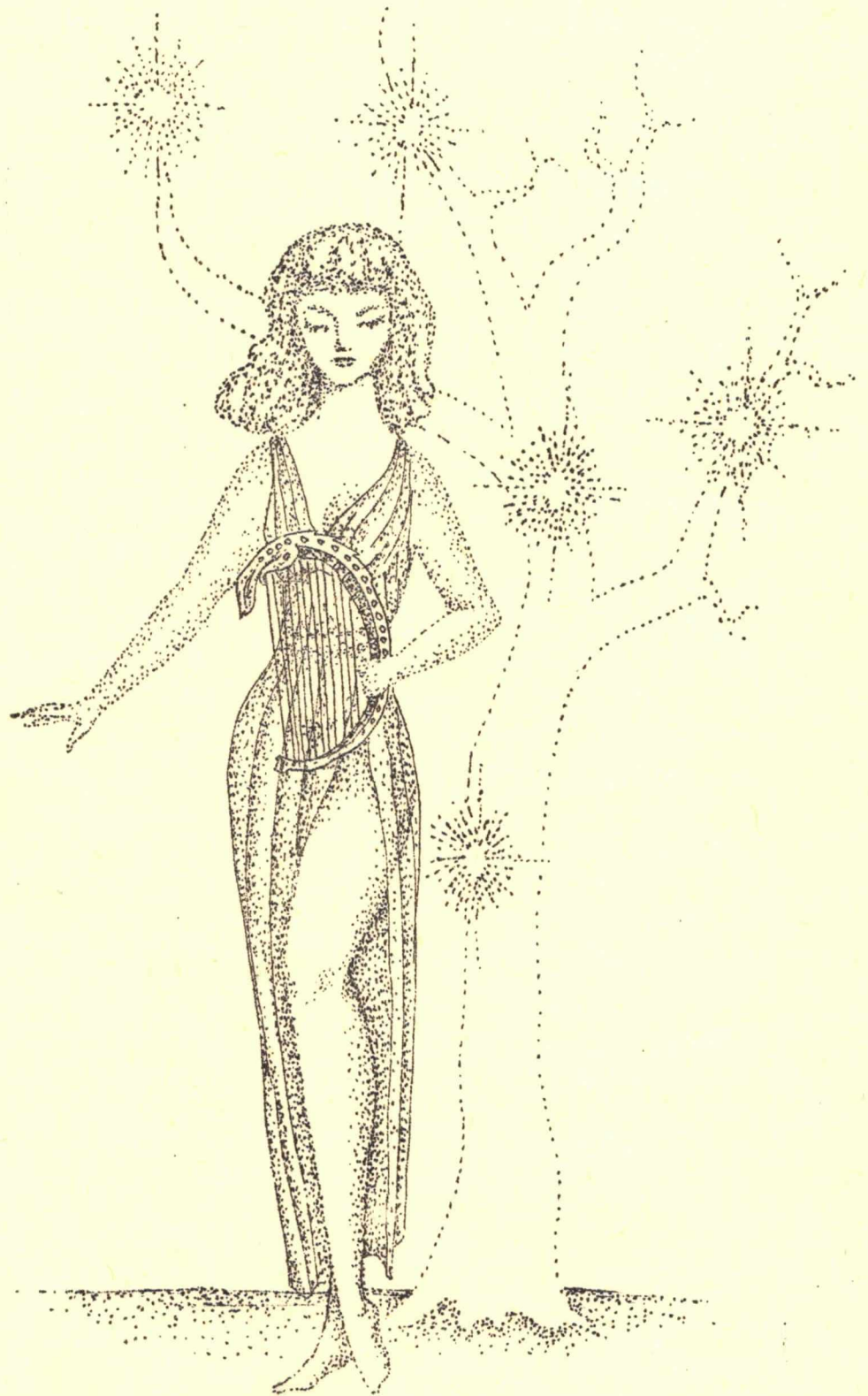


the Golden Harp

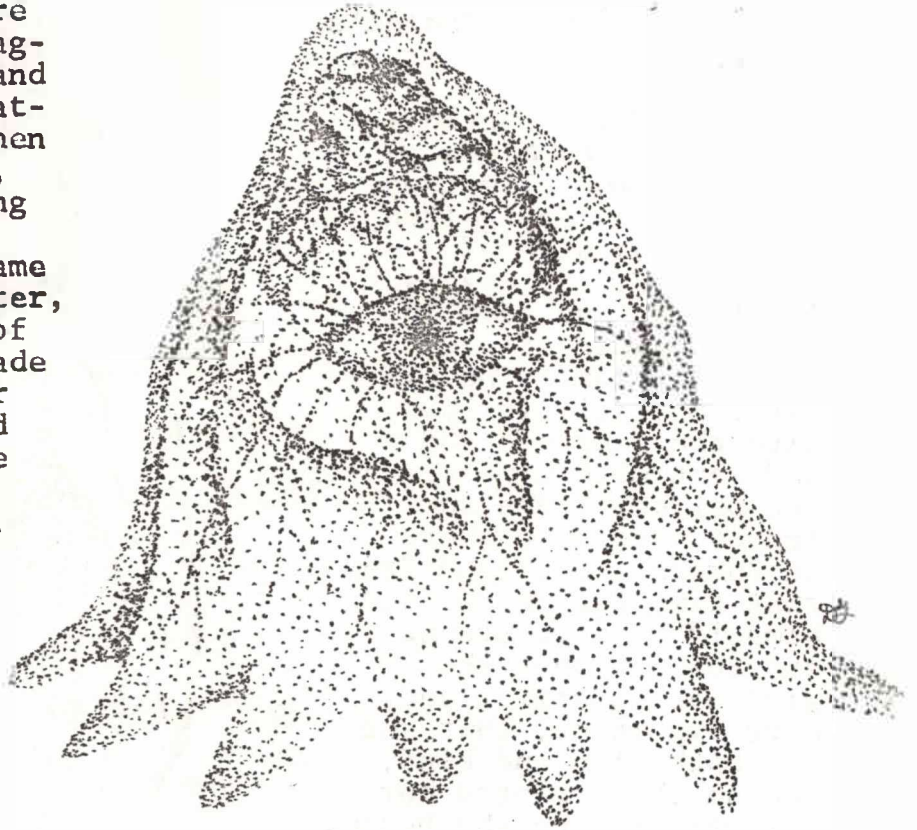


"So into the fight I must go whate'er the odds
Resolved to lay all my foemen on the scarp--
Yet prepared to fall at the mandate of the Gods
And wait for the sound of Evina's Golden Harp"

from

The Song of Rizni the Swordsman

*In the beginning there was only Shaas, a huge dragon that floated, sleeping, in the midst of emptiness. After more time than can be imagined, Shaas awoke, and with her breath created the firmament. Then Shaas laid two eggs, and with their laying she died. From the first of the eggs came Ernont, and his sister, Ses. From the body of their mother they made Shalar, and together they created men and women and all of the creatures that make the world beautiful. While they were at work the second egg hatched, and from it came the Crayak.



The Crayak was at first a primitive, gelatinous thing with no true shape. As it grew, it learned to copy the appearance of other things, and in time it learned to appear in any form that it wished. It could not stand the warm sun and light made it uncomfortable, so it fled deep into the caverns of Shalar, where there is perpetual darkness.

It is said by some that Shaas laid a third egg that has yet to hatch, and that the creature that comes from it will so far overshadow anything that has been and everything that will come after, that the end of Shalar will take place.

