you: Your mother has been working for two years to rally our kind. No, not to fight—don't look so fierce and satisfied. That was never her way, you know that. It was what your father, who was a soldier until they marked him, loved about her—that she could be so strong without ever doing harm. She's found a place for us to go—just mages, just folk who show a light, marked or not. She's been spreading the word, organizing. Mages sailed in ships from far ports, with supplies and livestock and everything we'll need, besides our craft, to make a new home. We were only waiting until the supply ships were there, so that our leaving wouldn't alert the king to send his warships to sink them. Now we can't afford to wait for word. We must go tonight. If wind and spirits were with them, they'll be waiting for us. We'll be happy there, Luriel. And it will be only us."

"No kings, or nobles, or soldiers?"

Corlin brushed the hair off her face, gently thumbed the dimpled mark on her cheek. "We're all veterans of a war. We'll all be kings, because we all have this symbol burned on our hearts."

"What did it mean, in ancient times?" Seblík asked.

Corlin's hand dropped away. "It isn't ancient. Some henchman of some king thought it up, a symbol of terror and loathing. But it will be ancient someday. Where we're going, we'll redeem it."

"Come with us," Luriel blurted, and ran to the table to clutch Seblík's hand. "Oh, come with us, please."

He squeezed her hand as if he would never let go, but he said, "I'm not one of you, Luriel."

"You might as well be! You know everything!" Reflexively, she swallowed her next words, and then said them anyway, because truth was important now: "You killed for us."

He went pale but did not release her hand. It was the hand the hot iron had burned when she picked it up and crushed the soldier's windpipe. She had killed, too. "I've done a lot of things, sweet Luriel. But never something as brave as what you're about to. What did I tell you about building a new home? You're all very strong, to do that. I take risks when I have to. But I'm not that strong. You are. Go create the most beautiful land the world has ever known. I will never forget you."

She could do a casting for courage. She could do it by herself, if she had to. They said you couldn't alter someone's mind or heart, but castings could do anything if your magelight was bright enough, and hers was—she had her mother's light. Castings could kill, if you wanted them to. That's why magecraft was so strict, because they didn't want you to hurt or kill. But Father had known how to fight. In the last moment, he had looked to see if she was safe and didn't see

the knife. You had to be more careful than that. If she was very careful, now, and slipped out onto the stairs while Ashara was packing ... there was vellum in the box, there was ink mixed in the pot ...

Ashara burst through the door just as Corlin frowned at the fire and asked if they smelled some foul thing burning. "It's begun," she said.

Luriel went to the window as Corlin swore and Seblík cursed himself for a fool. They were at the top of their building, four stories up, where it leaned out and nearly touched the building across from it, but the side window had a good view down the street. Toward the far end of the wizards' quarter, the sky glowed, like a sunset in the middle of the night.

"They've started at the castle end," Corlin said, wrapping food in waxed linen and shoving it into a woollen sack. "We're lucky." Luriel's clothes were folded and ready, and it took only moments to add them to the canvas duffel with the others. Ashara was climbing into the loft, where they'd brought the codices from all their hidey-holes. "We can't take them all!" she said, looking at the battered leather satchel that was the sturdiest carryall they owned.

Luriel followed Seblík up the ladder. He was holding his own satchel, rugged cowhide stitched by the king's leathersmiths. "Take mine," he said, "it will carry more and more securely. I'll take the rest and try to hide them."

"Hide them here, stay here!" Luriel cried, past all reason.

"I'm afraid they're going to burn every building in this quarter," Seblík said gently. "They'll want all of you in the open so they can catch you. But you'll be gone."

"I can't choose, I don't know which ones we'll need," Ashara moaned. Corlin had tried all afternoon to sort them, and failed. All were precious.

"Just take what you can and trust the rest to me," Seblík said. "I'll see them safe. I promise you."

It was done before Luriel could get her breath. They were standing on the wrong side of the door, and Seblík was inside. "I'll pack the rest of the codices," he said, motioning for them to go. "Spirits speed you on your journey, good mages. I wish things had been different."

"Wait!" Luriel cried. She ducked under his embrace and back inside.

"Luriel, we haven't time," Ashara snapped. They could hear the cries now, the smashing doors, the dull clank of metal.

Luriel snatched up the velvet-bound codex that Seblík had given her to write dreams and wishes in. She pressed it into his hands.

"But this was a gift, it was for you ..." he said helplessly.

"Now it's full, and now it's for you," she said. Then they were gone, out into the smoky night, rushing down the street, away from the clamor of riot, the roar of conflagration. Bound for exile in a land that no one had even named. She would see her mother again ... but they would be only two, now.

They walked long into the night, past the city gates, past the silent fields, into a rocky place she had never been. Ahead of her lay only places she had never been. Other refugees joined them. Most were marked. All burned with magelight. Some spoke quietly as they walked, but Luriel just walked. She thought of the verses she had scribed for Seblík, lines of admiration and regret, illuminated with gratitude and hope. She envisioned him reading them—reading the old Celyrian she had taught him, teaching others how to read it.

He's braver than he thinks he is, she told herself.

She did not look back. She would see him again.

Celyrian was the language of healing. ♣