

then

Golden
Book



"And joyful am I to behold another year,
Felled not by sword or by Winter's daggers sharp.
Then sing! O Tryeth! with voice so sweet and clear--
And still for a moment Evina's Golden Harp!"

from
The Song of Rizni the Swordsman



It came to pass, in that time when Shalar was still young and the gods spoke to men, that a young Style mated with one of the great serpents that dwelled on the land. From their union came Itiera, goddess of wisdom. Although she possessed the beauty of a goddess, her lower parts were formed like those of her father, and she writhed across the land in a shimmer of rosy scales. Itiera was all-wise, and generally disposed to be friendly towards mankind. She dwelled deep in the forest and was attended by youths and maidens who had made the pilgrimage to her domain and chose to stay there.

Now it happened once that a great and proud king trekked through the endless forest with his retinue of slaves and nobles, in search of the goddess. This great king, whose name was Imarkus, sent his slaves out before him, and they combed the forest that he might find wisdom -- and with it gain more riches and greater renown. In his foolishness he sought to force the secret of wisdom from the snake woman, and in so doing he flouted the law of the gods. For the law says that a man must go alone to find wisdom.

One evening, as the sun hung in that last agonized wait before plunging beneath the rim of the world, Imarkus walked by himself along the side of a small rushing stream. As he walked along, the sound of a woman's laughter came to his ears, together with the sound of splashing water. He quickened his steps and came at last to the edge of a pool in the forest. Falling gracefully from the rocks above, the stream widened a bit before continuing along its way, and in the pool a bevy of beautiful women laughed and played. Imarkus watched them for a while, and then his eyes strayed to the boulders by the side of the fall, and he gasped in wonderment, for lying across one of the huge stones, her head resting negligently on her arm, was a woman whose beauty was beyond conception.

The King was enraptured by the sight of her, and determined to make her his own. He strode from the bushes and, amid the squeals and shrieks of the other women, walked over to where she lay -- so like a dream he feared she would disappear before he could reach her. She sat up at his approach, and the masses of her long golden hair covered the beauty of her body. Her eyes were blue as the deepest lake, and her face was chiseled as though intended for the ideal of perfection in paradise. She regarded him without expression as he looked down at her, his eyes ravenous at the sight. He told her of the honor he would do her, and of the might of his kingdom and his name. And then he moved as if to seize her.

She looked deep into his eyes, and he lost himself, motionless, in the awful brilliance of her gaze. Caught in a web he could not break, Imarkus gazed in torture into her eyes and learned in horror that the woman he had sought to possess was Yulanora, Mistress of Darkness. Filled with a great anger at his presumption, and at the fact that he had looked upon her body uncovered, Yulanora named him a beast and condemned him to wear the form his mind so well portrayed. Agonizing fire spread through the limbs of the King as he felt himself wrenched and torn, twisted and deformed, into the semblance of a beast.

Yulanora laughed to see him so, and fashioned an iron chain which she hung around his neck to mark his servitude. She raised herself before him then, turning and twining that he might see the full splendor of her flesh, and mocked him for his inability to

speaking. One day a year he was to have in his own form, she said, one day every year in which he might seek a way to expiate his sins. For the rest of the time, through day and night, for all eternity if it must be, he was her slave, and tied to her by bonds he could not break. Laughing, Yulanora walked into the forest, and the slave creature, its tail between its legs, whined and followed after.

Not many years afterwards, in the city called Imris, there ruled a Queen who was beautiful above all women. She was filled with a pride and hauteur that matched her beauty and could not find any man that pleased her. The fame of her beauty spread far, and by the eve of her twenty-fourth birthday she had been sought by kings and commoners alike. The people of Imris prayed that she might marry, so that there would be a child to follow her on the throne, but she scorned their pleas, and, in her pride of beauty and youth, swore that only a god could be worthy of her. She lifted her sceptre high above her head and cried out to the gods to send her one worthy of her beauty, and the sky darkened and the lightning flashed. The people cowered back and whispered, but Queen Galicy laughed exultantly and threw back her head to drink in the rain that hurled itself down upon her.

The days passed, and the rain dried from the soil. Hotter and hotter the days grew, and the streams dried in their beds. The cattle lowed with thirst, and children cried out against the heat. The priests prayed for relief but there was no answer.

Then, in the twilight of the day, a man strode into the city. He was small and ill-favored, and past the prime of his life, but he went to the palace to ask the hand of the Queen in marriage. He swore, before the Queen and her court, that if she would be his bride he would see that the rains came again to the land. Galicy made mock of the man, and ordered him from the palace, and the ministers wondered at his presumption.