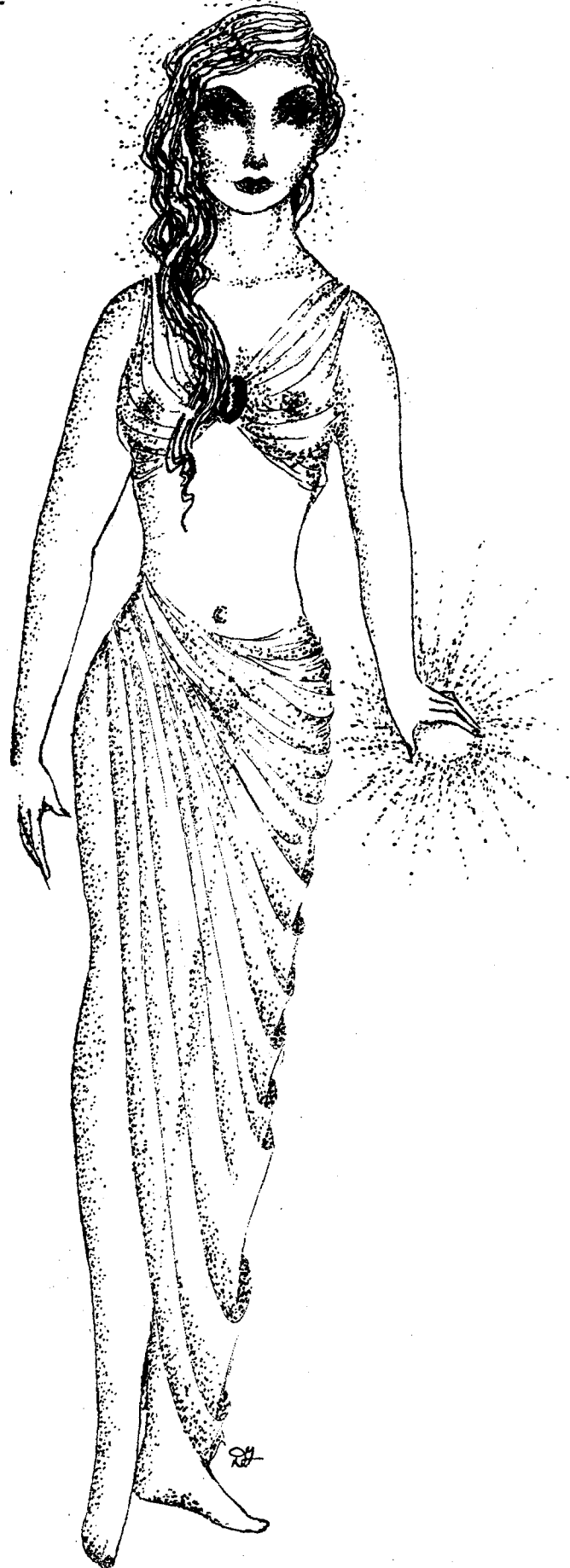
The Crayak was jealous of the work of Ernont and Ses and so, there in the darkness, it tried to create life. But the Crayak was young and inept and its first creations were hideous monsters that it angrily destroyed. As time went on it learned more, and eventually it made all of the delicate jointed and tendriled creatures that live in the darkness and hide in the slime of rot and the stench of decay, for the being that was the Crayak was evil and could not by itself create anything of beauty. As it was both male and female it could engender its own young and so it brought forth Bregor and Kriel. The first was a beast thing, shaped like a man but covered with fur, and the second was scaled and born with a fish's tail.

Ernont took his sister, Ses, to be his wife, and from their union came Ereth, a huge warrior of a man who took delight in hunting. He carried a bow and a quiver of arrows, and hung a

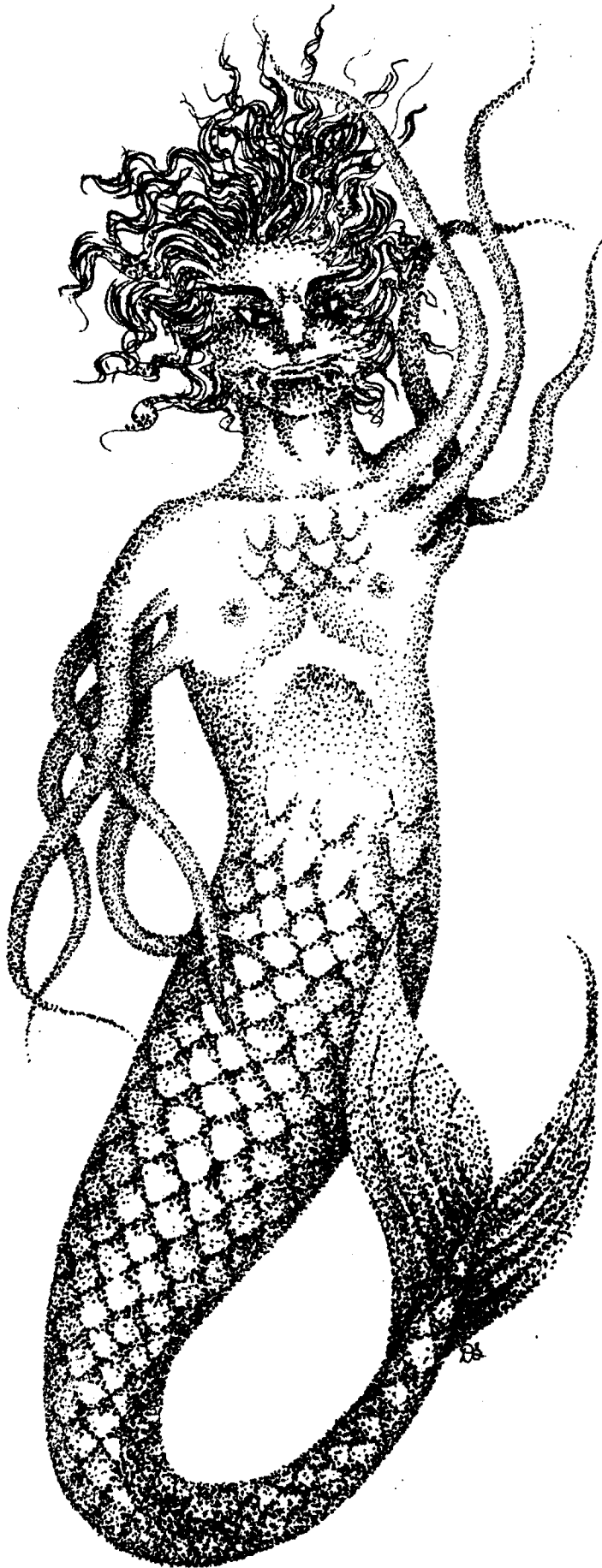
huge sword at his side. A huge black beast called Zorgan went with him to hunt. It was too much cat to be called a dog and too much dog to be called a cat, and it was as high as Ernont's waist.

One day, while hunting on Shalar, Ereth saw a beautiful mortal maiden combing her long golden hair by the side of a forest pool. She was so lovely that he fell in love with her at once, and asked her to be his wife. She fell in love with the handsome god and went with him to the palace of Ses and Ernont. She rode there on Zorgan's back and from that time Zorgan devoted himself to her. Ernont and Ses saw that the girl was beautiful and, more important, that she was both wise and kind, and so they granted her immortality and she became the wife of Ereth. Her name was Delena, and she watched over the affairs of marriage and motherhood among men. From the union of Ereth and Delena came three children: Urak, who took after his father; Evina, who lived only for music and art; and Shanna, who was born with ruby eyes and followed the way of a warrior.

Now, a part of the Crayak still longed to create beauty and so, twisting it's flesh into the appearance of Ernont, it came to Ses as she walked in her garden. Believing the Crayak to be her husband, Ses allowed the Crayak to make love to her, and from their union came Yulanora, who was the most beautiful of



Yulanora



women, but whose heart and soul were pure evil. Yulanora had the power of creation and, unlike her father, she could fashion things that had at least the outward appearance of beauty. Yulanora came often to Shalar, and several times she welcomed a mortal man to her bed. From one of these unions came Amaris and Kriesa, the twins who preside over the dead, and from another came **Narno**, who drives men to kill for gain.