The heat continued, and the cattle began to die, and then came the gadflies which stung the people without cease. The stranger came again then, and once again asked for the Queen in marriage. Once again she called him fool and bid him be gone. He left, and hard on his heels came a rain of blood that fell warm into the streets and stained the buildings with the mark of death. The following day she came again, again he demanded her hand in marriage, saying that he would not ask again. Despite the urgings of her ministers, she refused him in a voice filled with insult, and laughed at the discomfiture of her people.

The face of the stranger grew black with anger, and suddenly he seemed to grow in stature. He towered above them all and seemed surrounded with the majesty of power. Extending a forefinger toward the Queen, he named her foolish and vain, and mocked her for her wish to wed a god. The earth began to tremble at his words, and the buildings of the city swayed and crashed to the ground around them. The ministers and the court cowered before the stranger, but Galicy, white-lipped, stood before the might of the man whom she had unwittingly summoned by her vain words, and laughed.

The stranger cursed her then, for her vanity and for her hauteur, and for her selfishness in letting her people suffer because of her. He told her he was Narno, son of Yulanora, and from that day she would bear his curse. She would have no place to call her home, for there would be no city or land that would own her, and wherever she went, doom would follow. To the end of her days she would have no friends and no companions. And those eyes which she turned only on her own beauty

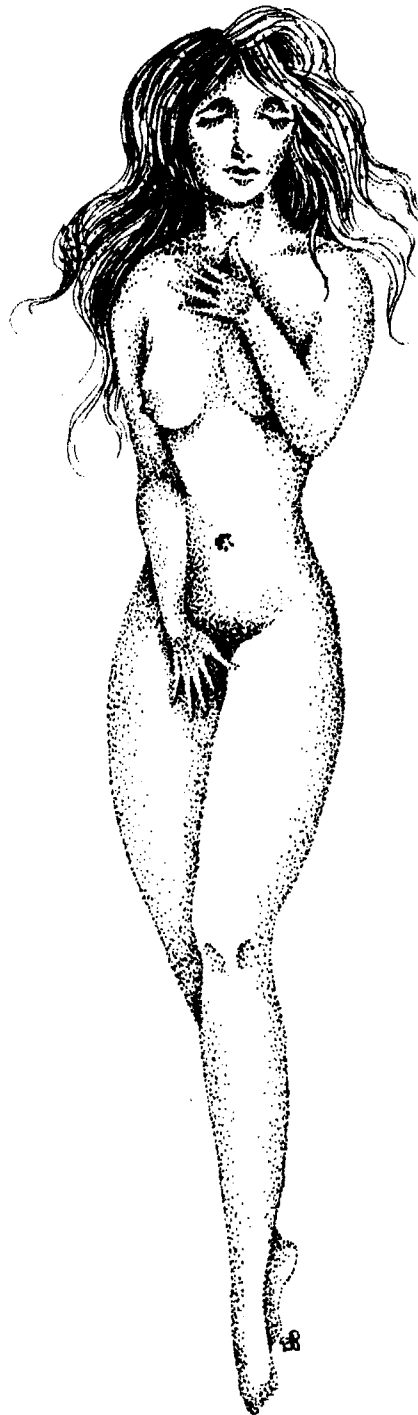
were from that moment dark and insensitive. His every word was like a whip falling on her flesh, and stroke by stroke he beat her down, until the proud Galicy ran screaming into the night. Behind her the city shut its gates, and the god dropped his eyelids over his terrible gaze and went from the sight of men.