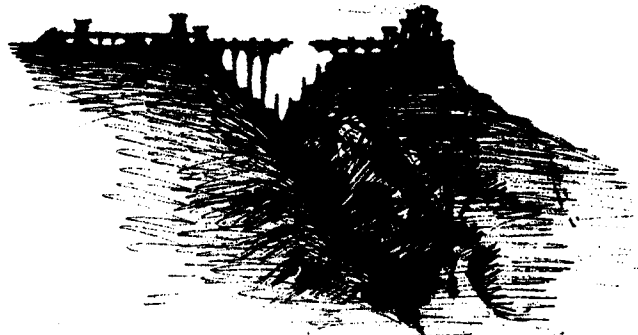
Kriely, though he had a scaled body and lived in the sea, longed for a woman to be his queen, and so he appealed to his father, the Crayak to give him a bride. The Crayak created Imris, who was as much a monster as Kriely, and she bore the Nyleses who drag sailors down to their deaths. Kriely soon grew dissatisfied with his monstrous wife and banished her to a desolate region of the sea. Then he appealed to Ernont, and threatened to turn the seas and the rivers from their beds to flood the land unless the god found him a wife. Ses and Ernont created Nesina, who was beautiful and loving, but shaped with a fish's tail like Kriely. The children she bore him were the Styles, some of whom were born with legs instead of tails and could be seen by men as they laughed and played on the beaches.

Imris, enraged at the treatment she had received, sulked in a cave at the bottom of the sea, and waited for the birth of the last child Kriely had given her. When it was

finally born it proved to be a terrifying monster with scaly tentacles and a gaping, insatiable mouth. Imris caged it in the cave and the Nyleses brought the bodies of the dead to feed upon.

Bragor, who was born of the Crayak, perhaps retained something of the original spirit that lived in the great Mother, for he fashioned jewelry and moulded goblets of crystal and gold, but his main talent was in the forging of weapons. He created swords that could only be drawn by their owners, and swords that could not be lifed, and once as a joke he created a sword that turned to vapour and vanished when it was taken from the sheath. Bregor was bent and mishapen and, because no woman would care for him, he harboured a great hatred of all women. One day, as he hunted in a stream bed for moonstones, he discovered Evina, Ereth's daughter, bathing in the cool water. The god seized her and carried her, screaming, to his home. Once he had taken her to his castle, Bragor wondered what to do with the woman. He had taken her on an impulse and he disliked her as much as he disliked all women, but he could hardly return her. Evina trembled in fear of the god, and begged him to take her home, but he would not. He tried to make her help him with his work, but she could not hold the heavy metal and the heat of the forge made her faint. Disgusted, he left her to amuse herself with the jewels and golden baubles that lay thick on the floor, and shut himself up in his workshop.

Finding a bent piece of gold that was studded with jewels, and a coil of gold wire, Evina made a harp, and sang softly and sadly to herself to pass the hours away. Bragor, returning late from his work, heard the girl singing, and the sound pleased him. His dislike for her lessened as the song went on and he decided to keep her with him to sing forever. Evina, more in fear and relief than anything else, welcomed Bragor as her husband and never again returned to her home. The god, on his part, brought her gold and silver thread to weave into cloth, and rich jewels to adorn her hair. And Evina, satisfied enough with her strange husband, wove, and sang, and played her golden harp; and it is said that the last sound that a warrior hears before his death is the music of Evina's harp.





On day as Zorgan hunted through the forest - as animals are wont to do - he chased a ferret to the edge of the river, where it dove into a small hole in the bank. As Zorgan dug after the small thing his claws hit a round smooth ball of stone. He nosed it around and then, having lost interest in the ferret, picked it up in his jaws and carried it to Delena. Finding his mistress seated in the garden he dropped the bauble into her lap. Delena picked up the ball and wiped it clean on the grass. It was small enough to be covered by her two cupped hands and it seemed to be made of a clear crystal; but as she looked into it she saw that the very center of it was formed of a multitude of shimmering, vibrant colors. She stared into it and the colors seemed to overwhelm and overflow her. Suddenly she was in the midst of a vast throng of people, all of whom knelt to do her homage, and the air was filled with sweet sounds, and she could feel the arms of her lover warm around her. For a few moments Delena sat there, entranced by the fulfillment of everything she desired, living the wishes she had had as a child, as a maiden, and as a wife. Delena gasped and tore her eyes away from the sphere, and then hurried to take it to Ernont who sat at council in the great hall, surrounded by the other great divinities and their servants. Ernont, having examined the sphere, passed it among the company for all to see. It was, he decided, one of the ymorin - a tear shed by Shaas at the birth of the gods. It was decided that the ymorin should be kept safe so that all might enjoy it, and so Ernont caused it to be mounted in a golden frame and set at the top of an ivory pillar in the midst of a pavillion in the palace garden. The frame was fastened with a silver lock, and the great god himself kept the key. So, the ymorin was left, shimmering in all its glory, so that everyone might gaze into it for as long as he chose.

Now, there was, hidden safely behind a golden drape and gnawing a rich pastry crust, a small black mouse. The mouse listened carefully to all that was said and then it hurried away to the Black Caverns to tell Yulanora what had come to pass. The dark goddess listened to what the mouse had to say and she smiled. Yulanora Azaraine, Yulanora the Glider in Darkness, Yulanora the Silken Voiced wanted the ymorin. So that very night she sent an owl, two graveyard rats, and a nest of ants to the palace of the gods. Very very silently they went. The rats spoke softly to one another that there was no one on guard, and the ants filed up the side of the ivory pillar, where they crept into the silver lock and clicked its tumblers into place. The owl pulled aside the golden frame with its beak and then, with a flurry of silent wings, grasped the ymorin in its talons and flew off to take it to his mistress.

There was a great hue and cry the next morning, when the gods discovered that the ymorin was gone. Zorgan nosed about the pavillion, bristled and snarled softly. The gods set out to search for their missing treasure and questioned everything that they met, but they got no answer. At last they came to a serpent and it flicked its tongue and said, in its lazy way, that it had seen an owl fly across the moon and that a ball of fire had glittered through its talons as it winged its way to the palace of Yulanora. The gods immediately sent a demand to Yulanora for the ymorin's return, but she refused and, being angry at the perfidity of the serpent, sentenced the creature to go forever on its belly. The serpent could do nothing and to this day may only crawl and warily caution people to be silent.

Yulanora still refused to return the ymorin, no matter how the gods threatened. They prepared to try and take it from her by force, and she began to raise a great army of loathsome things to defend her ownership of the jewel. Fearing that it might be taken from her by trickery she hid it deep within the caverns beneath Mt. Calaikanora, and set a terrible multiheaded daemon to watch over it for her.

The gods appealed to Bregor to fashion weapons for them to use in the battle and he, chuckling, forged them in the same fires that he forged others for the army of Yulanora. At last the preparations were complete and the gods set out for the great plain that sweeps out before the palace of Yulanora. There was mighty Ernont himself, and Ereth his son, and Urak the son of Ereth. There was Carsis and his hiddious pack of hounds, and Evenrude swinging his blue sword, and Memisis riding the golden unicorn. There was Nelysa of Carnos, and Ivris of Zicas with his left sleeve empty, and others too numerous to mention. All of the gods and their sons went forth to the great plain and the forces of evil met them there to do battle. Both men and divinities fought, though few of the mortals understood the reason for their fighting. There were bowmen from the armies of Shalar, and winged demons with enchanted swords, and there were ghouls that fed as they killed. The battle waged back and forth for what may have been an eternity and the earth of Shalar was red with blood. Yulanora herself rode out on the back of a great black dragon and directed the battle as her mount soared back and forth through the sky.