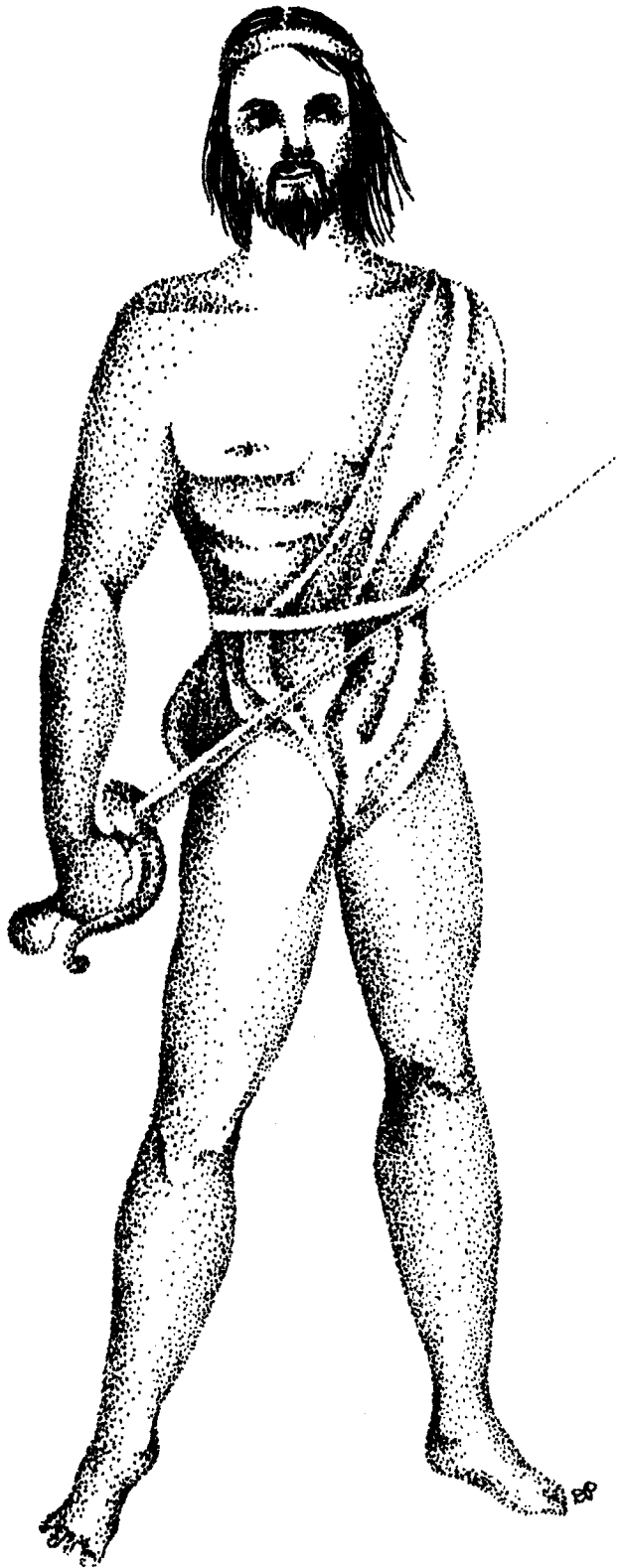
In the dark and in the cold Galicy ran, until the soles of her feet bled and the clothing was ripped from her body. Through the night and into the dawn she fled, half-mad with fear, and the animals slunk from her path, for not even the most vicious among them would touch her.

The years passed as the god had foretold, and Galicy's path was marked by war and by famine, by death and by suffering. Still beautiful in her shame and agony, the blinded woman walked naked through the land, and warriors turned their eyes from her in horror.

There came a day when she walked through a forest, many years and many miles from her home. It was spring, and the birds spoke softly in the warm breeze. Galicy could feel the warmth of the sun on her face, and the soft cool grasses beneath her feet. Her outstretched hand fell upon a tree, and she sank down beside it, resting her cheek against the rough bark. It had been so long, so very long. She ran her hand over the smooth, taut skin of her face and wondered if she was still beautiful, and then she touched the tree with her fingertips, remembering the sight of moss on bark, and the pattern of the sunlight on the leaves. She dropped her eyelids over her useless eyes and slumped against the tree, filled with the weariness of years.

After some moments she heard the sound of footfalls in the grass, and she straightened, ready to flee. There was a strange sense about the person who came through the forest, and a radiance that made Galicy feel that she could almost see who it was. The footsteps stopped before her, and a gentle hand caressed her forehead. As the hand passed over her eyes she suddenly realized that she could see it, and, as though a glowing image surrounded by dark, she





could see the person before her: it was a woman, clothed only in a light gauzy scarf. Long hair floated down around her shoulders, and a star shone brilliantly on her forehead. Her eyes were filled with pity as she looked down on the unhappy Queen, and then she moved her hand and Galicy's world was dark once again.

As the woman's hand moved gently across Galicy's forehead, the Queen found herself thinking of the past and of all that had come to pass during the years she had wandered. The tears rolled down her cheeks, and she prayed to herself that she might soon die. There was a gentle comforting warmth that surrounded her then, and the person before her wiped away her tears with gentle tapering fingers. Galicy felt the woman take her hand, and she rose to her feet when urged to. The stranger led her through the sunlight and into shady places where the wind rustled through pines that spoke to one another in cautious whispers. They passed along a stream which gurgled cheerfully to them, and there, where the sun made the grass warm, and the birds sang of spring, the woman left her. As she left, she touched Galicy's forehead once more, and the Queen knew her for Tryeth, Goddess of Spring.

The goddess had not been long gone when another's footsteps sounded through the air. These were different -- heavy, harsh, and confident. They stopped abruptly, and a man's voice asked why she was alone here in the forest. Galicy stammered that she merely wandered there, and flushed with shame as she tried to hide her nakedness. The man came closer to her, and then offered her his cloak. She reached for it blindly and after a second he guided her hand to it and then wrapped it

carefully around her. He asked her name, and then fell silent when he learned that she was the cursed Galicy. After a moment he muttered that his luck could not possibly be any worse, and he took her hand and led her a short distance away, where a fire crackled and the scent of cooking meat was strong in the air.

He left her there, and then re-

turned some moments later with water, offering her a drink. He told her that he was called Ivris, and that the spectre of ill-fortune had haunted his steps ever since he had killed the wizard Dhurtus some five years before. He laughed harshly as he told her of the demons that he had slain to get to the wizard, and of the monster that had taken off his left arm with one snap of its mighty jaws.

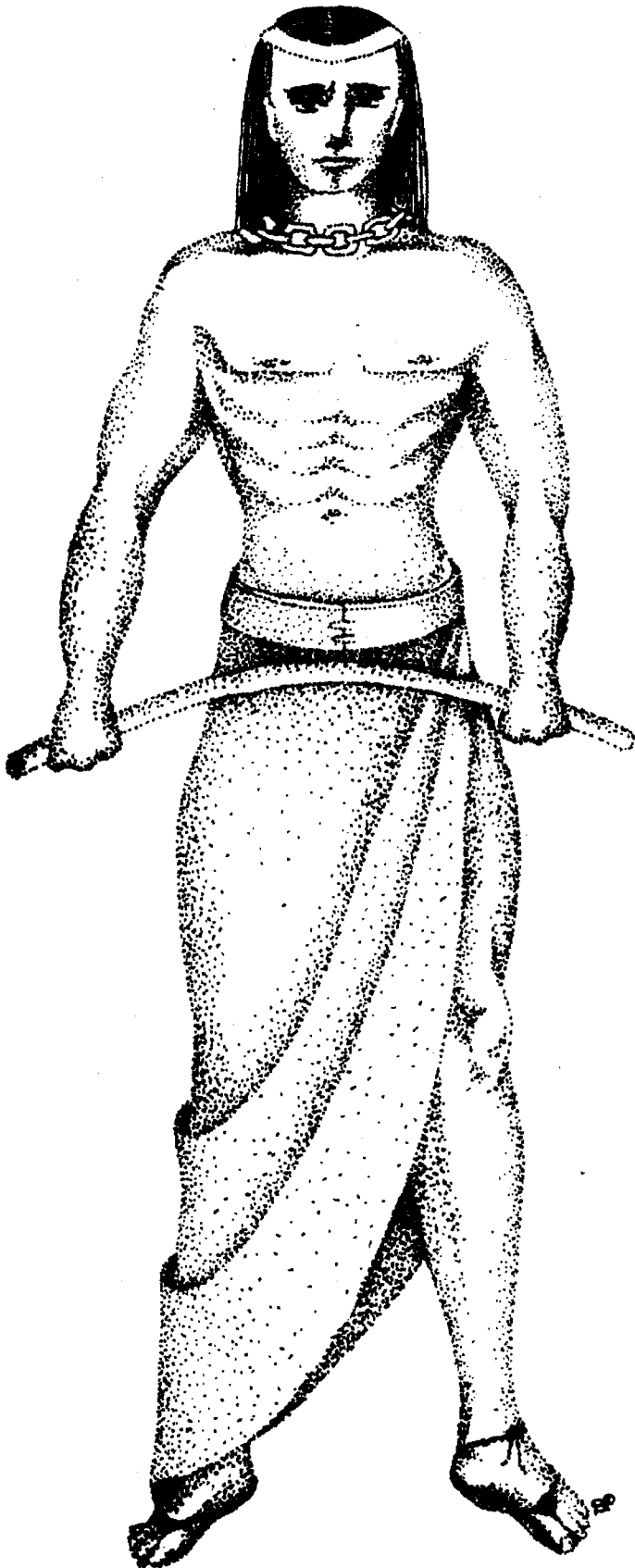
In the distance of her memory Galicy remembered his name, for he had been spoken of as one of the mightiest warriors that strode upon Shalar, and was said to be a son of Ernont himself. she asked him what ill-fortune plagued him, and he fell silent. His voice was tight with hate when, a few minutes later, he told her of the terrible visage the wizard had given him, and she gasped in revulsion when he guided her fingers over the twisted and scarred horror that was his face. The pain of her own existence died a little in her pity for him, and that night she pillowed his head in her lap as they slept.