Coming to realize that the war was not apt to be won the gods held a council and Shanna, who had fought with them as ably as any man claimed the right of going to Yulanora's place in search of the ymorin. Shanna was a true warrior maid. There had never been a

man who could best her at any contest. She had long black hair, and ruby eyes and handled a sword with an ease few men could match. The gods granted her claim, and she took Zorgan and traveled by night to Yulanora's palace. The fortress walls were enchanted and could not be climbed, and the huge iron gates were firmly barred. Zorgan, panting in eagerness, dug swiftly and silently under the outer wall until he had made a tunnel through which both he and Shanna could squeeze.

The courtyard beyond the wall was cold and damp and formed of black onyx, as was the castle itself. Together the two crossed the courtyard, and made their way up the wide black stairs and into the castle. Torches hung on the walls, and burned with a bloodred flame, and mounds of whitened bones mixed with golden trinkets on the floor. At one point they passed under an arch above which was set a skull that wore an intricate jeweled crown. The walls were hung with bloodred tapestries that had scenes of death and torture worked on them in golden thread. They walked on and on through that silent place and Zorgan bared his fangs and hissed at the scent of evil in the place. In the center of one room was a sunken vat filled with liquid that boiled and fumed. Shanna shuddered as a human head floated to the surface for a moment, the flesh nearly cooked from the bones. They walked on, through rooms filled with gold, and rooms filled with rich furs and fabrics, and through rooms heaped high with mouldering bones, but still they did not find what they were seeking. Eventually they heard the sound of the dragons wings and rushed down to the lowest levels of the castle to wait until Yulanora slept. As they waited in the darkness they heard the sound of footsteps and soon caught the glimmer of a torch. It was Yulanora herself, winding her