Through the days that followed, Ivris and Galicy traveled together, wandering through the forest without destination of reason save only an urge that each felt. Deep in the heart of the forest one day, as the first autumn colors were appearing on the leaves, they surprised a huge black beast drinking from a small stream. It sprang backwards and crouched low, baring its fangs at them. Ivris could see that it wore a collar of heavy iron chain, and he held his sword low and ready. Galicy asked why they had paused, and then, in the knowledge that beasts never attacked her, began to walk in the direction Ivris had indicated. Taut with apprehension and ready to go to her aid, Ivris watched the blind woman walk toward the animal. It cowered back, flattening its ears and baring its teeth as the woman approached. Her outstretched fingers brushed its heavy fur, and it sprang past her and disappeared into the forest.

For the next few nights they saw the beast watch them from the underbrush, and one night it came to their campfire and lay down in the flickering light, its long muzzle stretched out on its huge heavy paws. Its ears pricked attentively when the two of them spoke, and it whined softly and stared long at Ivris. Then it disappeared, and they did not see it again for many days.

When it came again it panted and lolled its long red tongue, and then pulled at their clothing, urging them to follow it. As if realizing that Galicy could not see, it pulled at Ivris and whined, and caught his wrist in its jaws. Wondering at the beast's intention, Ivris took Galicy by the hand and led her in its path. The animal watched them anxiously and whined when they hesitated. They followed it through the forest, and up the slope of the mountain on its other side. The path was narrow and treacherous, and Ivris, using his one arm to support Galicy, was about to consider following the beast madness, but there was no room to turn around and go back. Finally they came to a shelf of stone high on the mountainside, where tall boulders shielded them from the strong winds. It was nearly dark and they stopped there, the beast throwing itself across the path as though to prevent their return.

In the morning Ivris awoke to find a man stretched across the ground where the man had lain down. He awoke as Ivris rose, and sprang quickly to his feet, the iron chain still hanging heavy on his chest. He told Ivris that they had little time, for there was far to go, and bid him waken Galicy. Giving no explanation, he led them on up the side of the mountain along paths that were scarcely marks on the rocks. They toiled on until it was nearly twilight again, and at last they came to the crest. There the mountain separated into two peaks, joined



by a narrow bridge of stone that shook in the wind, and on the other peak, silhouetted against the dying light, was a cherry tree, still laden with fruit.

Ivris looked wonderingly at their guide, for the tree was the Tree of Truth which bears fruit on but one day out of every year -- the fruit which, when eaten, removes any spell. It must be plucked between sunrise and sunset, for it decays on the tree as soon as the light fades. Their guide stepped gingerly onto the bridge and walked carefully over to the tree, where he plucked one single fruit and then returned. He held it in his hand as he watched Ivris go out and return, and then the last few rays began to flicker out and he looked into Gallicy's sightless eyes. In the last moment of light he handed the woman the fruit and bid her eat it; then the sun sank and there rose a mournful howl from the beast he had once more become. No man may twice pluck fruit from the Tree of Truth between his birth and death; Imarkus the cursed had given away his chance for salvation.

The beast sat there on its haunches, crying its lamentation into the night, and Gallicy, pressed tight to Ivris's breast, looked wonderingly at the creature who had renewed her life. Then the darkness lightened, and a glow of warmth spread over the rocks. The light grew until they saw that it sprang from the forehead of a beautiful woman who stood before them, her nearly naked body glowing with the radiance of springtime, and they knew her for Tryeth, now nearly gone for the year. She smiled softly at Gallicy and Ivris and then held out her palm to the beast that looked apprehen-

sively up at her. Glowing on her hand was one ruby-red fruit, still fresh and plump from the Tree. The beast took it from her, and as he did so the light faded and was gone, and the first chill wind of autumn blew across the land. Imarkus, a man once more, bowed his head for a few silent moments, and then the three of them, shivering in the chill winds, made their way down the mountain and into a world that had suddenly grown very beautiful.

+ + + + +

The Golden Harp: Legends of Shalar

Issue no.2, written and published by Dian Pelz for the 70th Mailing of the Spectator Amateur Press Society, in January, 1965.

Cover: Itiera, Goddess of Wisdom

Back cover: Zorgan (from The Golden Harp no. 1)

Talisman Press 27