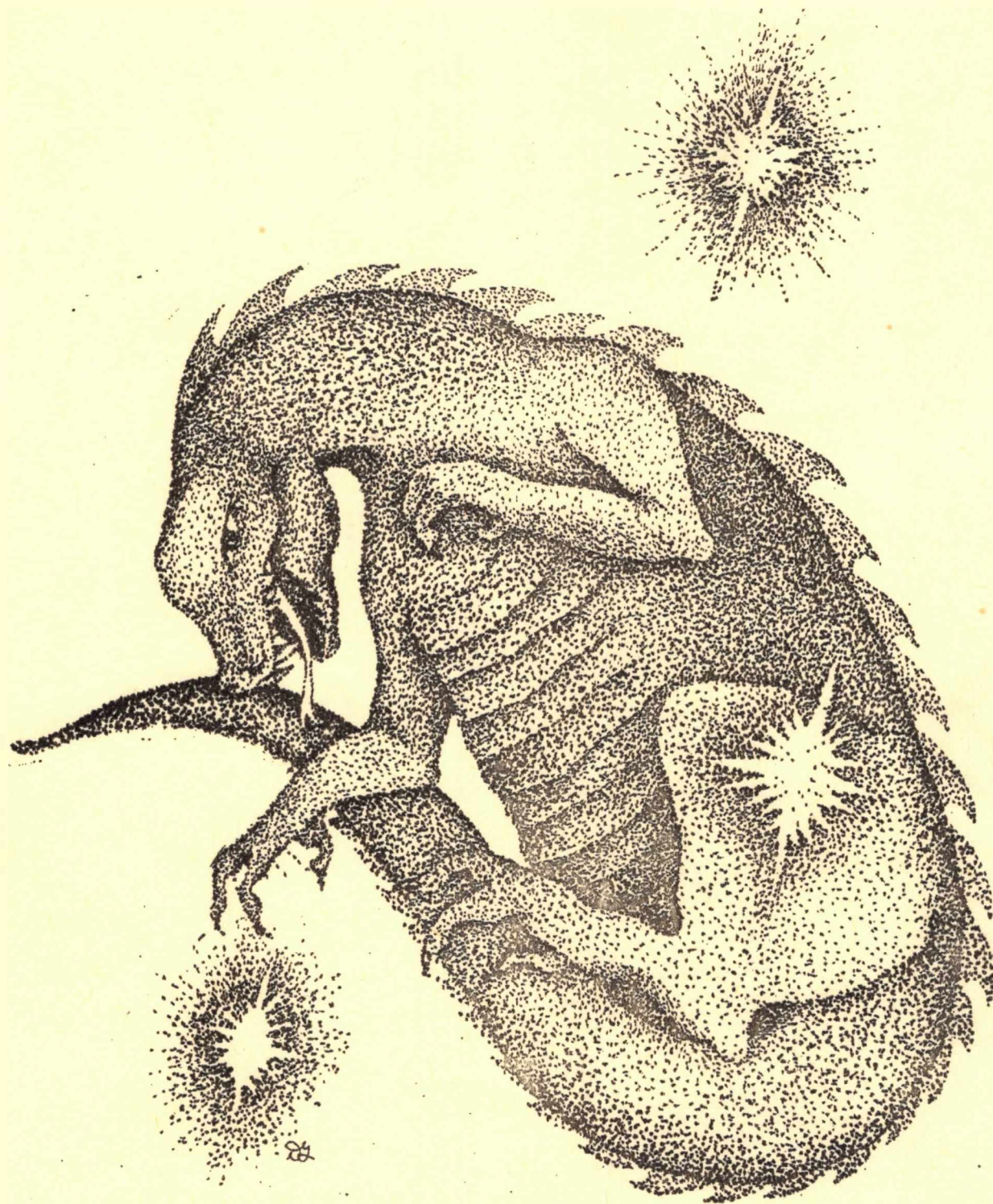


Shanna

way down into the depths of the castle. Shanna and Zorgan followed her, keeping the light of the red torch always in sight as she turned into a tunnel deep under ground. They went on and on following her - past stinking pools of slime and over bridges that stretched out over bottomless crevases. Once Shanna's foot caught a stone, and Yulanora whipped around, but she could see nothing in the gloom and, after a long, long moment, went on. They had traveled many miles when they came to a vast cavern. Yulanora set her torch in a socket on the wall and went into the cavern; they could see her framed in the dim light that came from the interior. After a while Yulanora came out again, took her torch from the wall and went back the way she had come. Shanna ran swiftly inside and saw a small onyx coffer, guarded by a drooling horror with four heads and a long lashing tail. The thing screeched in rage at the sight of her, and Shanna drew her sword to kill it, calling for Zorgan as she did so. Between the two of them they dispatched the monster. Shanna grabbed up the coffer and started for the door, but standing in the doorway was Yulanora, the anger black on her face. The two goddesses stood for a second staring at one another and then Zorgan, growling ominously in his throat, sprang at Yulanora, unsheathing his claws to sink them into her flesh. As Yulanora staggered back, thrown off balance by Zorgan, Shanna darted past her and out into the darkness. Recovering her balance, Yulanora threw off Zorgan like a man would an angry cat and he, snarling his hate, followed Shanna out the door. Zorgan, needing no torch to see, led the way through the dark as Yulanora called her minions to her.

Eventually Shanna and Zorgan reached the outer air, and found that they stood high on the slopes of Mt. Calaikanora, and there, with the mountain wind blowing about them, Shanna opened the coffer and looked once more into the glory of the ymorin. She took it out of the coffer and held it up and then heard the exultant laugh of Yulanora who had just emerged from the darkness with a pack of her noisome creations behind her. She snatched the jewel from Shanna and then, with a howl of rage, Zorgan sprang at her and the ymorin went flying through the air to smash on the rocks at the mountains foot.

The fragments of the ymorin sank into the soil, and some of them landed in the mountain's streams, and the finer of them shimmered through the air, and so they spread throughout Shalar and every person they reached knew what it was to daydream of joy and fulfillment; but the glory of the ymorin was gone forever, and the gods would never forget the loss. Yulanora, stifling the first sob she had ever felt, turned and walked back into her darkness as Shanna, her fingers twined in the thick fur of Zorgan's neck, climbed slowly down the mountainside. The war of the ymorin was over.



Talisman Press Publication

№ 4

7-9-63